

LIVES OF ROYAL WOMEN



Early English Queens, 650–850

Speculum Reginae

Stefany Wragg

ROUTLEDGE

EARLY ENGLISH QUEENS, 650–850

This book offers the first dedicated and comprehensive examination of the lives of nearly thirty women known to occupy the office of queen in the English kingdoms between 650 and 850.

The queens of early England are often shadowy figures in the historical record, beset by numerous issues which have largely confined them to the margins of history. Through careful analysis, this volume presents a ground-breaking appraisal of the role of queens in early England, and how their actions and identities shaped their practice of queenship. Organised thematically, it offers an overview of queens in many different roles, such as agents of Christianity, mothers and peaceweavers. From high-profile queens such as Æthelthryth of Ely and Cynethryth of Mercia, to the shadowy Leofrun of East Anglia and the nameless queen of King Anna of East Anglia, the book engages with sources to advance fuller narratives about even the most obscure queens of the era.

Aided by resources such as genealogical tables, *Early English Queens, 650–850* is an ideal resource for students and scholars at all levels, as well as general readers interested in the lives of queens and early English history.

Stefany Wragg completed her DPhil on Old English and Early English History at the University of Oxford, after receiving her MPhil from the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. She has worked on contextual readings of literature, saints' cults and queenship. She teaches in a secondary school in the UK.

Lives of Royal Women

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This series features academic, yet accessible biographies of royal women – consorts, dowagers, royal mothers and female sovereigns – inclusive of all periods, cultures and geographic regions. These biographies include a deep engagement with the premise of queenship studies and the exercise of the queen's office (or equivalent), in addition to covering the lives of particular women. The series is divided into three sub-strands: Queens of England (blue), Queens and Empresses of Europe (purple), and Royal Women of the World (red).

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EARLY ENGLISH QUEENS, 650–850

Speculum Reginae

Stefany Wragg

Cover image: A queen occupied many disparate roles simultaneously, such as wife, mother and peaceweaver. This image captures the multiplicity of identities a queen had to resolve within her person, as well as the relative anonymity which characterises the majority of the queens of this era © Stefany Wragg

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**For all the women whom history forgot –
queens or not**



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ABBREVIATIONS

- GestaRegum* William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R.M. Thompson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- HE* Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- LE* *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth*, ed. and trans. Janet Fairweather (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005).
- LectEorm* *Lectioes in Natale Sancte Eormenhilde* in Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 11–25.
- VAlfredi* Asser, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. William Henry Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); trans in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (London: Penguin, 1983).
- VsÆthelberhti* Anonymous, *Vita Sancti Æthelberhti*, ed. M.R. James in 'Two Lives of Ethelbert, King and Martyr' in *The English Historical Review* 32, No. 126 (1917), 214–44.

xii List of Abbreviations

- VBalt* *Vita S. Balthildis*, in *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum II* (Hannover: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani, 1884–1920), pp. 475–508; trans. Paul Fouracre and Richard A. Gerberding in *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640–720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 119–32.
- VsG* Felix, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).
- VOffarum* Michael Swanton, ed. and trans. *The Lives of the Two Offas* (Crediton: The Medieval Press, 2010).
- VSex* *Vita Beate Sexburge Regine*, in *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love, *Oxford Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 133–90.
- VWer* Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *Vita S. Werburge*, in *The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love, *Oxford Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 25–52.
- VWilf* *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).

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NOTE ON THE NAMES

The spellings of names varied in early England. They were written down as they sounded, but according to the conventions of Latin orthography. During the intervening period, characters such as the eth (‘ð’), which is pronounced ‘th’, could be mistaken, like the name ‘Friðuswið’, which we now recognise as the patron saint of Oxford, Frideswide. Similarly, the character used in some early English texts to represent the sound ‘w’ was the rune wynn, *ƿ*, which was sometimes confused with the Latin letter ‘p’ – thus many later medieval texts accidentally name Eowa, a younger brother of Penda through whom Æthelbald and Offa of Mercia drew their lineage as ‘Eopa’. The representation of vowel sounds could also vary in spelling. The name of Cyneburh of Mercia’s husband could be rendered Ealhfrith or Alhfrith. I have opted to use spelling which more clearly shows lines of relationship (Ealhfrith and Ealhswith, for example, who were full siblings). Barring that, I have defaulted to the rendering of the name in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; in instances where names do not occur there, I have followed the practice in the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* database.

I have also opted to call the era ‘early England’, in line with the guidelines from the *International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England*, moving away from the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’, which has problematic connotations in the way it is used in public discourse in the twenty-first century. The term still appears in titles of publications and books.

INTRODUCTION

Speculum Reginae: Early English Queens, 650–850

This book offers a biographical account of some of the earliest known English queens. We know the names or existences of around thirty queens in this era, in which the kingdoms of early England were becoming increasingly formalised and approaching an institution recognisable as what would later be known as monarchy. Early English queenship as an institution or practice, and the individual women who held that office have yet to be treated as a whole. Individual queens stand out in the record: in the seventh century, Æthelthryth of Ely, queen and saint, is well-documented and was a popular saint in medieval England; other queens were demonised and castigated as scapegoats for the ills of a kingdom, such as Eadburh of Wessex and Cynethryth of Mercia, both eighth-century queens whose historiographers were less than kind to their memories.

It is for this reason that I have chosen the subtitle *Speculum Reginae* ('mirror of a queen', or 'mirror for a queen'). It is, admittedly, a neologism which both invokes a well-established tradition of medieval writing about royal families and their rules, and an extended metaphor for how we encounter the information and perceptions of the women who form the subject of this book. The

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speculum principum, or ‘mirrors for princes’, is a genre of literature traditionally composed for the advice and education of future leaders, principally those who would become kings.¹ Like queenship itself, the tradition stretches back into antiquity, drawing from authors and works such as Seneca and St Augustine’s *City of God*, through to the early Middle Ages, in works such as pseudo-Cyprian’s *On the Twelve Abuses of the World* (*De duodecim abusivis saeculi*), in Frankish texts like Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne* (*Vita Karoli*) and Smaragdus’ *The Royal Way* (*Via regia*), or in the aristocratic Dhudoda’s manual book (*liber manualis*) for her noble sons, as well as other texts. The genre was certainly evident in texts associated with England in this era. Letters from the English missionary Boniface to King Æthelbald of Mercia, and from Alcuin back to various English kings, employ the sort of didactic and hortatory functions of the *speculum* genre. Elements of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* offer advice praising the examples of good kings and criticising those of the wicked, a purpose identified explicitly in its preface. This work was translated into Old English sometime between the ninth and tenth centuries, as was Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis*, probably during the reign of King Alfred and at his instruction. The *Cura Pastoralis* offers advice for a good Christian ruler, whether a bishop or a king. Other texts less commonly considered as *speculum* may, however, also fit into this genre. The famous Old English epic poem *Beowulf* portrays several portraits of kings both wise and wicked, and bids its listeners to listen well when proclaiming ‘that was a good king!’ A neighbouring text in the same manuscript, an Old English translation of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, presents Alexander as ‘the famous king’ and his actions – whether as model or counterexample of good kingship. Asser’s *Life of Alfred* seems directly inspired by the earlier *Life of Charlemagne* in presenting its subject as a king and saint, a biography with hagiographic reflexes within the *speculum* tradition.

By undertaking a study of the lives of these early English queens, this book offers a *speculum reginae* of sorts. Many of the queens discussed here are documented as idealised forms of their historical selves. Remembered in charters, hagiographies and royal texts designed to promote the interests of their descendants (or their rivals’ descendants), the depictions are rarely realistic or authentic by our understanding of the terms. The authors who document and record these women

deploy them according to their purposes and the needs of their audiences. They are used as didactic devices to illustrate what is good and laudable: they are saints in hagiographic works designed to promote the interests of the communities associated with their cult, or they are wicked women whose avarice and otherness shaped the worlds and existences of the communities which followed.

This is why the extended metaphor of the mirror is so useful in understanding the work that follows. We cannot access any of these women directly. The documentary records in which their existences are remembered – to the extent that we can even say that – are only reflections of the women who existed. In each portrait, we see images, reflections, aspects of the individual, and, by extension, of the office of the queen that she fulfilled. In many cases, the sources by which we can access her and the details of her life are centuries later than when she lived. In other cases, she has taken on aspects to suit the needs of the community deploying her as a representation or literary device. Above all, there is obscurity. Queens' names are forgotten, invented, or conflated to serve a need for authenticity, with varying degrees of historical veracity or verisimilitude. Queens only feature in the historical records when they serve a distinct purpose, whether as a family connection, as progenitors or mothers, or actors in key events. Even then, they tend to occupy the margins, even when, after a careful investigation, they may have been a key agent in major cultural or political shifts. We can only see this by glancing indirectly through the looking glass of the documentation available to us. It requires a concerted effort to see through the smoke and mirrors of what exists as the historical record to access the queens who feature in it.

What Was a Queen?

There is no surviving fixed definition of what a queen was in the early Middle Ages. At her most fundamental, a queen was always a woman who was closely related to a king. In the majority of instances, this was a wife, though there was evidence of, if not polygamy, certainly concubinage. Some facets of what have been identified as Germanic traditions are associated with early English queenship. For example, the tradition of having multiple wives or concubines, a practice more

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commonly associated with the earlier, pre-conversion period, has also been observed in Old Norse and Frankish kingship.² In some instances, the status of a wife whose son was designated as heir would increase, being promoted to the role of queen.

In other instances, the queen might refer rather to a king's mother. Several mothers of kings were influential, but examples of queens serving as regents seem rare in early England. Seaxburh, the queen of Cenwealh of Wessex (r. 642–45 and 648–72) may be one such example, as she is recorded as having reigned after the death of her husband in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, though there is no record of the couple having a son; alternatively, Cynethryth, the queen of Offa of Mercia (r. 757–96), appears to have remained influential during the short tenure of their son, Ecgfrith (r. 796) as king. This is a major difference from, for example, Frankish queens, because of the nature of early English kingship. Frankish kings were more strictly patrilineal, descending in the first instance from father to son and, only in their absence, then to other male relatives. Kingship in early England, on the other hand, derived from two major principles. Firstly, a candidate for the throne had to be a male descended from the royal stock, usually with a mythic progenitor. Secondly, he had to be a proven and effective military leader. There are almost no examples of kings younger than their late teens. Ecgfrith of Mercia is a notable counterexample, but the circumstances of his accession were remarkable, as explored further in Chapter 2. Queens in early England, then, were sometimes mothers, though rarely continued as dowager queens, but were always defined by their close proximity to kings.

By their very nature, queens were mediatory figures. Marriages, often conducted as a means of alliance between two families, placed queens between two kin groups, and sometimes also two different rival dynasties. In some instances, these two factions may have been feuding, forcing the bride into a strained peaceweaving relationship, which is further explored in Chapter 3. At her marriage, a woman never fully shed her agnatic identity; instead, she acquired new layers of identity by positioning herself in relation to a new, sometimes even more powerful man: her husband, the king. For princesses, this could prove either advantageous or particularly perilous. For example, the marriage of Peada of Mercia (king of the Middle Angles, r. 653,

then Mercia r. 655–56) to Ealhflæd of Northumbria in the early 650s must have had some motive of attempting to curb hostilities between the two royal families of Mercia on his side, and Northumbria on hers. Other queens mediated religious conversions between their Christian birth families and their husbands: in the mid-seventh century, Eormenhild, a Kentish princess, appears to have been key in converting her husband, Merewalh of the Magonsætan, a Mercian subkingdom; similarly, Osgyth, who appears to have been descended from the Mercian royal stock, was married to Sighere of Essex (r. 663–88), a minor Saxon kingdom, in an attempt to strengthen ties between the two royal families and exert continued Christian influence in the region. In her work on queens in Old English literature, Stacey Klein notes that sources have a ‘shared sense of the queen as a mediatory figure ... who offers the potential to bridge differences between groups of people, social structures and systems of belief’.³ Historical queens – individuals whose existences feature now in the documentary record as literary reflections of their historic selves – face almost identical circumstances.

This medial position, occupying a space in two categories which at times were paradoxically mutually exclusive, could present problems for an early English queen. In many ways, a queen was little different from an aristocratic woman. She was expected to keep the household, raise and educate her children and any fosters or hostages, give advice to her husband, and further the interests of her family. A major motivation in her decisions was a fundamental question of identity: what constituted her family? Did she continue to prioritise the interests of her birth family, or did she throw in her lot with that of her husband? There is no general answer: each queen faced different circumstances and navigated the conditions in which she found herself individually. The question was even more fraught because of how a queen derived her power.

Queens, as early medieval women, derived their power principally by virtue of their relationships with their male relatives, whether by marriage or by birth. Queens were regularly called upon to give advice, settle disputes, promote family interests or proteges, or safeguard dynastic interests. These could be for male relations or sons. For example, Domne Eafe, queen of Merewalh of Mercia, who reigned in the late

seventh century, was called upon to mediate in a question over *wergild*, or the payment to recompense for the death of a relative. Her cousin King Ecgberht of Kent (r. 664–73) had been implicated in the murder of her brothers, Kentish *æthelings*, or men descended from the mythic royal lineage and held to be appropriate military leaders. Her brothers, Æthelred and Æthelberht, were later revered as martyrs and saints, but in the aftermath of their deaths Domne Eafe demanded land to establish a monastery as compensation. Later, Ælflæd, wife of Wigmund of Mercia (c. 849) may have been key in promoting the cult of her murdered son Wigstan from her position as abbess of Winchcombe, but also as the daughter of a former king.

A queen's relationship with her birth family rarely ended at the point of her marriage. By virtue of there being several kingdoms into which a woman could marry, a network of family relationships forged by sisters marrying kings could be a powerful conduit of power, forging alliances across the whole island. Perhaps the most notable of these was the network formed by the daughters of Eorcenberht of Kent in the seventh century: Domne Eafe married Merewalh, a Mercian sub-king; her sister Eormenburh was the second queen to Ecgfrith of Northumbria (r. 670–85); a third sister, Eormengyth, married Centwine of Wessex (r. 676–85). This created an unofficial alliance spanning three kingdoms which the queens could and did use to their advantage: Eormenburh used it to force the Northumbrian cleric Wilfrid into obscurity and exile, and Eormengyth may have used it to secure an abbacy at a foundation in Northumbrian territory in her widowhood. This was particularly unusual because most widowed queens returned to the kingdom of their birth and either founded or entered an existing monastic foundation associated with her royal family. Queens like Æthelthryth of Ely, who separated from her second husband, Ecgfrith of Northumbria, were even known to dedicate lands which had served part of her dowry to endow new monastic foundations. Equally, the collapse of a queen's birth family could have dire consequences. Osthryth, queen of Æthelred of Mercia (r. 675–704), seems to have married into the Mercian royal family as yet another attempt to placate the raging feud between the Northumbrian and Mercian royal families in the late seventh century; the death of her full brother, Ecgfrith of Northumbria, placed a half-brother, Aldfrith,

on the throne, who may have been less supportive of his half-sibling. Osthryth was murdered by her own Mercian nobles in 697, possibly as revenge for her half-sister's role in murdering the Mercian king Peda nearly forty years earlier.

The best sort of definition of a queen in early England remains a woman who was intimately related to the king, usually as a wife. One of the reasons for such a fluid definition was because there was no officially sanctioned ceremony recognising a queen. The earliest coronation office for a queen is the ninth-century Judith *Ordo*, which remained one of the most influential *ordos* for the anointing of a queen.⁴ Nevertheless, there were certainly other means of formally recognising a queen. The Latin title *regina*, queen, appears in a number of sources ranging from historical to documentary. Queens feature in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*), clearly distinguished from wives (*uxores*) or concubines (*concupinae*). They are given the title of 'queen' or 'wife of the king' in charters, sometimes in contemporary copies, other times in later copies (or even forgeries). The rare queen even had coinage issued in her own name: Cynethryth of Mercia, perhaps the most notable of the early English queens, had coins issued jointly with her husband Offa, but also in her name alone, with a ruler portrait on the obverse. The early English queens discussed here were queens consort of kingdoms, or even subkingdoms at times, much smaller than that of the later, unified England after Æthelstan. However, in considering the development of monarchy – that is, the rule of a single *family* – queens made considerable advances in unifying and transmitting legitimacies across generational and geographic divides.⁵

Nor did this necessarily end with the death of the king. Queens in early England frequently faced one of three fates: remarriage, cloister, or obscurity. A queen's relationship with her birth family was frequently one of the choicest attractions for a marriage partner. Most early English queens were of aristocratic birth, if not the daughter of a reigning king. The support and connection with her family could be crucial in forging alliances or maintaining support for a tenuous position on the throne. Æthelthryth of Ely's second marriage to Ecgrith of Northumbria, an *atheling* nearly ten years her junior, must be considered a political match, for Æthelthryth herself had expressed

a long-standing desire to retire from secular life according to hagiographical sources. Similarly, the success of Beorhtric of Wessex (r. 786–802) has long been connected with his marriage to Eadburh, a Mercian princess, and thereby as a connection or alliance with her father, Offa of Mercia. Earlier, Wihtred of Kent (r. 691–725) donated land jointly with his queen, Cynegyth, in thanks for returning the borders of his kingdom to what they had been in his father's days. Cynegyth's family may have been essential in returning the territory and single rule to this branch of the royal family.⁶ Other, later queens remained eligible brides in widowhood: the eleventh-century sources associated with the death of St Kenelm (Cynehelm) state the reason for the young *atheling's* martyrdom as his objection to the remarriage of his mother Ælflæd to a cousin of his – a cousin, presumably, on the paternal side being, thereby, a rival for the Mercian throne.

Many widowed queens opted for monastic life, often becoming abbesses of foundations usually associated with their birth families. For example, the Mercian princess-saint Werburh could trace no fewer than 16 female saints and abbesses in her genealogy; her mother Eormenhild followed in the footsteps of *her* mother, Seaxburh of Ely. Both mothers had been queens and entered monastic life, either as widows or in amicable retirements from secular careers. Cyneburh, a Mercian princess married to Ealhfrith of Deira (a Northumbrian sub-kingdom, c. 655–c. 665) returned to her homelands and was known with her sister Cyneswith as one of a pair of saintly sisters responsible for the foundation and governance of several monastic foundations in Mercia; her husband merely disappears from the historical record, and is presumed to have passed away, perhaps even having revolted against the rule of his father Oswiu. Absences and disappearances in the documentary record can make it difficult to fully appreciate circumstances and events, but can be compared against other sources to furnish the basis for some educated conjectures.

Kings like Ealhfrith could disappear from the historical record with no real certainty over their fate; the same can be said for queens, but perhaps even more so. Where many kings' demises or burials feature in historical works like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the ends of queens rarely feature in such works. For queens associated with a saint, or themselves cast in a holy light in

hagiographical works, there is often more information to work with, but even these accounts must be considered carefully. Working with later sources often tells us more about the needs and concerns of the community writing and consuming these sources, rather than the individuals and circumstances of their setting.⁷ It was the exception, rather than the rule, to record a queen's death – and usually for exceptional reasons. Frithugyth, queen of Æthelheard of Wessex (r. 726–40) is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as departing for a voyage to Rome in 737 with bishop Forthhere of Sherborne. There is no record of her – or Forthhere's – return. Did she, like Ine, Æthelheard's predecessor, make a final pilgrimage to Rome? Another notable exception is the death of Seaxburh of the Gewisse, a people later known as the West Saxons. There are suggestions that she ruled in her own right following the death of her husband, King Cenwealh (r. 642–45, 648–72) for up to two years.

Most queens faded into obscurity, though such obscurity is not limited to queens. It is particularly notable in the history of women in early England.⁸ The aristocratic women of early England are, if anything, more visible than their counterparts of other social classes, whose names and lived experiences are mostly omitted from surviving sources. Nevertheless, it is perhaps easier to see the absence because of the prominence queens hold in other areas of the historical record. For example, Cynethryth, the queen of Offa of Mercia became abbess of Cookham, among other foundations in her widowhood, and was involved in major negotiations and conciliar proceedings to settle disputes over proprietary rights with the archbishop of Canterbury in 798. There is no record of her passing – there is only absence. More stark because of its absence in the historical record is the fate of Osburh, the mother of Alfred the Great of Wessex (r. 871–99), a woman denied the title of queen in what must be regarded as a West Saxon reaction against the robust queenship of Eadburh under Beorhtric earlier in the late eighth century. She was the mother of Alfred, and possibly also other siblings born to Æthelwulf of Wessex (r. 839–58). Osburh appears in two episodes in Asser's *Life of Alfred*, but is otherwise absent by 856, when Æthelwulf took the Frankish princess Judith of Flanders to be his young queen. Had Osburh died? Was she divorced? Did the record of her pious character in Asser's account mean she had retired

to monastic life? We have only questions for the end of her career as queen. Other queens are even more obscure. The wife of Eardwulf of Northumbria (r. 796–806, 808–?), a woman whose name has not survived in any source and known from only one passing reference in a letter, is even more difficult to pin down. We do not know what her name was, what family she was born into, or from what kingdom she hailed. Our only knowledge of her was that she was cast aside in favour of a mistress in 797.⁹

The role of queen, however, did overlap with aspects of female roles in other classes. Women in early medieval Europe were seen to be in charge of the household; queens, too, were heads of the household, which in this case, was the royal court itself. Women in early England often held the keys to a house, and this was no different for a queen, who often had control of the household – and/or royal – treasury.¹⁰ The later office of butler (*pincerna*), a high-status role in the household involved with the serving of food at court, had not yet fully developed, though by the ninth-century, Alfred's father-in-law Oslac appears to have occupied an early form of the role.¹¹ Thus, early English queens must be seen as capable administrators, a role certainly confirmed in several contemporary sources. One such explicit reference is to be found in the correspondence of Alcuin. In one letter, he writes to a nun at the court of king Offa (c. 786/7):

Please greet my lady the Queen in my humble name. I would have written her a letter of counsel if the King's business had permitted her to read it. Let her rest assured that I am as faithful to her ladyship as I can be.¹²

Alcuin refers to the queen, Cynethryth, directly and separately. He implies that she is busy, but that she too might be consulted about the 'King's business'. The nature of court life in this period must also be noted when considering the role of the queen. The itinerant nature of the majority of courts in this era means that the queen was running, in essence, a household on wheels. This may have involved using tents, or wooden structures designed to last about the span of a generation, to house the essential servants and members of the royal family's retinue.

It is in this context that the importance of the queen's own social and political power becomes apparent.

One of the queen's main functions was as a peacekeeper, a key focus of Chapter 3. In terms of both political and social standings, this could take the form of appeasing and maintaining positive relationships with a king's nobles. She was by no means alone – rewards from the king, especially increasingly bookland, or land given to nobles with a charter to confirm the gift, either in perpetuity or in the terms stipulated in the grant, were also important as ways to curry favour with nobles. Either by using her influence to persuade the king, whether to donate to a particular monastic foundation or to confirm a gift to a loyal thane, or by giving her own gifts to cultivate loyalty, the queen commanded considerable social and political power, a key role in keeping the balance in kingdoms, especially in periods in which co-rule and fraternal succession were still more common than patrilineal.

Queens also wielded economic power. As John Blair has explored in his expansive work in *Building Anglo-Saxon England*, royal displays of wealth tended to be 'heavy in treasure and display, light in permanent built installations and capital investment, but flexible and adaptive in its spatial organisation, and probably all the more effective for that'.¹³ Kingdoms and their royal dynasties tended to have traditional territorial heartlands, and would often reuse a site several times throughout the generations, rebuilding and replacing wooden halls whose frames tended to last only about a generation. Like their royal kinsmen, queens were often adorned with gold, rings, or other precious items: in *Beowulf*, Wealhtheow is described as *cwen Hroðgares cynna gemyndig, ... goldhroden* ('Hrothgar's queen, mindful of etiquette [and] adorned in gold', ll. 613–14).¹⁴ The Old English poem *Maxims I* praises gold as *sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene* ('best on triumphal apparel, treasure on a queen', l. 126).¹⁵ The gold is not merely a poetic affectation. In the account of the death of Æthelthryth of Ely, formerly queen of Northumbria, she views the fatal tumour growing on her neck as a sort of penance for her earlier vanity for wearing valuable necklaces, saying 'instead of gold and pearls, a fiery red tumour now stands out upon my neck' (*HE*, IV.19). Archaeology, too, associates women and treasure. It is usually impossible to distinguish a king or queen from other high-status

burials, but it is noteworthy that around the 630s, the trend for exquisitely furnished male inhumations transitioned to those of elite females; by 680, even these were fading out, a phenomenon Blair links with the increased participation and high-status roles for women in monastic foundations, which were being founded in greater numbers than ever around 700.¹⁶

In addition to running the household, the queen's economic power was considerable in the form of gifts, whether to retainers, other rulers, or ecclesiastical recipients. The famous will of Æthelgifu, a late tenth-century document, notes how the lady bequeaths her lands and property; other late wills, including that of Wynflaed, gifted a sumptuous tent.¹⁷ There is little reason to suppose that earlier queens were any different, even if the documentary evidence is somewhat slighter for their grants and gifts. Sometimes these gifts were made as co-donors with their powerful husbands. Several of Wihtred's queens were co-donors to their favoured foundation, Minster-in-Thamet. In a charter of 694, Wihtred and his first known wife, Cynegyth, donate lands to abbess Æbbe, herself a dowager queen. In the charter documenting the donation, Wihtred thanks God for returning his rule to the boundaries of his father's (Ecgrberht, r. 664–73) territory.¹⁸ Little is known of Cynegyth beyond this charter, but her name, which alliterates those of other rulers whose names start with C/K, could perhaps suggest a political alliance which enabled Wihtred to take back the full extent of his territory as it had been under his father. She could be connected with the family including Cædwalla of Wessex (r. 685–88), who conquered Kent and installed his brother Mul as king there. However by 696, Æthelburh appears as Wihtred's queen in the documentary record. Like her predecessor, Æthelburh is known for being a co-donor with Wihtred, this time to St Augustine's, Canterbury; she is named as *coniunx mea* ('my wife'), and is one of three witnesses whose names are preserved in the thirteenth- and fifteenth-century copies of the charter. It is tempting to associate her with the line of Æthelberht, the king of Kent who invited Augustine of Kent to come to his kingdom, and whose daughter by Bertha was also named Æthelburh. Charters are a particularly important source that document the economic powers of early English queens.

A queen's generosity could extend to other forms of gift as well. Wilfrid's hagiography records that Eanflæd, queen of Oswiu (r.

642–75), used her influence to secure the young Wilfrid a position at Lindisfarne ministering to a former companion of the king who had retired there, thereby starting him on the path to his illustrious career in the Church. Stephanie Hollis asserts that at this stage, Eanflæd should be considered a co-ruler or leader-figure, similar to the office of the queen outlined in *Maxims I*.¹⁹ Her ability to steer patronage or sponsor young nobles constituted a form of leadership which served to strengthen the bonds between the communities and peoples under her – and her husband’s – rule.

Another queen known for her munificence and economic generosity was in fact Æthelthryth, later saint, of Ely. As a widowed queen, Æthelthryth had already received and retained the landed rights to the dower land given her by her first husband, Tondberht of the Gyrwe. Endowed with her own lands as well as with the ear of Ecgfrith, the king of Northumbria, Æthelthryth was a well-endowed patroness. The *Life of St Wilfrid* records that Wilfrid received an estate from Æthelthryth at Hexham:

For in Hexham, having obtained an estate from the queen, St Aethelthryth, the dedicated to God, he founded and built a house to the Lord in honour of St Andrew the Apostle. (*VWilf*, c. 22)

Bertram Colgrave dates this particular episode between 672 and 678, but the hagiographer’s insistence on retaining Æthelthryth’s title of queen suggests it was as queen that she donated to land for Wilfrid’s foundation; it also occurs in the narrative before any mention of Ecgfrith’s second wife and queen, Eormenburg (Iurminburg), which also supports this chronology. Nor was her munificence as queen limited to land. The *Liber Eliensis* records that whilst still queen, Æthelthryth also gifted luxurious vestments she had made with her own hands, including a stole and maniple, as well what must be financial support, to the hermit and later bishop and saint, Cuthbert.

One of the more prolific queens in terms of land donations was Cynethryth, queen of Offa of Mercia. In several charters, she affirms or witnesses the gift of land to foundations in Chertsey, Paris and Glastonbury, or to individuals, such as the gift to Ealdberht, one of

Offa's ministers, and his sister Selethryth, an abbess; in this charter, she is witness after the king and some of the bishops, but before several other bishops and *principes*.²⁰ It must be stressed that although Cynethryth's donation record follows traditional patterns of patronage for queens, she is exceptional in the quantity of donations she witnesses: she appears as a witness in 25 surviving charters.

Cynethryth's economic exceptionality is further minted in the coinage issued solely in her name, the only early English queen to be so recognised. Unlike any contemporary queen in medieval Europe except perhaps the Empress Irene of Byzantium, Cynethryth's coinage raised her profile and may have been issued in connection with the recognition and anointing of her son Ecgrith, as Offa's heir. The coinage appears to imitate early Byzantine coinage, possibly that of the Empress Helena, reinforcing the relationship between the two mothers, who modelled sanctity and piety to their kingly sons. It also establishes the authority of the queen, independently from her relationship with the king, as the majority of her coins bear the name of her moneyer, Eoba, who minted all of her known silver pennies, her name and her title, *Regina M*, queen of the Mercians. There are several coins with various versions of portraits on the obverse, in which her portrait serves as an additional authenticating factor. It is perhaps wise to be wary of just how much authority this in fact provided. Since these are the only coins minted solely in the name of a queen, it is difficult to interpret whether the run was seen as successful and therefore more coins were minted, further solidifying her own identity, authority and power, or whether the lack of later coinage issued solely in a queen's name might gesture that this was not considered an acceptable role or identity for a queen. Regardless of the circumstances, the exceptionality of Cynethryth's coinage must be acknowledged. Like other queens, she certainly authorised gifts, witnessed donations, organised patronage and oversaw the financial and logistical functioning of the itinerant royal household. Her role as an almsgiver reflects her access to monetary resources, and reinforces the view of the queen as a major financial power in this era.

Another major function of the queen was to give advice. Given her medial position in the court, at once at its centre yet also from its margins, as many queens came from rival branches of domestic royal

families or from foreign kingdoms entirely, a queen could often see a situation from different perspectives. The queen as advisor, especially to her husband, appears to have a long trajectory back into Germanic traditions.²¹ The nameless, pagan queen of Rædwald of East Anglia (r. 599–c. 624) admonished her husband when he was considering accepting a bribe to murder one of the exiles in his protection:

When he revealed to the queen the plan ... she dissuaded him from it, warning him that it was in no way fitting for so great a king to sell his best friend for gold when he was in such trouble, still less to sacrifice his own honour, which is more precious than any ornament, for the love of money. (*HE*, II.12).

The advice of the queen could be a boon to a king, but it often put her at odds with another key king's advisor, the bishop. The conversion to Christianity and increasing power of the Church sometimes put these two powerful advisors into competition for the king's ear. At times, they could work well together. Osgyth's marriage to the recently apostatised Sighere of Essex (r. 663/4–c. 688) appears contemporaneous with the preaching of Jaruman, which seems to have been largely successful in making a lasting conversion: Sighere's son, Offa of Essex, removed himself from the succession to the throne in 709 to go on pilgrimage to Rome. At other times, the queen could be a major thorn in a bishop's side. Eormenburh's persecution of Wilfrid, who had been a staunch supporter of her predecessor as queen, Æthelthryth, chased him across three different early English kingdoms and ultimately to Rome in an attempt to resolve the quarrel. As an advisor to the king, the queen occupied a prominent position in early English society.

Early England

Thus far, we have focused on what it meant to be an early English queen. However, the geopolitical arrangement of England also played a key role in how these queens lived. The political make-up of England in the years 650–850 differs widely from the arrangements following the establishment of the Danelaw and the amalgamation of

the rule of English-speakers under the house of Wessex that emerged in the tenth century. Sometimes referred to as the ‘heptarchy’, there were, in fact, several kingdoms in the area now known as England. Kingdoms were initially tribally based, rather than geographically, and the early kings were little different from elevated warlords. Over time, different peoples combined into larger kingdoms, sometimes ruled by regional subkings. A major feature of early English kingship was that most candidates for the throne, called *æthelings*, could typically trace their descent from a mythic ancestor king. This shared lineage denoted the candidate as being of royal stock, whether descending from a previously established line or from a cadet branch. This lineage tended to be only patrilineal, which is yet another reason why the names and family relationships of queens are often obscure and difficult to relate to other male relatives. Among these families and groups, several groups emerged in various regions, some coming to dominate neighbours and amalgamate other kin groups, whilst others declined in status.

Kent

By 650, several major kingdoms had emerged in the British Isles. In Kent, the descendants of Æthelberht, the first Christian king, and his Frankish queen Bertha, continued to reign in a junior role, and over time the kings of Kent saw their hold over the territory fracture, reunite and eventually pass entirely into foreign hands, as kings from neighbouring lands conquered and placed their own relations or client kings on the throne of Kent. In particular, Cædwalla of Wessex (r. 685–89) installed his brother Mul, as king of Kent; later, Offa of Mercia (r. 757–96) extended his rule to the region, although Mercian rule was not uninterrupted; his successor, Coenwulf of Mercia, later put down rebellions in Kent and installed his brother Cuthred as king. The earlier Kentish royal family, even though largely extinct by the closing years of this period, nevertheless attracted considerable interest from the monastic houses whose foundations and patron saints derived from this royal house. The *Kentish Royal Legend*, including the *Mildrith Legend*, included many of the queens and saints of this royal branch, and there was a continued interest in this family due to its long-standing