

Ælfgifu of York

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Ælfgifu of York (fl. c. 970 – 1002) was the first wife of Æthelred the Unready (r. 968–1016), by whom she bore many offspring, including Edmund Ironside. It is most probable that she was a daughter of Thored, Earl of southern Northumbria.

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Ælfgifu of York	
Queen consort of England	
	
Tenure	980s–1002
	
Born	fl. c. 970
Died	c. 1002
Spouse	Æthelred the Unready
Issue	Æthelstan Ætheling Ecgberht of England Edmund Ironside Eadred Ætheling Eadwig Ætheling Edgar of England Edith, Lady of the Mercians Ælfgifu, Lady of Northumbria Wulfhilda, Lady of East Anglia
Father	Thored, Earl of southern Northumbria

Identity and background

Her name and paternity do not surface in the sources until sometime after the Conquest. The first to offer any information at all, Sulcard of Westminster (*fl.* 1080s), merely describes her as being “of very noble English stock” (*ex nobilioribus Anglis*), without naming her,^[1] while in the early 12th century, William of Malmesbury has nothing to report. All primary evidence comes from two Anglo-Norman historians. John of Worcester, also writing in the early 12th century, states that Æthelred's first wife was Ælfgifu, daughter of the nobleman Æthelberht (*comes Agelberhtus*) and the mother of Edmund, Æthelstan, Eadwig and Eadgyth.^[2] Writing in the 1150s, Ailred of Rievaulx identifies her as a daughter of earl (*comes*) Thored and the mother of Edmund, though he supplies no name.^[3] Ailred had been seneschal at the court of King David I of Scotland (r. 1124–53), whose mother Margaret descended from King Æthelred and his first wife. Although his testimony is late, his proximity to the royal family may have given him access to genuine information.^[4]

Problem of fatherhood

These two accounts are irreconcilable at the point of ascribing two different fathers to Æthelred's first wife (in both cases, Edmund's mother). One way out of it would be to assume the existence of two different wives before the arrival of Queen Emma, Æthelred's Norman wife, although this interpretation presents difficulties of its own, especially as the sources envisage a single woman.^[5] Historians generally favour the view that John of Worcester was in error about the father's name, as Æthelberht's very existence is under suspicion:^[6] if Latin *comes* is to be interpreted as a gloss on the office of ealdorman, only two doubtful references to one or two *duces* (ealdormen) of this name can be put forward that would fit the description.^[7] All in all, the combined evidence suggests that Æthelred's first wife was Ælfgifu, the daughter of Earl Thored. This magnate is likely to have been the Thored who was a son of Gunnar and earl of (southern) Northumbria.^[8]

Marriage and children

Based largely on the careers of her sons, Ælfgifu's marriage has been dated approximately to the (mid-)980s.^[8] Considering Thored's authority as earl of York and apparently, the tenure of that office without royal appointment, the union would have signified an important step for the West-Saxon royal family by which it secured a foothold in the north.^[9] Such a politically weighty union would help explain the close connections maintained by Ælfgifu's eldest sons Edmund and Æthelstan with noble families based in the northern Danelaw.^[10]

The marriage produced six sons, all of whom were named after Æthelred's predecessors, and an unknown number of daughters. The eldest sons Æthelstan, Ecgberht, Eadred and Edmund first attest charters in 993, while the younger sons Eadwig and Edgar first make an appearance in them in 997 and 1001 respectively.^[11] Some of these sons seem to have spent part of their childhood in fosterage elsewhere, possibly with Æthelred's mother Ælfthryth.^[12]

Out of Ælfgifu's six sons, only Edmund Ironside outlived his father and became king. In 1016 he suffered several defeats against Cnut and in October they agreed to share the kingdom, but Edmund died within six weeks and Cnut became king of all England. Æthelred gave three of his daughters in marriage to ealdormen, presumably in order to secure the loyalties of his nobles and so to consolidate a defence system against Viking attacks.^[13]

Sons

- Æthelstan (born before 993, d. 1014)
- Ecgberht (born before 993, d. 1005)
- Edmund (II) Ironside (born before 993, d. 1016)
- Eadred (d. 1012 x 1015)
- Eadwig (born before 997, exiled and killed 1017)
- Edgar (born before 1001, d. 1012 x 1015)

Daughters

- Eadgyth (born before 993), married Eadric Streona, ealdorman of Mercia.^[14]
- Ælfgifu, married ealdorman Uhtred of Northumbria.^[15]
- (possibly) Wulfhild, who married Ulfcytel (Snillingr) (d. 1016), apparently ealdorman of East Anglia.^[16]
- possibly an unnamed daughter who married the Æthelstan who was killed fighting the Danes at the Battle of Ringmere in 1010. He is called Æthelred's *aðum*, meaning either son-in-law or brother-in-law.^[16] Ann Williams, however, argues that the latter meaning is the appropriate one and refers to Æthelstan as being Ælfgifu's brother.^[8]
- possibly unnamed daughter, who became abbess of Wherwell.^[17]

Life and death

Unlike her mother-in-law, Ælfthryth, Ælfgifu was not anointed queen and never signed charters.^[18] She did, however, make at least some impression on the contemporary record. In a will issued between 975/980 and 987, the thegn Beorhtric and his wife bequeathed to their “lady” (*hlæfdige*) an armllet worth 30 gold mancuses and a stallion, calling upon her authority to oversee the implementation of the arrangements set out by will.^[19] In a will of later date (AD 990 x 1001), in which she is addressed as “my lady” (*mire hlæfdian*), the noblewoman Æthelgifu promised a bequest of 30 mancuses of gold.^[20] Just as little is known of Ælfgifu's life,

so the precise date and circumstances of her death cannot be recovered.^[21] In any event, she appears to have died by 1002, possibly in childbirth, when Æthelred took to wife Emma, daughter of Count Richard of Rouen, who received or adopted her predecessor's Anglo-Saxon name, Ælfgifu.

Notes

1. Sulcard of Winchester, *Prologus de costruzione Westmonasterii*, ed. Scholz, pp. 74, 89; Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 169, note 30.
2. John of Worcester, *Chronicon ex Chronicis* (West-Saxon regnal list at the end of Chronicle).
3. '[...] cum jam de filia Þrethi nobilissimi comitis filium suscepisset Edmundum.'--Ailred of Rievaulx, *Genealogia regum Anglorum*
4. Keynes, "Æthelred."
5. This possibility is raised, for instance, by Stafford, *Queen Emma*, p. 66 and 66 note 3. It is also considered, but subsequently rejected by Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 25.
6. Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 25; Keynes, "Æthelred"; *Handbook of British Chronology*, p. 27.
7. His name is only attested for an ealdorman (*dux*) on the witness lists for two spurious royal charters relating to grants in Tavistock and Exeter S 838 (AD 981)(<http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=seek&query=S+838>) and S 954 (AD 1019)(<http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=seek&query=S+954>) The latter subscription may be an error for Æthelweard; see Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*. p. 169 note 29.
8. Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 24.
9. Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 24-5.
10. Keynes, "Æthelred"; Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, p. 25.
11. S 876 (AD 993), S 891 (AD 997), S 899 (AD 1001).
12. Keynes, "Æthelred"
13. Stafford, *The Reign of Æthelred II*.34-5.
14. John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, AD 1009.
15. *De Obsessione Dunelmi* § 2; *Handbook of British Chronology*, p. 27.
16. *Handbook of British Chronology*, p. 27.
17. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (MS E) 1048; *Handbook of British Chronology*, p. 27.
18. Ryan Lavelle, *Aethelred II: King of the English*, The History Press, 2008, p. 56
19. S 1511 (975 or 980 x 987).
20. S 1497 (c. AD 990 x 1001).
21. It has been suggested that she died in giving birth. Trow, *Cnut: Emperor of the North*, p. 54.

Sources

Primary sources

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External links

- Ælfgifu 17 at Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England

Preceded by Ælfthryth	Queen Consort of England 980s–1002	Succeeded by Emma of Normandy
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