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Female Rulership: The Case of Seaxburh, Queen of Wessex

by Anne Foerster

In 672 „Cenwalh passed away, and Seaxburh, his queen, ruled one year after him”.¹ This brief statement reads like many of the other notifications about the death of a ruler and the succession of another in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.² Nonetheless, the reported case and its echo in later historiography are worth a closer look. For even though the line of succession in 7th century Wessex was open to quite distant relatives, a king’s widow following her husband to the throne was a rare thing.³ Furthermore, the ways medieval historians dealt with Seaxburh and her short reign in the kingdom of Wessex reveal their thoughts and understandings of the concepts of gender and authority.

While a decent and legitimate ruler was generally pictured as a man with virtuous and masculine attributes, medieval authors developed strategies to deal with diverging realities: weak and inept kings, and women proving in various circumstances that they were capable of good leadership. Analysing medieval narratives on such presumed ‘exceptions to the rule’ allows us not only to evaluate contemporary conceptions of women and men, of masculinity and femininity, and of rulership, but also to understand how they were generated, implemented, modified and reproduced in interaction with themselves and other concepts.⁴

The aim of this short essay is to follow Seaxburh’s story through the centuries, comparing Bede’s almost complete silence on her with her first explicit mentioning in the *Anglo-Saxon*

¹ Quoted from the translation by Dorothy Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London 1961, p. 22. Cf. the entries to the year 672 in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, eds. David N. Dumville et al., 7 vols., Cambridge 1983-2004. Cf. Barbara Yorke, art. „Seaxburh”, in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford (2004), p. 616, see also online (subscription required): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25149>, accessed April 19, 2018.

² E.g. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 3: MS A, ed. Janet Bately, Cambridge 1986, (a. a. 534, 588, 642/43, 726, 729, 740; pp. 27 (a. a. 616), 31 (a.a. 670 and 675), 33 (a.a. 716).

³ Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England*, London – New York 2002, pp. 142–148; Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, New York 2013, pp. 103–114; cf. also Pauline Stafford, *Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective*, in: *Gender, Family and the Legitimation of Power. England from the Ninth to Early Twelfth Century*, ed. Pauline Stafford, Aldershot 2006, pp. 251–264.

⁴ Anne Foerster, *Die Witwe des Königs. Zu Vorstellung Anspruch und Performanz im englischen und deutschen Hochmittelalter (Mittelalter-Forschungen 57)*, Ostfildern 2018 chapter III. 2. 1. [in prepress process]. For examples for powerful women, cf. the volume *Mächtige Frauen?*, ed. Claudia Zey (Vorträge und Forschungen 81), Ostfildern 2016. For the deployment of gendered attributes in the praise or criticism of rulers cf. also Philippe Goridis, *Rex factus est uxorius. Weibliche und männliche Herrschaftsrollen in Outremer*, in: *Kreuzzug und Gender*, eds. Ingrid Baumgärtner and Melanie Panse (*Das Mittelalter. Perspektiven mediävistischer Forschung* 21,1), Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 22–39, pp. 26–27.

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Chronicle, as well as some twelfth and thirteenth century views. In doing so, it will highlight the different views on the ruling abilities of women and the gendered theoretical conceptualisation of royal power and authority.

The Venerable Bede, writing about sixty years after the events, reports in his *Ecclesiastical History* of political disorder after Cenwalh's death. It is not uncommon to depict the transmission of authority as a phase of trouble and conflict between rival claimants to rulership. The author, however, does not mention Seaxburh's succession, stating instead that *subreguli* (sub-kings) divided the kingdom and reigned until ten years later when Cædwalla subdued them and re-united the kingdom under his rule.⁵

Earlier in his history, when Bede introduces Cenwalh as successor to the West Saxon throne, he mentions Seaxburh as the unnamed second wife whom the king married after he had cast away his first consort, the sister of the Mercian king Penda. Because of this atrocity, Penda attacked him and drove him into exile.⁶ Bede's narration clearly aims at depicting Cenwalh's reign as unlucky, because he finds the king's faith in the Christian God wanting.⁷ Consequently, through his story of a troubled succession with sub-kings fighting for the throne, the author evokes an impression of Cenwalh's reign leading to dark times.

And since Bede knows of a first wife, whom Cenwalh had repudiated before he married Seaxburh, the latter was probably no legitimate consort in his eyes. Canonical legitimacy of marriage was no general criterion applied to kings in those times, but the author still seems to have had objections against this course of action. From his point of view both Cenwalh and his second wife were adulterers, and thus not living as good Christians should.⁸ If Bede knew the story of Seaxburh's succession, he had good reason to ignore it. First, it was not suited to underline his presentation of a bad king's reign steering the realm into chaos, and second, it might have conveyed the appearance that an adulteress was rewarded with a throne for her violation of Christian marriage traditions.

⁵ Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford 1969, reprint with corr. 1991, b. IV, ch. 12, p. 368.

⁶ *Ibid.*, b. III, ch. 7, p. 232–234.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cf. Bede's communication of the decision made at the synod at Hertfort that a man who was lawfully married must not take another wife if he wanted to be a Christian: *Decimum capitulum pro coniugiis: Ut nulli liceat nisi legitimum habere coniugium [...] Quod si si quisquam propriam expulerit coniugem legitimo sibi matrimonio coniunctam, sie Christianus esse recte voluerit, nulli alteri copuletur.* Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (see note 5), b. IV, ch. 5, p. 352.

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The annal for 672 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, first recorded at the end of the ninth century, briefly states Seaxburh's succession. Since most entries in the Chronicle for the seventh century are quite terse, this one does not stand out. The succession itself was noteworthy (obviously the only noteworthy thing that they still were aware of in the late ninth century, since the annal 672 only consists of the above cited sentence), but it seems not to have been understood as something extraordinary requiring further comment.⁹ Rather, the authors chose to present the succession of Seaxburh in the same way as they dealt with the vast majority of successions: a king died, another one began to reign and any of his difficulties in obtaining authority were not remarkable or not supportive for the authors' intentions. This equalisation becomes even more visible in the West-Saxon regnal list, in which the writers included Seaxburh as the only female ruler. The absence of further notes regarding Seaxburh in the Chronicle should neither be interpreted as deliberate silence on the authors' side nor as a sign for a complete lack of action on Seaxburh's. As the general brevity of the entries shows, short, peaceful or uneventful reigns were not likely to provoke analysis.

According to the Chronicle, in 674 „Aescwine succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex”.¹⁰ The annal does not mention his predecessor, but Manuscript A's regnal list gives the impression that it was Seaxburh. According to annal 674 Aescwine descended from the line of Cenwalh's great-uncle Ceolwulf. He was succeeded by Centwine, who was, like Cenwalh, Cynegils son,¹¹ and therefore his brother. The existence of a living male sibling of Cenwalh's family makes Seaxburh's reign even more striking. So, why did the widow ascend to the throne after the king's death – and not his brother? An explanation might be that he was not at the spot when his brother died and thus his sister-in-law tried to preserve the throne for him until he was able to take over the reins of the realm himself. Another possibility is that she tried to secure her own position as queen which she saw endangered by Centwine's wife. In any case, either she was not assertive, or she herself died shortly after her husband, as the Chronicle states that she only reigned for one year. In any case, the authors find nothing strange in a widow inheriting her late husband's realm.

⁹ For the attitude towards queens in Wessex cf. Anne Foerster, *The King's Wife in Wessex: The Tale of Wicked Queen Eadburh*, in: *Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte* 1 (2018), pp. 169–173, <https://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/12694> (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Quoted from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (see note 1) p. 22. Cf. the entries to the year 674 in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, eds. David N. Dumville et al. (see note 1).

¹¹ MS A (see note 2), p. 1.

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In the twelfth and thirteenth century, historians take up Seaxburh's story again. John of Worcester points out the contradicting reports on her in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: „Cenwealh, king of the West Saxons, died in the thirtieth year of his reign. His wife, Queen Seaxburg, ruled for a year after him, according to the English chronicle, but, according to Bede, under-kings held the realm, which they had divided among themselves, for about ten years.“¹² William of Malmesbury, writing between the 1120s and 1140s, adds some details to the brevity of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. He describes a queen governing with all the skills of a good ruler so that she did not differ from her late husband except in sex.¹³ With his wording, William emphasises the fact that she is a woman capable of wielding authority over a kingdom. Thus, he indicates that a combination of such an ability in line with the female sex was rather uncommon and therefore worth noting explicitly. He reveals his opinion on Seaxburh's gender in his note on her death by stating that she exhaled more than female spirit (*plus quam femineos animos*).¹⁴ Hence, the author marks the skills and virtues that he expects of a good ruler, such as military competences, vigour, and consistency, as forms of action and behaviour that were considered male or, at least, exceeded the capabilities of an ordinary women. A male conception of these characteristics is not made explicit, as William does not describe Seaxburh in male terms, and 'more than female' should not automatically be considered male. The author might suggest that an outstanding form of femininity was necessary to be able to rule well and wisely. However, in his opinion authority and womanhood did not usually go well together.

In the thirteenth century Matthew Paris, siding with the barons who were seeking to limit royal power, did not typify Seaxburh as a positive exception. He states that her subjects were not content being ruled by a woman, thus stressing his belief in the rights of the magnates towards

¹² The *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, vol. 2: The annals from 450 to 1066, eds. Reginald R. Darlington and Patrick McGurk (Oxford medieval texts), Oxford 1995, pp. 120–121: *Kenuualh rex Westsaxonum .xxx. anno regni sui defunctus est, cuius uxor Seaxburh regina secundum Anglicam cronicam uno post illum regnauit anno; secundum uero Bedam subreguli regnum inter se diuisum annis circiter .x. tenuerunt*. I am thankful to Dominik Waßenhoven for pointing out this passage to me.

¹³ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*. The history of the English kings, vol. 1, ed. and transl. by Roger A. B. Mynors, compl. by Rodney M. Thomson and Michael Winterbottom, Oxford 1998, ch. 32, p. 46: *Kenwalkius, post triginta unum annos moriens, regni arbitrium uxori Sexburgae delegandum putauit; nec deerat mulieri spiritus ad obeunda regni munia. Ipsa nouos exercitus moliri, ueteres tenere in offitio, ipsa subiectos clementer moderari, hostibus minaciter infremere, prorsus omnia facere ut nichil preter sexum discerneres. Veruntamen plus quam femineos animos anhelantem uita destituit, uix annua potestate perfunctam*.

¹⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta* (see note 13), ch. 32, p. 46: *Veruntamen plus quam femineos animos anhelantem uita destituit*.

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their ruler.¹⁵ Some modern historians characterise his works as very misogynistic. Against this view, Rebecca Reader stresses his benevolent presentation of women he personally knew.¹⁶ But this does not account for Matthew's general idea of the female sex and gender. While he accepts and sometimes even praises other powerful women such as Semiramis, the legendary queen of Assyria, and, in his own time, the French queen Blanche of Castile, they seem to be exceptional women to him, overcoming their anatomical sex and social gender. Thus, Matthew could have and probably would have portrayed Seaxburh as a positive exception, if it would have helped his purpose. But her case served him to propagate his special concern: the rights of the magnates in the government of the realm.

The authors of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle did not consider it necessary to highlight the fact that Seaxburh was a woman. They seem to regard a reigning queen as a possibility and not too far from the usual. Had they felt otherwise they would not have spared a comment since they, in all their brevity, remarked extraordinary and wondrous things happening. Bede's silence might have been caused by a rejection of the idea of a female in the position of a king but there are other plausible explanations.

The female sex and gender of the protagonist are only made explicit by later writers such as William of Malmesbury and Matthew Paris, who did so not only in describing Seaxburh, but regularly used those categories to praise or criticise men and women, especially in relation to power and authority. A queen from the very distant past could function as a projection screen for contemporary views and perceptions. Since living memory was long gone and Bede's and the Anglo-Saxons Chronicle's contesting information left much room for speculation, William and Matthew could use her to their own ends and thus portrait her as a positive, yet exceptional, example of a reigning woman, or as a ruler who, on the grounds of being a female person, had not the approval of her magnates and, therefore, was deposed. Stories like the one on Seaxburh should therefore be scrutinised carefully with a gender-sensitive eye to allow for insights in medieval thoughts on the mutual interdependencies of ideal and legitimate rulership, sex, and gender.

¹⁵ Matthew Paris, *Flores Historiarum*, vol. 1, ed. Henry R. Luard (Rolls series), London 1890, p. 329: *Rex Occidentalium Saxonum Kinewaldus, cum regnasset triginta et uno annis, defunctus est, et regnavit pro eo uxor ejus Sexburga uno anno; sed indignantibus regni magnatibus expulsa est a regno, nolentes sub sexu femineo militari.*

¹⁶ Rebecca Reader, *Matthew Paris and Women*, in: *Thirteenth-Century England VII. Proceedings of the Durham Conference 1997*, eds. Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell and Robin Frame, Woodbridge 1999, pp. 153–161.