

Aethelfleda, the "Lady of the Mercians"

Who was she? Aethelfleda was the ruler of the Kingdom of Mercia, one of the Anglo-Saxon states that flourished between the end of Roman rule in 430 AD and its takeover by the Normans in 1066. She was the only woman to hold such a role in over 500 years of Anglo-Saxon England.

Mercia was one of many small kingdoms which were at war with one another throughout the period. At its peak, Mercia covered the whole of the Midlands, including London. Its most famous king was Offa, around the year 800 AD. He not only built the famous Dyke but he was a recognised power in the wider European context, an equal of Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor. However, a hundred years later, when Aethelfleda was the ruler, Mercia was much reduced in size and importance. This was partly because the neighbouring kingdom of Wessex had grown more powerful, but also because from 793 AD. Vikings had begun to attack all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, not just those on the coast. By the year 870 AD. Mercia had been over-run and the only kingdom not ruled by Vikings was Wessex, under its king, Alfred - the Great.

Alfred "the Great" Everyone knows that he burned the cakes! Probably not, as this story only emerged several hundred years after his death. But he was the man who at the eleventh hour turned the tide back and began driving the Vikings back. He was also famous for supporting learning, for translating Classical texts into English and for establishing the "Anglo-Saxon" Chronicle, our main source of information about that period. He also devised a strategy of fortifying towns (called burhs) as an effective way of repelling Viking invasions. He agreed a treaty with the Viking leader which divided England into a Viking bit and an Anglo-Saxon bit. Aethelfleda was Alfred's daughter.

Aethelfleda's Life Born around 870 AD, Aethelfleda would have been a child when her father and his family were driven back by the Vikings to a refuge in the Somerset levels, and Alfred very lost his Kingdom.

As a teenager, she was married to Ethelred, the chief lord of the Mercians. They were not called "king" and "queen" because technically Mercia owed allegiance to the King of Wessex. Aethelfleda and Ethelred ruled Mercia together until his death in 910 A.D. Uniquely, Aethelfleda was accepted by the Mercian nobles as the sole ruler of their Kingdom. As ruler, she enforced laws, dispensed justice, distributed honours and treasure - and directed armies.

Anglo-Saxon society was male-dominated, a macho culture of big tough men whose lives consisted of fighting every summer season, whether against other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Vikings, or the Welsh. The objective was to capture territory but mainly loot in the form of gold and enemy ~~en~~ women as slaves. Winters were spent in feasting and sagas in huge "mead halls." How did Aethelfleda manage to become an accepted leader in such a society? She had no doubt learned much from King Alfred, her father, and she had had over 23 years of running things alongside her husband. She was accepted by Mercian nobility who hoped she would bring back some of the ancient glories of Mercia - and its independence as a separate state. She was also a very successful military leader, pushing back against the Vikings in the East (capturing Derby and Nottingham) and in the West (repelling invasions by Viking fleets up the River Severn and down the River Dee).

By the time of her death in 918, Aethelfleda was poised to accept the subjection of York itself, the primary Viking stronghold, but this was to fall not to her but to her nephew, Athelstan, who thus became the first King of all England. Mercia itself was subsumed into this Kingdom. Aethelfleda had tried to set up her only child, a daughter, to follow her as the ruler of an independent Mercia, but her brother, Edward the Elder, had other ideas and took over Mercia as ruled by Wessex. Aethelfleda had, however, raised Edward's son, Athelstan.

Religion. Mercian kings had been converted to Christianity in the 7th Century: St Chad found a cathedral church in Lichfield in 600AD. - once so important that it was promoted as a third Archbishopric after Canterbury and York. Alfred was a devout Christian, who had been taken to Rome to be blessed as a child by the Pope, and his daughter Aethelfleda was keen to follow his lead, not only by beating back the Vikings, still pagans at that time. She and her husband Ethelred founded or re-established Christian places of worship in Mercia, including Worcester and Gloucester, where both are buried. Aethelfleda collected relics of both St. Oswald (after whom Oswestry is named) and Alkmund; she is reputed to have established the first churches dedicated to Alkmund in Whitchurch, Shrewsbury and Darby.

Art. Although Anglo-Saxon culture seems to have revolved around hard-drinking and hard-fighting, they did produce and value very impressive decorative art - some small reminders of which have survived. We think of the Book of Kells in Dublin, the Lindisfarne Gospels here, and the treasures of Sutton Hoo. Also the ~~extremely~~ delicate gold work of the Staffordshire Hoard and King Alfred's Jewel (in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford).

Later History. Aethelfleda acquired some recognition in the 20th century, when statues of her were erected in Tamworth in 1913 and in 2018, 1100 years since her death. Her funeral was re-enacted in Worcester and there was even a BBC programme - in which she was described as "the warrior queen who broke the glass ceiling!"

ALFRED (the "Great")
King of Wessex
ruled 871 - 899 A.D.

EDWARD
"the ELDER"
King of Wessex
ruled 899 - 925 A.D.

AETHELFLAED m. AETHELRED
"Lady of the
Mercians"
Sole ruler
911 - 918 A.D.

Lord of Mercia
ruled 881 - 911

daughter

AELFWYN
918 A.D.

ATHELSTAN
King of Wessex and Mercia
ruled 924 - 939 A.D.
First "King of England"

nephew

"Peak Mercia"
under Offa 750-800 A.D.



King Alfred treaty with
Guthrum 886 A.D.



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argumētū
godspeller
incipit euangelij
genelogia mathei



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Alfred the Great

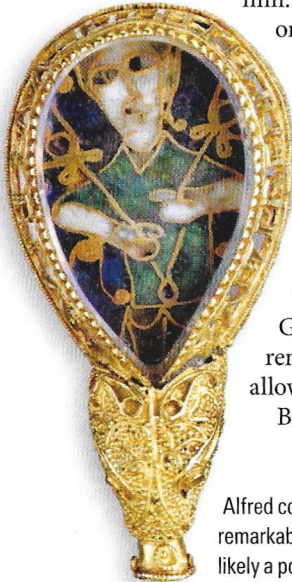
Unlikely king who vanquished the Vikings – and took aim at ignorance

The youngest and sickliest of five sons of King Æthelwulf of Wessex, Alfred's odds of making it to the throne were very long. But make it he did in 871, during a turbulent period when kingdoms were toppling all around him. After a Viking attack on his winter court at Chippenham in January 878, he fled into the Somerset marshes at Athelney, before winning the decisive battle of Edington. Under the terms of his surrender, the Viking leader Guthrum was baptised, renamed Æthelstan and allowed to rule East Anglia. But there are plenty of

successful war leaders knocking about. Alfred was a great monarch because he understood that there was more to ruling than military might. Under the depredations of the Vikings, monasteries had been destroyed, together with their books. Alfred established a widespread programme of literary regeneration, translating learned texts into Old English.

It is telling that the most remarkable artefact from his reign is the 'Alfred Jewel' – a raindrop-shaped piece of rock crystal decorated with an enamel figure and encased in gold. Words around the edge read: AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN – "Alfred ordered me to be made". This seems to be an aestel, or text pointer – a reading aid of the sort that he had sent out to each bishopric during his programme of translation. As the *Beowulf* poet puts it, *þæt wæs gōd cyning* ("that was a good king").

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Eleanor Barraclough, historian and author of *Embers of the Hands* (Profile, 2024)



Alfred commissioned the remarkable Alfred Jewel, which was likely a pointer used to follow text

Statue outside Tamworth castle, 1913.
Aethelfleda and her nephew, later King of England



Aethelfleda statue
outside Tamworth station,
erected 2018

