



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ATHELSTAN

GRANDSON OF ALFRED THE GREAT

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Athelstan – Grandson of Alfred the Great

Introduction

Athelstan was the grandson of Alfred the Great and the son of Edward the Elder. His aunt was Aethelflaed, Lady of Mercia.

Ecgywonne

His mother was one Ecgywonne. Very little is known about her and there are some who believe that she was a consort of Edward the Elder, some suggest that she was a concubine, some state that she was a noble woman whilst others state that she was a low born commoner who the future King took as a common law wife. One source even states that she was a relative of Dunstan, later to be known as Saint Dunstan. We just do not know.

What we know

What we do know, is she bore a daughter to Edward, but we do not know her name either, but records indicate that this anonymous daughter married a Norse leader called Sihtric Caech, who ruled in York, in an arranged marriage proposed by Athelstan when he was king.

Of the childhood of Athelstan, little is certain. Some sources state that his grandfather Alfred, had designated him for Kingship and that he personally invested Athelstan with a sword, belt and regal cloak and that he saw him as a future King.

Athelstan is believed to have been educated at the Mercian court but there is no information known that records his relationship with Aethelflaed

This course of action may have been instigated by Alfred to ensure that a named successor would counter a possible move for the throne by his nephew, Aethelwold. An insurance policy should anything happen to the heir to the throne, Edward the Elder.

Aethelwold did try and claim the throne upon Alfred's death and claimed that he was the rightful Aethling (prince). He allied himself with the East Anglian Danes and others from the Danelaw and fought against the men of Kent and Wessex at the battle of the Holme on the 13th of December 902. Aethelwold was killed in the battle and though the Danes won a tactical victory, their casualties were so vast that it left them impotent whilst Edward the Elder could still field a significant force.

A Pyrrhic victory for the Danes and a fatal blow to those of Wessex who had supported Aethelwold. The father of Edward the Elder's third wife and therefore the grandfather of the future King Edmund the first, Sighelm of Kent was in this battle.

Aelflaed

Athelstan's father, Edward took a second wife. Again the circumstances of why or how this came about are not known. His second wife was called Aelflaed and we know that she bore him children. Her firstborn was one Aelfweard who would succeed Edward the elder as King of Wessex in July 924 but his reign was short as he died within 16 days, leaving the throne of Wessex empty and its Witan arguing as to who should succeed Aelfweard as King.

Eadgifu

In due course, Edward the Elder would take a third wife, Eadgifu of Kent. She bore two sons who would each become Kings of England, namely Edmund the first and Eadred. She had two daughters also.

Athelstan

Athelstan was crowned King of Mercia upon the death of His father but he would not be crowned as King of Wessex until the 4th of September 925 so there is reason to believe that he faced opposition there.

A question that may be asked but cannot be answered is, had Edward the Elder planned to unite the Kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex under one ruler, namely Aelfweard or had he planned to have Athelstan rule in Mercia whilst Aelfweard ruled in Wessex. He probably never gave any thought to the Aelfweard dying prematurely.

Aethelflaed's daughter, Aelfwynn had been removed from power by Edward the elder some 18 months after her mother's death so one must wonder if Edward had been plotting a long term plan to unite Wessex and Mercia, which of course his father Alfred the Great, had dreamed of. A United Kingdom of the Anglo Saxon peoples. Engalaland!

I would imagine that Aethelflaed would have been horrified by Edward's treatment of Aelfwynn and it must have caused much discontent in Mercia. Was the relationship between Edward and Aethelflaed as close and symbiotic as is often believed? We will likely never now.

There is no evidence that Athelstan was at the siege of Chester in 907 nor that he was at the battle of Tettenhall (Wodensfield) in 910, but equally there is no evidence that he was not. He would have been 16 at the time of Tettenhall, an age where he would be expected to fight.

His Royal status would have ensured that he received a high level of education and that he was also trained as a warrior and that he was instructed in and taught about military strategy and warfare. It was an necessity in that period. A weak King would not remain in power for long. Athelstan would have to lead armies.

King of both Wessex and Mercia

Athelstan was about 30 years old when he became the King of both Wessex and Mercia in 925. However opposition in Wessex appears to have continued and one source tells of an plot by an ealdorman known only as Alfred, plotted to have the King blinded, supposedly on behalf of the dead Aelfweard's brother Edwin. Edwin was soon to drown at sea and some believed that Athelstan may have been complicit in this.

Two years later, he invaded Northumberland and took York, the last remaining Viking Kingdom in what is now England. A United Engalaland was now a reality.

There is no record of any battles or of any widespread destruction. The ruler of York, Athelstan's brother in law, the Viking Sihtric had died and the King took the opportunity reclaim the land.

However an issue arose when the Hiberno- Norse ruler of Dublin, Godfraid also known as Guthfrith attempted to install himself as ruler. Again there are no records of any battles or sieges and Guthfrith fled and sought refuge with King Constantine of Alba. Athelstan's annexation of Northumberland was not popular amongst the majority of Northumbrians.

A southern King had never controlled their Kingdom before and they were fiercely independent. The Anglo Scandinavian population had merged into a distinct people who felt no allegiance to a Southern King.

Athelstan demanded that Guthfrith be handed over to him but he clearly wasn't as he was back in Dublin a short while later.

Two years later, the northern Kings and some Welsh rulers met with Athelstan at Eamont and submitted to his overlordship.

The Welsh did the same a short while later at Hereford.

Athelstan would now mint coins with the legend proclaiming him as King of all Britain.

The North

In the north, the Celtic Kingdoms of Strathclyde and Alba (Scotland) were determined to remain as independent states after decades of parochial warfare and fighting off Viking invaders.

Whilst he held power in what was England, he did not rule the whole island but he appears to have aspired to doing so.

Athelstan was one of the most Pious of all the Anglo Saxon kings. He was a great lawmaker and he married his sisters to continental rulers in order to form alliances. He collected relics as gifts to churches and a number of those gifts can still be viewed today at Durham Cathedral. He centralised his Government and initiated many reforms.

We do not know as to what conditions had been imposed upon Strathclyde and Alba at Eamont but in 934 Athelstan invaded the two nations. No reason for this invasion is known but it may have been that Alba and Strathclyde rebelled against the sums of tribute that Athelstan may have demanded or that they were making overtures to the Norse in Dublin in order to build up an alliance that could curtail Athelstan's ambitions.

No battles are recorded but Athelstan devastated their lands and it is claimed that he raided as far north as Caithness. No details are known but Constantine and Strathclyde soon submitted to Athelstan. One would believe that Athelstan would have impressed his overlordship on them and imposed some harsh terms. After all, Constantine and Owain were now oath breakers, a crime that was considered heinous in the medieval period.

Brunanburh

In 937 the frustrations and rage of the Northern Kingdoms, in league with the Norse from Dublin, came to a catastrophic and bloody conclusion at the battle of Brunanburh.

The Norse leader, Anlaf, the son of Guthfrith, wanted what he considered was his birthright, York. Constantine and Owain may have wanted a buffer state between them and the Anglo Saxons. They certainly wanted to throw off Athelstan's yoke.

Brunanburh was the event of the century. A great victory for Athelstan, or was it?

The Norse coalition were beaten. The Anglo Saxon chronicles stated 'That countless men died in the battle, never yet as many people killed before this with swords edge since the Angles and Saxons came over the broad sea'.

Anlaf and Constantine escaped. Owain may have died. Certainly the casualties were huge but it would appear that a significant number of the defeated armies survived and escaped.

There is no record or claim that the Saxons were able to reach the ships of the enemy and we know that Anlaf returned to Ireland some six months later. Constantine, who's son Cellach, died in the battle returned to his own lands where he reigned until 943, before retiring to a monastery. There are no records that state that he lost any territory or suffered incursions from the Saxons.

Anlaf, had not lost confidence amongst his own people and had military success in Ireland and there is nothing to suggest that Strathclyde was put under duress.

Athelstan died two years on from Brunanburh. Within weeks Anlaf had seized control of York and soon after, he'd seized control of the five Boroughs of the Dane law, namely Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Lincoln and Stamford.

Anlaf was aided by the Archbishop of York, a slippery character called Wulfstan, whom Athelstan had gifted with the area known as Amounderness several years before. Wulfstan would play an important part in Northern politics over the course of the coming years and may be viewed as a 'King maker'. In 947 he would invite the Viking King of the Orkney's, Eric Bloodaxe, to become King of York, an event that the endless cycle of warfare and bloodshed would continue.

It would take Athelstan's successor, the young King Edmund the first, five and a half years to reconquer Northumberland, but that as they say, is yet another story of those turbulent times.