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Genealogy and Royal Women in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*: Politics, Prestige, and Maternal Kinship in Early Medieval England

Asser's Life of King Alfred is notable for its rare inclusion of the genealogies of two royal women: Alfred's mother Osburh and his wife Ealhswith. This article explores the presence of these genealogies in Asser's work, arguing that they performed an important and pressing political function for Alfred's dynasty, which differed from the intended function of male royal genealogies. The ways Asser uses the genealogies of women may indicate that female royal genealogies were more important than the extant sources initially suggest. This also has broader implications for how we understand the place of maternal kin in early medieval England more widely.

In AD 893, the Welsh monk Asser wrote the biography of his patron, King Alfred of Wessex. Within his *Life*, Asser bestowed upon the king an elaborate and extensive genealogy, peopled with ancestors drawn from the heroes of poetic legend, the fabled kings of English history, biblical mythology, and even the gods of the old, pre-Christian religion.¹ Unusually, however, Asser also provided brief genealogical details of Alfred's wife Ealhswith, and of Alfred's mother Osburh, who was, like her husband and sons, presented as a relative of Cerdic, the first king and founder of the kingdom of Wessex. At the same time, however, Asser was also keen to point out Osburh's alleged Jutish heritage.²

As Asser's text demonstrates, early medieval royal genealogies were complex compilations of differing and at times competing traditions. Discussions of elite genealogies such as King Alfred's from early medieval Europe more broadly have revealed a basic set of common features we can use to contextualize these texts, and previous work has also established much of what these genealogies can and cannot tell us. It has been recognized, for example, that many medieval elite genealogies (and this is especially true for early medieval England) were constructed works, designed to tell an imagined story about an idealized past, and their

compilation was often motivated by contemporary political needs.³ In reality, Walter Pohl has argued that ‘actual genealogical knowledge seldom stretched back more than three or four generations’, underscoring the fact that these texts often do not convey reliable genealogical information, but instead tell us what stories their contemporary compilers wished to narrate to their audiences about the family in question.⁴ In the case of royal genealogies, ancestors also played a central role in legitimising a king’s rule and their authority.⁵ It also seems to have been a general rule that the longer the genealogy, and the further it stretched back through history, the stronger and more prestigious the family was considered to be.⁶ In this way, Joan Holladay argues that medieval genealogies used the authority of the past to justify the present, and for this reason they became ‘a controlling and predictive device and a strategy ideal for use at moments of stress or threats to the line’.⁷

Much of what remains of the early medieval English royal genealogies has survived in the late eighth-century ‘Anglian collection’, preserved in four manuscripts, and edited on the basis of the three pre-Conquest copies by David Dumville.⁸ This collection contains genealogical records for the royal dynasties of Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent, Deira and Bernicia, as well as the sub-kingdom of Lindsey.⁹ The extant contemporary genealogies are simple lists of names, with little to no illumination or marginalia. The names are either written into the body of the text, as with Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, or, as with the Anglian collection, the names are listed and arranged into columns, descending down the genealogy. The fact that various forms of this material were included in a range of prominent works including Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* (c.731), the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (c. late ninth century), Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* (c.893), the *Historia Brittonum* (c.828) and Æthelweard’s *Chronicle* (c.975x983) clearly demonstrates the importance of royal genealogies to contemporaries. The incorporation of royal genealogies into these prominent and often widely circulated texts also indicates that the audience for royal genealogies in early medieval England was both large and relatively diverse.

One such audience would have been the royal families themselves –genealogies would have allowed them to reflect on their own origins, the glory of their ancestors and their own family history.¹⁰ Another audience would have been the king’s court and other members of elite society, with royal genealogies serving as a reminder both of the source of the king’s authority and that the prestige of his ancestry necessitated showing respect and loyalty. Certain ancestral figures, such as Woden, also separated the royal family from other wealthy elite families and thus elevated their position within society, as claiming direct descent from Woden seems to have been a uniquely royal tradition.¹¹ Other ancestors, such as Cerdic and other ‘founder-kings’, also created an integral link between the royal family and the history of the kingdom itself, further re-asserting the dominant position of the royal family *vis-à-vis* other elite families. If we consider that many of the texts containing royal genealogies were written in Latin (such as those by Bede, Asser and Æthelweard), we might also suggest that this points to an ecclesiastical audience as well. Another commonly intended audience may also have lain outside England altogether. Indeed, one of the intended audiences for Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, which contains a complete genealogy of Alfred, may have been the Welsh.¹² Manuscripts of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* are also known to have circulated in Carolingian Francia, which proves that continental audiences were aware of these English genealogical traditions.¹³ All of this suggests that interest in royal genealogies was high, and this interest was maintained across time and across a multitude of potential audiences.

Despite the large body of extant royal genealogies from this period, overwhelmingly these genealogies document royal men, mostly kings, and trace descent patrilineally, ignoring maternal ancestors and the genealogies of royal women. Notably, however, the work that stands apart from this tradition is Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*. As already noted, in his late ninth-century biography, Asser included genealogical material for not one but two royal women – Osburh, the wife of King Æthelwulf, and Ealhswith, the wife of King Alfred. Osburh’s genealogy is presented in substantially less detail than that of her son Alfred (whose descent is traced without

interruption back to Adam), and the genealogical information provided about Ealhswith is even sparser. Unlike the genealogies of kings, the genealogies of women are incomplete, revealing only particular moments in their genealogical history as opposed to the much longer, uninterrupted lineages of royal men. Nevertheless, the rare appearance of genealogical material relating to royal women in this text may indicate the significance of maternal ancestry and female genealogies in royal contexts in England more widely.¹⁴ Although on the surface the rarity of genealogical texts relating to royal women would suggest that maternal ancestry and the genealogies of royal women were deemed largely unimportant and inconsequential by contemporaries, this article will instead argue through an analysis of Asser's biography that the genealogies of royal women could in fact carry a great deal of importance, and that the differences in Asser's presentation of male and female royal genealogies can be explained by a difference in their intended function in his text. Furthermore, it will be argued that the significance of royal women's genealogies in Asser raises important questions about how we understand the place of maternal kinship more broadly in early medieval England.

The genealogy of Osburh

‘Alfred’s mother was called Osburh...She was the daughter of Oslac, King Æthelwulf’s famous butler. Oslac...was descended from the Goths and Jutes, and in particular, from the line of Stuf and Wihtgar...who, having received authority over the Isle of Wight from their uncle King Cerdic and from his son Cynric, their cousin, killed the few British inhabitants of the island...’¹⁵

Osburh’s genealogy is the most detailed extant genealogy relating to a royal woman from early medieval England, and has previously been the subject of scholarly analysis by Janet Nelson.¹⁶ Osburh’s genealogy differs fundamentally from Alfred’s own: rather than being a complete genealogy stretching back to humanity’s creation, it is instead merely a snapshot of a particular

moment in her genealogical history. This snapshot, deliberately chosen for inclusion by Asser, focuses specifically on demonstrating Osburh's links to the Jutes and her connection to Cerdic. The position of Osburh's genealogy within Asser's *Life* is important, as it is given directly after Alfred's own genealogy (traced patrilineally through his father). Together these genealogies form the introductory chapters to the entire work, indicating the importance of genealogy in elite circles for the purposes of social identification – Alfred's ancestry, traced through both his father and his mother, was designed to introduce Alfred to Asser's audience, and to explain who Alfred was as a man and a king. This not only demonstrates the centrality of kinship and ancestry to the conceptualisation of personal identity in this society, but the fact that Alfred's maternal ancestors are overtly used for this purpose within Asser's work is a notable innovation in the surviving textual evidence. Although this may have been done within a pre-existing tradition that already recognized the potential importance of female genealogies, the significance of the ways in which Asser exploits these genealogies in his work should not be understated.

Asser's unusual inclusion of Alfred's maternal ancestry and the genealogy of Osburh, a royal wife and mother, thus raises questions about why it was written into Alfred's biography seemingly against tradition, and what its purpose was. One possible explanation for the appearance of Osburh's genealogy in Asser is a difference in genre. Most contemporary royal genealogies survive in annals or in genealogical collections, whereas Asser is a biographical text, influenced by different traditions and with different aims. While the genealogies of royal women do not feature in the texts that usually contain royal genealogies, traditions may have been different in biographical texts. However, a comparison to Einhard's *Vita Karoli* demonstrates that this was not the case. The *Vita Karoli* is a near-contemporary example of another royal biography, and yet it contains no parallel inclusion of royal women's genealogies and Charlemagne's maternal ancestry is not referred to.¹⁷ It has also previously been noted that scholarly work at the court of Alfred was influenced by Carolingian traditions.¹⁸ This makes the lack of any parallel in Einhard striking, and suggests that wider Carolingian genealogical

traditions did not underpin the inclusion of royal women's genealogies in Asser. This indicates that Asser did not include the genealogies of royal women in his *Life* either under Carolingian influence or on the basis of previous English traditions.

An alternative explanation for the inclusion of this genealogy is that Osburh seems to have been a particularly important and influential figure for Alfred, and Asser therefore deemed it necessary for his reader to know about her and her background, if they were to understand Alfred. We know from Asser's relatively detailed coverage of Alfred's childhood that Osburh played an important role in Alfred's education and upbringing, including the famous story of Osburh arranging a poetry competition between her children, which a young Alfred, of course, won, thus demonstrating his superior diligence and *divina inspiratio* over that of his siblings.²⁰ Given that the advancement of learning and education would become one of the hallmarks of Alfred's reign, Osburh may have been seen as crucial in fostering this defining interest in a young Alfred, and she may therefore have been an important influence on Alfred's later reign. Indeed, before providing Osburh's genealogy, Asser informs his reader that Osburh was *religiosa nimium femina*, a greatly religious woman.²¹ However, between this and Dhuoda's *Liber Manualis*, it seems that elite women may have regularly been involved in the education of their children in ninth-century Western Europe.²² As such, mothers were likely to have played a prominent role in many kings' upbringings, yet no maternal genealogies of other English kings have survived, even when their paternal genealogies have. Once more, given that we are also provided with (albeit sparse) genealogical information about Ealhswith later in Asser's work, there is much more to the inclusion of Osburh's genealogy than her important role in Alfred's upbringing alone.

Instead, the answer to this puzzle can be found largely in the contemporary political environment of late ninth-century Wessex. By the time of Alfred's reign, Wessex had expanded its borders eastward to include the previously independent kingdoms of Kent and Sussex, on an essentially permanent and indivisible basis after the reign of Æthelberht.²³ However, this fusion

of kingdoms was still relatively recent, with Alfred's father Æthelwulf leaving Wessex proper to his eldest son in his will, and the territories in the southeast to his second eldest.²⁴ Because of this, Alfred's ancestry was used to justify his legitimate rule over all parts of his enlarged kingdom, and this was done primarily through establishing genealogical connections to these regions via *both* his father *and* his mother.

Alfred's own West Saxon pedigree was hardly in doubt – his genealogy was littered with previous West Saxon kings from both the near and distant past, acting almost as a 'hall of fame' for the West Saxon dynasty. Indeed, Asser even refers to Ine as *ille famosus Occidentalium rex Saxonum* ('that famous king of the West Saxons').²⁵ Alfred's lineage also includes the obligatory reference to Cerdic; descent from him alone was more than enough to display Alfred's apparently thoroughbred West Saxon heritage, thus giving his rule over this people more credibility. The more recent territorial additions to the kingdom, however, were more problematic, and this is where his mother Osburh's genealogy fulfilled its role. Asser tells his audience of Osburh's, and thus by extension Alfred's, Jutish heritage, with particular reference to Stuf and Wihtgar, the Jutish brothers who were the earliest rulers of the Isle of Wight.²⁶ The depiction of Osburh having Jutish heritage is key here, because of the traditional association (promoted by Bede in his widely-distributed *Historia ecclesiastica*) of Kent and its people with Jutish origins.²⁷ In this way, Asser uses the genealogy of Alfred's mother to emphasize Alfred's alleged ancestral connections to the Jutes and therefore both the people of the Isle of Wight and of Kent. This ancestral connection to a much newer part of the kingdom of Wessex thus helped underline the legitimacy of Alfred's rule in this region – Alfred through his mother shared the history and origin of the people of Kent. Asser therefore used Osburh's genealogy to present Alfred as a king holding an ancestral right to rule all parts of the enlarged kingdom of Wessex.

In a similar vein, Charles-Edwards has convincingly demonstrated the existence of an integral connection between a kingdom and its ruling dynasty. He argues that even from the

beginnings of the ‘Germanic’ settlement of what would become England, small kingdoms were expanded by the destruction of royal kindreds in neighbouring kingdoms, whose territories were then conquered by their rivals.²⁸ He cites the destruction of the royal kindreds in the Isle of Wight and the northern kingdom of Deira as examples, and argues that following this destruction, the kingdoms could then be subsumed into Wessex and Northumbria respectively.²⁹ He also argues that people who lived in these conquered territories did not easily forget their former royal family – often their memory and their connection to the region endured.³⁰ This suggests that royal kinship and ancestry were intimately connected to a sense of regional identity, and it would therefore have been prudent for the West Saxon dynasty to establish ancestral connections to these regions and capitalize upon the strength of this memory and of the connection between people and place, rather than try to ignore it.

This is, therefore, precisely the reason behind the inclusion of Osburh’s genealogy and the mention of her Jutish heritage during the opening chapters of Asser’s *Life*, and also possibly one of the key reasons why Alfred’s father married Osburh in the first place (assuming her genealogy was not invented later). She would have legitimized Æthelwulf’s control over Kent in particular, and helped to secure it for the West Saxon dynasty. Janet Nelson has previously drawn attention to Oslac’s alleged Scandinavian heritage in Osburh’s genealogy, and also that the appearance of the Os- prefix, an old Northumbrian royal name element, in Osburh’s genealogy may have been designed to appeal to contemporary Northumbrians.³¹ Both are also possible, and if true this would further underline the point made above of the importance of Osburh’s genealogy in creating ancestral links between the West Saxon royal dynasty and with communities which lay outside the original bounds of the old kingdom of Wessex.

The genealogy of Ealhswith

‘...King Alfred was betrothed to and married a wife from Mercia, of noble family, namely the daughter of Æthelred (who was known as Mucil), ealdorman of the *Gaini*. The woman’s mother was called Eadburh, from the royal stock of the king of the Mercians’.³²

One of the glaring omissions in the passage above, and indeed in Asser’s entire work, is Ealhswith’s actual name. Although this could possibly be taken as evidence that Ealhswith was not considered an important figure by Asser (and was perhaps reflective of her standing at court), in this case the reason behind the omission of her name is impossible to know. However, it is worth pointing out that including Ealhswith’s name (or indeed any other biographical details about her) was not essential for the goal Asser was trying to achieve – what mattered to Asser here was Ealhswith’s family and genealogical heritage. Asser was not concerned with allowing his reader to understand Ealhswith as a person, but rather with demonstrating what advantage her genealogy brought to Alfred and his heirs. The fact that her genealogy is included when her name is not therefore emphasizes, rather than undermines, the importance Asser placed on her genealogical heritage.

Not only does Asser fail to provide Ealhswith’s name in his work, unlike Osburh who is named, Asser also provides us with even less genealogical detail regarding Ealhswith compared with Osburh. The reason why Asser seems to treat these two women differently is not entirely clear. It could possibly have reflected a difference in status at court – perhaps Osburh held a position of greater authority than Ealhswith, and therefore merited greater attention. There may also be a more practical explanation. Asser may have simply seen Alfred’s mother, and her genealogical heritage, as more important for understanding Alfred’s background, upbringing and character, than Ealhswith. As we have seen, Osburh does appear to have played an important role in Alfred’s life and education. This may also explain why Osburh’s genealogy appears at the beginning of Asser’s *Life*, whereas Ealhswith’s genealogy appears later. Furthermore, the political

context of the 890s is also important here. As will be discussed in greater detail below, Asser only included genealogical details he considered essential for his purposes, and this may go some way towards explaining the differences between the genealogies of Osburh and Ealhswith. The purposes of their inclusion were slightly different, and so the forms they take in his text are also slightly different.

Despite its brevity, the few details we do have concerning Ealhswith's genealogy are nevertheless revealing. We are told that Ealhswith's father was a Mercian nobleman named Æthelstan 'Mucil', ealdorman of the *Gaini*.³³ Even more significantly, Asser then notes that via Ealhswith's mother Eadburh, Ealhswith was descended from the old kings of Mercia.³⁴ This is curious – not only does Asser include some genealogical detail of a royal woman, he also tells his reader about Ealhswith's own maternal ancestry; even with Osburh's more detailed genealogy, we only learn about her paternal ancestors. Why did Asser again appear to break with tradition and discuss the genealogy not just of Alfred's wife, but specifically her maternal ancestors? Again, the answer lies in the contemporary political environment of late ninth-century Wessex.

By the time Asser was writing his *Life* in 893, the eastern part of the former kingdom of Mercia had fallen under Scandinavian control, with the western part governed by Ealdorman Æthelred, who became Alfred's son-in-law through Æthelred's marriage to Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd. Although the degree of independence exercised by Æthelred is not entirely clear, it seems that he generally exercised power under the overlordship of Alfred.³⁵ As a result, Alfred had managed not only to uphold the territorial integrity of his own kingdom against successive viking attacks, but had also extended his rule, albeit indirectly, into western Mercia. The extension of his rule is encapsulated in Asser's introduction to his *Life*: *Domino meo venerabili piissimoque omnium Britanniae insulae Christianorum rectori, Ælfred, Anglorum Saxonum regi* (To my venerable and most pious lord, ruler of all the Christians on the island of Britain, Alfred, king of the Angles and Saxons).³⁶ This reference to Alfred's kingship over Angles may be a reference to

the extension of his authority over western Mercia, as Mercia was identified by Bede as one of the traditional ‘Anglian’ kingdoms, unlike the territories within Alfred’s kingdom of Wessex, which were traditionally thought to be inhabited primarily by Saxons and Jutes.³⁷

With this in mind, the motivation behind Asser’s inclusion of Ealhswith’s maternal ancestry becomes clearer. Through Ealhswith’s maternal ancestors the house of Cerdic acquired an ancestral connection to Mercia and its former royal family, and Asser was keen to promote this. If we recall Charles-Edwards’ argument that there was an integral link between kingdoms and their royal families, in this way Alfred and his heirs could use Ealhswith’s genealogy to present themselves as rightful rulers of Mercia – the old Mercian dynasty had not disappeared, it instead lived on through Alfred’s heir Edward and his daughter Æthelflæd, who ruled Mercia alone after the death of her husband Æthelred. It is noteworthy that the use of the genealogy of a royal woman in this way, to establish ancestral connections between Alfred’s dynasty and the regions subject to his family’s rule, was precisely the same way Osburh’s genealogy was used earlier in Asser’s text with regards to Kent and the Isle of Wight. Through Alfred’s mother and his wife, Asser indicates that Alfred and his heirs possessed ancestral connections to the peoples and/or royal families of the places West Saxon domination had extended over in recent years, namely Kent and Mercia, and also reaffirmed their links to the previously conquered Isle of Wight.

The precise context within which Asser wrote his *Life* is also important to emphasize here. During the 890s when Asser was writing, Alfred and the West Saxon court began to firmly focus attention on securing the succession of Alfred’s eldest son Edward – something that was far from certain, given the existence of Alfred’s older brother Æthelred’s sons and the potentially controversial ascension of Alfred himself to the throne. As such, much of Alfred’s final years as king were spent preoccupied with demonstrating that Edward was the best, and only, choice for the succession.³⁸ Furthermore, not only did Alfred intend for Edward to inherit his throne, he

also intended to pass on his enlarged kingdom intact and undivided.³⁹ That Alfred's successor would rule over the whole of 'greater' Wessex was by no means certain either. Indeed, within Alfred's own lifetime the western and eastern halves of the kingdom had been ruled by different people, and that is without even considering what would happen to the West Saxons' more recently-established overlordship over English-controlled Mercia.

We must therefore read Asser's inclusion of these two genealogies within this context as well – they were not only about justifying present political realities, but about securing Alfred's future dynastic objectives. As discussed above, the specific part of Osburh's genealogy Asser chose to emphasize was the part that demonstrates her descent from Jutes (who were linked to Kent and the Isle of Wight), and her connection to Cerdic. By focusing on this part, the alleged shared history and traditions between different constituent parts of Wessex were emphasized – Osburh's genealogy tied the Jutes to Cerdic, the first king of Wessex. This in turn at least partially undermined the logic of dividing the kingdom upon Alfred's death, should Edward succeed. As a descendant of both Æthelwulf and Osburh, Edward was well placed in this regard to rule over 'greater' Wessex as a whole.

However, Edward's cousins, his main rivals for the throne, were also descendants of Æthelwulf and Osburh, and this is where Ealhswith's genealogy was crucial. Asser suggests that Edward, through his mother, also possessed an ancestral right to rule over Mercia, due to her descent from the old Mercian kings – something Edward's cousins Æthelhelm and Æthelwold lacked. Asser was therefore attempting to show that Edward alone was the candidate with the ancestral right to rule the areas currently subjected to Alfred's authority in their entirety. Only Edward had the right to exercise authority over all regions currently under the dominion of Wessex, and only Edward's succession could ensure these regions remained united under one king after Alfred's death. The appearance of Jutes and the Mercian royal family in the genealogies

of Osburh and Ealhswith was therefore not a coincidence – they were deliberately included by Asser to support contemporary West Saxon political and dynastic objectives.

We may wonder why these two rare examples of genealogies of royal women appear, of all places, in ninth-century Wessex. Asser famously tells his reader how, following the accidental murder of the eighth-century West Saxon king Beorhtric at the hands of his wicked queen Eadburh (who was later exiled and apparently died destitute on the streets of Pavia), the West Saxons vowed never again to have queens, instead deciding that royal spouses would simply be the ‘king’s wife’.⁴⁰ Indeed, Stafford has suggested that Ealhswith’s mother Eadburh was specifically named and mentioned in her genealogy, even when Ealhswith herself was not, to act as a contrast to the ‘wicked’ queen Eadburh.⁴¹ Asser tells his audience of how Alfred’s mother-in-law was, by contrast, a venerable woman who remained a chaste widow after her husband’s death.⁴² In this way, Asser uses the two Eadburhs to construct contrasting models of widowhood, and this may also have some relevance to the succession. By drawing this contrast Asser could be suggesting that royal widows should retire from public life and avoid involving themselves in politics, and should therefore not attempt to exert influence over issues such as succession.⁴³ These anxieties at Alfred’s court around the status and influence of royal women could therefore explain why Asser chose to name Eadburh specifically in Ealhswith’s genealogy. In any event, charter evidence does appear to support the implementation of this demotion in the position of royal women in the ninth century, which Asser himself describes as controversial, while Mercian charters from the same period do not show the same demotion, indicating the decrease in the status of royal women was, as Asser suggests, a uniquely West Saxon development.⁴⁴

Although we do not know the date of Osburh’s death, we do know that Ealhswith was alive when Asser wrote his *Life of King Alfred*, and was therefore still the current ‘king’s wife’. It may perhaps seem odd, then, to see a text written at the court of a ninth-century West Saxon

king taking the unusual step of promoting the maternal genealogy of the current 'king's wife', in a political environment where the status of such women had been deliberately lowered and their influence curtailed.

One explanation for this is the importance the genealogies of royal women may have held in early medieval England more broadly. Even if women were not able to wield a great deal of political power at the West Saxon royal court, their ancestry still held considerable force, and acted as an important tool of royal propaganda. Although examples of the use of these genealogies in this way have not survived from other English kingdoms nor from other centuries, the evidence from Asser may indicate the existence of a broader tradition in England centred on the importance of female genealogies that remains hidden beneath the extant royal genealogies which document kings and their paternal ancestors alone. After all, for Asser and his audience to have even cared about the genealogies of royal women, there must already have been a pre-existing recognition within society of their potential importance. Asser may therefore provide us with a glimpse of this hidden significance –the genealogies of royal women may not have been seen as irrelevant as the extant evidence largely suggests. It may have also been the case that towards the end of Alfred's reign there had been some attempt to rehabilitate the position of royal women in Wessex. The position of royal women, specifically the 'king's wife', seems to have improved in tenth century England, which may have been a result of changing attitudes beginning at the end of the ninth century.⁴⁵ This trend also mirrors the increasing importance and status of royal women more widely in Europe during this time, arguably exemplified by the later position of Alfred's own daughter Æthelflæd as ruler of Mercia, and so the genealogies of women included in Asser should be read within this broader context of change.⁴⁶ In this way, the promotion of the genealogies of royal women may not only have been acceptable, but perhaps even desirable. It is also notable that in some versions of Alfred's own paternal genealogy, King Ine's sisters Cuthburh and Cwenburh make an appearance alongside their brothers.⁴⁷ Although this is not the case in Asser, and their appearance in the

West Saxon royal genealogy is not consistent across different texts, this may nevertheless also speak to a growing recognition of the place of royal women in West Saxon history – a recognition perhaps reflected by the decision to include the genealogies of Osburh and Ealhswith in Asser's *Life*.

Politics vs. prestige

There remains one important difference, however, between the extant royal genealogies of men, and those of the royal women that appear in Asser. This is that male genealogies are highly detailed and are extended into the distant past, whereas the two genealogies of royal women considered here are incomplete, relatively short and undeveloped in comparison. The reason for this difference is that the intended function of the genealogies of royal women was different from that of royal men.

With the genealogies of royal men, the main intended purpose was to bestow prestige and to trace the origins of royal authority. This is not to say that the genealogies of royal men could *never* be used for very specific political ends. Indeed, the figures of Scyld, Sceldwa and Beaw in the ninth-century West Saxon pedigree may have been added to demonstrate connections to incoming Scandinavians in Britain, which was of course a pressing concern in the latter part of the ninth century.⁴⁸ However, narrow and specific political goals such as this were rarely, if ever, the primary purpose for which the genealogies of royal men were originally constructed. Take, for example, the Anglian collection of royal genealogies mentioned above, dating from the late eighth century. This collection documents the genealogies of the royal dynasties of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, Kent, East Anglia, Essex, and the sub-kingdom of Lindsey.⁴⁹ All but one of these dynasties are traced back to the figure of Woden and his immediate ancestors. Woden's role in the royal genealogies has been much discussed, but it seems clear that Woden was intended to be presented as the ultimate origin of royal authority,

and indeed a hallmark of royalty more generally, given that claiming descent from him seems to have been a uniquely royal tradition.⁵⁰ Although the precise origins of this tradition are obscure, Woden is clearly presented as a figure of antiquity, existing on the Continent sometime before the *adventus Saxonum*, and was a figure that therefore symbolized one of the key aspects of the collective origin myth of the English.⁵¹ In this way, the origins of royalty and of royal authority are bound together with the mythologized history of the English – Woden represented an ancient origin point for them both.

This royal genealogical tradition that centred on demonstrating descent from Woden underwent a significant change in the late ninth century. A key feature of the two ninth-century genealogies of Æthelwulf and Alfred is that unlike the Anglian collection, these genealogies do not stop with Woden or Woden's close ancestors, but instead are traced all the way back to Adam.⁵² In these texts, Woden thus becomes a descendant of Adam, representing a merging of Christian and pagan traditions. The act of tracing the West Saxon genealogy through Woden back to Adam can also be found in a mid-tenth-century genealogy recorded in the manuscript Cotton Tiberius B. v/1, indicating a continuation of this new genealogical tradition. Although the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, produced in the early ninth century, includes a genealogy of Alanus that is traced back to Adam, the works produced at Alfred's court appear to be the first time that the genealogy of an English king had been traced back to Adam, and the first time that Woden is explicitly presented as a descendant of Adam.⁵³

Making Woden a descendant of Adam in the ninth-century West Saxon genealogies is likely to have been down to Alfred's desire to highlight his line of descent and that of his successors all the way back to Adam. Although Christianity teaches that all men are descended from Adam, by tracing the genealogy back to him, Alfred's genealogy appears in some ways to mirror the biblical story of humanity itself. The reader is reminded of key biblical moments, such as the great flood and Noah's ark, and the story of Cain and Abel through mention of their

brother Seth, and the genealogy culminates in the creation of humanity by God with Adam. The impression this gives is that the history of England, and biblical history more broadly, had been leading up to the reign of Alfred and his successors – to his revival of Christian learning, his fight against the pagan vikings, the contemporary leader of the ultimate Christian fight of light versus darkness. This marked a break with previous royal genealogical conventions in early medieval England which were drawn from local histories and mythologies: now the lineage also contained ancestors lifted directly from biblical genealogies as well.⁵⁴ Incorporating biblical genealogies also fitted neatly with one of the goals of Alfredian propaganda, and Asser's work in particular, which was to assert and emphasize Alfred's uniquely close connection with God. Indeed, Davis has argued that going back to Adam allowed the West Saxon kings to 'gaze down the length of their pedigree to God's creation of cosmic order in the world. They could contemplate there the direct source of their own political authority'.⁵⁵ However, this had not just been done for the West Saxon royal family's own contemplation – its incorporation into Asser's *Life* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* show that this newer genealogical tradition was intended to have a very wide audience indeed. As such, we can see that these changing traditions reflect a desire to use the genealogies of royal men to trace the origins of royal authority, and by the late ninth century the origins of this no longer lay on the Continent with Woden, but instead with Adam and the moment of creation itself.

Other figures appear in the genealogies of royal men that also traced the origins of royal authority and bolstered the prestige of their subjects. Many of the royal genealogies include key figures that are associated with their respective kingdoms. Cerdic and Giwis feature in the West Saxon genealogy, Ida features in the Bernician, Hengest and Oisc in the Kentish, Icel and Wuffa in the Mercian and East Anglian respectively.⁵⁶ All of these figures were distinct and important for each kingdom as well as its royal family; indeed the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* names Hengest, Ida and Cerdic as the first rulers of their respective kingdoms, so clearly these figures were part of a shared set of origin myths and were recognized as having played a key role in the histories of

each kingdom.⁵⁷ Identifying a line of descent from these figures was an essential way of bolstering royal prestige, and the very first king of one's kingdom was an ideal choice to claim descent from to demonstrate legitimate authority to rule. We have also already seen above the role of male royal genealogies acting as a 'hall of fame' for their dynasty. Clearly, then, the main function of the genealogies of royal men was to trace the origins of royal authority and to bestow prestige upon the subject and their dynasty. Although, as acknowledged previously, these genealogies could also be used for contemporary political purposes, the evidence suggests that this was not the primary purpose for which they were originally constructed and preserved. Instead, the focus of the genealogies of royal men was prestige and legitimacy.

The evidence from Asser's *Life of King Alfred* considered above shows, however, that this was not the case for the genealogies of royal women. Instead, their main purpose in Asser's text seems to have been almost exclusively to achieve narrower and more immediately pressing political aims. As has been seen, it is not a coincidence that we find ancestral links with Kent and kings of Mercia in the genealogies of Osburh and Ealhswith respectively included in Asser, at a time when the West Saxons had expanded, and were consolidating, their control and influence over these same regions. Furthermore, given the generally sparse and undeveloped nature of the genealogies of royal women, the inclusion of such references was clearly deliberate and indicative of the motivation behind the construction and inclusion of the genealogies in the first place.

Acknowledging this difference in intended function between the genealogies of royal men and the genealogies of royal women included in Asser thus helps to explain the differences in their form. It would have been possible for Asser, for example, to trace the genealogy of Ealhswith's maternal ancestry all the way back to Adam, as he does with her husband Alfred's paternal ancestry at the beginning of his work. This is because the Anglian collection included the genealogy of the kings of Mercia, from whom Ealhswith was descended, which was up to date as far as the late eighth century or the early ninth century. A version of the Anglian

collection is likely to have been present at Alfred's court, given that genealogies written into the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* appear to be based on it, (and in any case, Asser had access to the *Chronicle* as well, which traces the Mercian genealogy from Ecgfrith to Woden) and so Mercian genealogical information would have been available for Asser to have used.⁵⁸

As such, if Asser wished to place Ealhswith's prestigious and famous ancestry on full display in order to garner prestige for Alfred's heirs, as he did with Alfred's paternal genealogy, it would not have required too much effort to do so. Although the kings of Mercia had not followed a simple line of descent after the death of Ecgfrith in 796, at least one version of the Anglian collection, dated to the early ninth century, was extended to include the genealogy of King Coenwulf of Mercia (reigned c.796-821), from whom Ealhswith was likely descended.⁵⁹ Although establishing the genealogical links that connected Ecgfrith's branch of the Mercian royal family to Coenwulf's branch may have been more difficult depending on whether or not the genealogical sources Asser used included Coenwulf, this problem would not have been insurmountable by any means. After all, we know that this genealogical information did exist and was available in written form in ninth-century England. Asser would have needed only to have filled the gaps between the end of the Anglian collection (or failing that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) and the late ninth century when he was writing, which were relatively recent decades, some of which lay within living memory.. The line from Woden, where both the Anglian collection and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* end for the Mercian dynasty, back to Adam could then have been taken from Alfred's own paternal genealogy, as they would have been the same.

Yet despite the relative ease with which Ealhswith's complete maternal genealogy could have been constructed and included, it was not. This shows that the underdeveloped form that the genealogies of royal women take in Asser's text was not due to gaps in the record, but was instead a conscious and deliberate choice. One potential reason for this could be that Ealhswith was likely descended from King Coenwulf, but the Mercian rulers Alfred's sister Æthelswith and

daughter Æthelflæd married were both descended from different dynastic lines to Coenwulf.⁶⁰ As such, Asser may have opted to refer to generic ‘kings of Mercia’ rather than draw attention to her specific line of descent, so as to avoid any potential doubts around the legitimacy of any particular Mercian branch that Alfred’s family had married into over the course of the ninth century. However, this alone is not a satisfactory explanation for the sparse nature of Ealhswith’s genealogy. It does not explain, for example, why no other ancestors are included in her genealogy when they could have been, nor does it shed any light on why Osburh’s genealogy is also very brief and lacking in detail compared to Alfred’s complete paternal genealogy featured at the beginning of Asser’s *Life*.

On this point, we must instead return to an argument made by Holladay, referenced at the beginning of this article. Holladay has correctly pointed out that in the early Middle Ages, as a rule the longer a genealogy was, and the further it stretched back through history, the stronger and more prestigious it was perceived to be.⁶¹ By this test, neither Osburh nor Ealhswith’s genealogy was particularly prestigious, especially compared to the length of the genealogies of royal men, despite the fact that they were both in one way or another descended from royalty. The reason for this was because, as argued above, demonstrating prestige was not the primary purpose their genealogies were designed to fulfil, unlike the genealogies of royal men, which rendered providing the complete genealogies of these women unnecessary for Asser’s objectives. Instead, the purpose of including these royal women’s genealogies was focused more narrowly on very specific contemporary political goals, and this difference in intended function between male and female genealogies therefore explains the differences in their form – in each case Asser only chose to include the level of detail he needed to.

The place of maternal kin

Recognising the significance that the genealogies of royal women could have also raises more general questions about the place of maternal kin within families. It is an established line of argument in existing historiography that greater emphasis was placed on paternal kin than on maternal kin within family groups in early medieval England, at least in certain circumstances.⁶² This is mostly supported by law code evidence, which suggests an emphasis on paternal kin in terms of oath-swearing and wergild payments, and in the fact that laws assign responsibility for protecting the property of a child whose father has died to the child's paternal, rather than maternal, kin.⁶³ However, there is much more meaning associated with kinship than narrow matters of law, and the genealogical evidence considered here shows that maternal kin could in fact matter a great deal, even in the male-dominated sphere of politics and royal propaganda. As such, it is important that we do not undervalue the significance of maternal kinship in early medieval England.

Furthermore, the law code evidence is not as clear about the position of maternal kin as it first appears. For example, the laws of Kentish kings Hlothhere and Eadric state that a child whose father has died is to be given a 'willing protector' from among his paternal kin to protect his property until the child reaches the age of ten.⁶⁴ In this instance, the paternal kin assume this responsibility in law not because paternal kin were more important than maternal kin, but because of anxieties around landholding and property. The other two options in this case would be that the mother herself assumes responsibility for protecting her son's property (that he inherited from his father), or that a member of the child's maternal kin fulfil this duty instead, neither of which were preferable options. This is because female landholding at this time was notoriously insecure and open to challenge, as attested by the over-representation of women in land disputes and the frequency with which reversion clauses were attached to land bequeathed to women in wills, with the aim of enlisting monastic communities as legal protectors for landholding women.⁶⁵ Because of this, if the mother herself were to be given the responsibility of

protecting her child's land, there was a very real danger that the land could be lost entirely through a legal challenge she lacked the power and resources to successfully defend.

On the other hand, there was also a risk if a maternal relative of the child were given this responsibility. The land in question in this case would have been inherited by the child from their deceased father, and was likely therefore part of the 'folkland' passed through the child's paternal kindred down the generations. Folkland perhaps made up a majority of a person's bequeathed land and was in theory strictly inalienable from the kindred, and paternal relatives would have therefore been justifiably uncomfortable with someone outside the paternal family exercising control over the land and property in question.⁶⁶ Such a situation also risked the possibility of paternal folkland falling outside of the kindred and into the child's maternal kindred, where it did not legally belong, if a maternal relative decided to try and seize the land. Granting the child's property a protector from the paternal side thus removed the dangers of both of these alternatives, and was thus the most practical and acceptable solution. In other words, the clause does not reflect the inferior status of maternal kin *vis-à-vis* paternal kin, but rather it reflects anxieties around female landholding and a desire to protect the rightful succession of paternal folkland. As such, the clause cannot be taken as evidence that maternal kin were less important in early medieval English society. Once more, it should also be recognized that a similar clause also appears in the West Saxon laws of Ine, and here the obligation of looking after property is simply given to *þa mægas* (the kinsmen), with no distinction between paternal and maternal kin and no explicit requirement that the protectors come from the paternal side.⁶⁷ This suggests that drawing a distinction between paternal and maternal kin was not necessarily a universal or widely used principle, even in legal texts.

On the legal front, this just leaves us with references to oath-swearing and payment of wergild associated with the process of the feud that emphasize paternal kin specifically.⁶⁸ In terms of oath-swearing, II Athelstan states that if anyone wished to demand payment of the

wergild for a relative killed in the belief they were a thief, then they must produce two oath-swearers from the paternal side, and one oath-swearer from the maternal side to demonstrate the victim's innocence.⁶⁹ Again, however, it should be highlighted that a similar clause appears in Ine's law which allows kinsmen to swear oaths to prove the innocence of a relative killed for being a thief. This clause does not stipulate from which parts of the kindred the oath-swearers must be drawn, and does not mention any distinction between the paternal and maternal sides of the family.⁷⁰ This further underlines the point made above that even within the legal texts (which originate from different time periods and different kingdoms), there was a lack of consistency in terms of whether or not any emphasis was placed on paternal kin, even when dealing with very similar issues. This in turn suggests that it was not generally standard practice to make such a distinction, nor was it universally the case that paternal kin were always emphasized in these circumstances.

King Alfred also expressed in his will a desire for his bookland to remain on the male, rather than female, side of his family, which was apparently a tradition within the West Saxon dynasty started by Alfred's grandfather.⁷¹ The most likely reason for this was a simple desire to concentrate royal wealth and property in the hands of those who could one day succeed to the kingship, which were on the whole patrilineal male descendants. Again, though, Alfred's will is a legal document, and it is difficult to find distinctions between paternal and maternal kin, or the suggestion that maternal kin were less important, outside references to inheritance and the feud that are found within these legal sources. For example, ecclesiastical texts such as the extant corpus of Old English penitentials frequently deal with issues relating to kinship, yet a distinction between paternal and maternal kin does not appear in these texts. Once more, even when dealing with the feud and wergild payments, it is still relatively rare for the law codes to make such a distinction – most of the time the law codes refer simply to generic 'kinsmen'. This suggests that there was little acknowledgement within wider society of any material difference between one's paternal and maternal kin, especially outside the realms of inheritance and the feud.

Furthermore, we should remember that kinship meant much more to contemporaries, as it does for us today, than narrow and specific clauses found in legal texts. It is difficult, for example, to envisage emotional bonds being weaker between a child and their maternal kin compared with those they shared with their paternal kin, and indeed we have no evidence to suggest this might have been the case. In addition, the genealogical evidence considered above demonstrates that despite the fragmentary source record for the genealogies of women, maternal kin could form an integral part of self-conceptualisation and social identification. When it came to how people represented themselves and how others judged them, maternal kin mattered. This is demonstrated clearly in Asser's work – the fact that Asser's first two chapters document Alfred's paternal and maternal ancestry almost exclusively shows that kinship played an essential role in establishing and communicating a person's social identity, at least in elite circles. As has been seen, maternal kinship and maternal ancestry mattered a great deal in this process, and to interpret the difference in the detail and length of Alfred's paternal and maternal ancestry as evidence that maternal kin mattered less is to misunderstand the intended purpose of the genealogies of royal women in Asser's text in the first place. Therefore, while we can recognize that some law codes do in specific instances appear to place an emphasis on paternal kin, we must view these clauses within a much wider legal and social context where the dichotomy between paternal and maternal kin is difficult, if not impossible, to discern, and historians must therefore be cautious about understating the importance of maternal kin more generally within early medieval English society.

Conclusion

This article has made three interventions. First, it has argued that despite what the extant source record indicates on the surface, the genealogies of royal women in early medieval England may have carried much more importance than has previously been recognized. Second, it has been

shown that the function of the genealogies of royal men and royal women differed: male genealogies were focused on prestige and tracing the origins of royal authority, whereas the female genealogies included in Asser's *Life* were instead focused on much narrower and immediately pressing political objectives. These differences in intended purpose therefore explain the differences in their presentation and level of detail. Finally, it has been argued that the importance of the genealogies of royal women that Asser's work reveals also has implications for how we think about the place of maternal relatives more broadly. It has been argued that maternal kin, at the very least outside the realms of inheritance and the feud, likely existed on equal footing with paternal kin in everyday life, and that we must be cautious about undervaluing the importance of women and maternal relatives and ancestors in kinship networks in early medieval England.

The importance of royal women in forging alliances and acting as 'peace-weavers' through marriage, as well as the importance for a king in securing a wife with influential relatives, has long been acknowledged.⁷² However, this article has also shown that although a woman's living relatives may have been important for a husband in shoring up his authority in a very practical, tangible way, her deceased relatives could also fulfil an important political function, and could act as an vital instrument in the creation of royal propaganda.⁷³ In this way, we have seen that the role of royal women at court, and their place in West Saxon history more broadly, partly due to anxieties around the succession, were all very much live and contested issues at Alfred's court during the 890s. Recognizing the ways in which royal women and their genealogies were used and presented in Asser's *Life* therefore also holds an important place in our understanding of the broader political and dynastic concerns that came to dominate the final decade of Alfred's reign.

¹ Asser, *De rebus gestis Ælfredi*, c. 1, in W.H. Stevenson (ed.), *Asser's Life of King Alfred: together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1904), p. 2 (hereafter referred to as 'Asser'); for a discussion on the alleged use of poetic figures as ancestors in the West Saxon genealogy, see D. Cronan, 'Beowulf and the Containment of

Scyld in the West Saxon Genealogy’, in L. Neidorf, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 112-37.

² Asser, c. 2, p. 4.

³ See for example, T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 112.

⁴ W. Pohl, ‘Genealogy: A Comparative Perspective from the Early Medieval West’, in Hoven, Lutter, and Pohl (eds), *Meanings of Community Across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 232-69, at p. 232.

⁵ Pohl, ‘Genealogy’, p. 250.

⁶ J. A. Holladay, *Genealogy and the Politics of Representation in the High and Late Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 2019), p. 4.

⁷ Holladay, *Genealogy*, pp. 3-4.

⁸ The term ‘Anglian collection’ was first coined by David Dumville; D.N. Dumville, ‘The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), pp. 23-50; The collection can be found in London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian B. vi; London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v; Rochester, Cathedral Library, A. 3.5; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 183. This latter copy of the collection has been dated to the post-Conquest era, and was not edited by Dumville, but Dumville notes that no substantial differences exist between this text and the other copies of the collection, see Dumville, ‘The Anglian Collection’, p. 28; For more on the West Saxon genealogies specifically, see D. N. Dumville, ‘The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List: Manuscripts and Texts’, *Anglia* 104 (1986), pp. 1-32.

⁹ Dumville, ‘The Anglian Collection’, pp. 23-50.

¹⁰ C.R. Davis, ‘Cultural Assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 21 (1992), pp. 23-36, at p. 36.

¹¹ Wallace-Hadrill and John have highlighted the use of Woden in particular as a legitimising royal ancestor, see J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), p. 45; E. John, ‘The Point of Woden’, in Filmer-Sankey, Hawkes, Campbell and Brown (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 5 (Oxford, 1992), pp. 127-34, at p. 132.

¹² S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Middlesex, 1989), pp. 41-2.

¹³ B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds. and trans., *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London, 1969), pp. xliv-xlv.

¹⁴ For a discussion of women in royal genealogies from England in a post-Conquest context, see P. Sigurdson Lunga, ‘Queens and Demons: Women in English Royal Genealogies, c.1100-1223’, in L. Ashe and E. J. Ward (eds), *Conquests in Eleventh Century England: 1016, 1066* (Woodbridge, 2020), pp. 225-41.

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- ¹⁵ Asser, c. 2, p. 4; in translation in Keynes and Lapidge (eds), *Alfred the Great*, p. 68.
- ¹⁶ J. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family, Reflections on Asser, Chapter 2', in I. Wood and N. Lund (eds), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 47-66.
- ¹⁷ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, c. 2, O. Holder-Egger (ed.), *MGH SS rer. Germ.*, 25 (Hanover, 1911), pp. 4-5; for a consideration of women in Frankish genealogies more generally, see I. Wood, 'Genealogy Defined by Women: The Case of the Pippinids', in L. Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith (eds), *Gender in the Early Medieval Europe: East and West, 300-900* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 234-56.
- ¹⁸ A. Scharer, 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', *Early Medieval Europe* 5 (2) (1996), pp. 177-206, at p. 206; J. Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred' in C. Holdsworth and T.P. Wiseman (eds), *The Inheritance of Historiography, 350-900* (Liverpool, 1986), pp. 115-36, at pp. 115-6.
- ²⁰ Asser, c. 23, p. 20.
- ²¹ Asser, c. 2, p. 4.
- ²² P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 36-54; see also J.L. Nelson, 'Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages', in W.J. Sheils and D. Wood (eds), *Women in the Church* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 53-78, at pp. 69-70; R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 223-7.
- ²³ R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Harlow, 1998), pp. 27, 31.
- ²⁴ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, p. 31.
- ²⁵ Asser, c. 1, p. 2.
- ²⁶ Asser, c. 2, p. 4; Asser notes that Osburh has both Gothic and Jutish heritage, but it is likely that Asser is mistaken here, following the incorrect assumption that Goths and Jutes were the same people, see note 8 in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 229-30.
- ²⁷ HE I. 15, p. 50; Nelson has also previously highlighted this point, see Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family', p. 56; Scharer has also highlighted the likelihood that Asser was familiar with Bede's work, see Scharer, 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', p. 190.
- ²⁸ T. Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited', in J. Hines, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 171-210, at pp. 183-191.
- ²⁹ Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship', p. 184.
- ³⁰ Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship', p. 185.
- ³¹ Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family', pp. 51-3.
- ³² Asser, c. 29, pp. 23-4; in translation in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 77.

³³ Asser, c. 29, p. 24; Keynes and Lapidge suggest the *Gaini* were one of the old tribal groupings of Mercia, and that charter evidence confirms the existence of such an ealdorman, see note 57 in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 240-1.

³⁴ Asser, c. 29, p. 24.

³⁵ For a discussion of Æthelred's position as ruler of Mercia, see Abels, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 180-4.

³⁶ Asser, p. 1.

³⁷ *HE* I. 15, p. 50

³⁸ Alfred's preoccupation with securing Edward's succession in the 890s has been noted in many places, for example see B. Yorke, 'Edward as Ætheling', in N. Higham, D. H. Hill (eds), *Edward the Elder, 899-924* (Abingdon, 2001), pp. 25, 37; D. Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation *Ordo*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 46 (2017), pp. 147-258, at pp. 229, 232-3.

³⁹ Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation *Ordo*', pp. 228, 233.

⁴⁰ Asser, c. 13-15, pp. 10-14; Stafford has explored the possible reasons behind the inclusion of this story, see P. Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex, 800–1066', *Past and Present*, 91 (1) (1981), pp. 3-27.

⁴¹ P. Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective on Alfred's Family History', in T. Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Abingdon, 2003), pp. 251-64, at p.263.

⁴² Asser, c.29, p. 24.

⁴³ Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation *Ordo*', p.161.

⁴⁴ Asser, c. 13, p. 11; note 28 in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 235; see also Abels, *Alfred the Great*, p. 84; on the position of the king's wife in Wessex, see Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex', pp. 3-27.

⁴⁵ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, note 28, p. 235; Stafford, 'The king's wife in Wessex', pp. 4-5, 17.

⁴⁶ For more on the increasing status of royal women, especially queens, in tenth-century Europe more widely, see S. MacLean, *Ottonian Queenship* (Oxford, 2017).

⁴⁷ For a discussion of Cuthburh and Cwenburh and reasons for their inclusion, see P. Stafford, 'Reading Women in Annals: Eadburg, Cuthburg, Cwenburg and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles', in M. C. La Rocca (ed.), *Agire da Donna: Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI-X)* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 269-89.

⁴⁸ K. Cross, 'Genealogy: Building a Viking Age Identity' in K. Cross, *Heirs of the Vikings: History and Identity in Normandy and England, C. 950 – C. 1015* (York, 2018), pp. 25-59; see also Cronan, 'Beowulf and the Containment of Scyld', pp. 112-8.

⁴⁹ Dumville, 'The Anglian Collection', pp. 23-50.

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- ⁵⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, p. 45; John, 'The Point of Woden', p. 132.
- ⁵¹ P.A. Shaw, *Uses of Wodan: The development of his cult and of medieval literary responses to it*, PhD dissertation, University of Leeds (2002), p. 132; on the prevalence in England of the collective origin myths associated with the *adventus Saxonum* in particular, see N. Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989); this is also not necessarily to accept the historicity of the *adventus* story, but rather to acknowledge its contemporary prevalence and importance, for a recent re-interrogation of the *adventus Saxonum*, see S. Oosthuizen, *The Emergence of the English* (Leeds, 2019).
- ⁵² *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 855, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, 3 MS A*, J. Bately (ed.) (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 45-6; Asser, c. 1, p. 1.
- ⁵³ *Historia Brittonum*, in W. Gunn, ed. and trans., *The 'Historia Brittonum'*, (London, 1819), pp. 10-11, 54.
- ⁵⁴ Genesis 5:3-31 (KJV).
- ⁵⁵ Davis, 'Cultural Assimilation', p. 36.
- ⁵⁶ Dumville, 'Anglian Collection', pp. 23-50.
- ⁵⁷ ASC 455, 495, 547, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bately, pp. 18-22.
- ⁵⁸ K. Sisam, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 39 (1953), pp. 287-348, at p. 298; for a discussion of Asser's use of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, see Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', pp. 115-136; for the Mercian genealogy in the *Chronicle*, see ASC 755, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bately, p. 38.
- ⁵⁹ B. Yorke, 'Edward as Ætheling', in N. Higham, D. H. Hill (eds), *Edward the Elder, 899-924* (Abingdon, 2001), p. 27; Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance', p. 259.
- ⁶⁰ P. Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance', pp. 259-60.
- ⁶¹ Holladay, *Genealogy and the Politics of Representation*, p. 4.
- ⁶² See for example Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon Kinship Revisited', p. 179; T. Charles-Edwards, 'Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide', *Past & Present* 56 (1972), pp. 3-33, at pp. 16, 31; L. Lancaster, 'Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society: II', *The British Journal of Sociology* 9 (4) (1958), pp. 359-377, at pp. 369, 372-3; P. Stafford, 'King and Kin, Lord and Community: England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', in P. Stafford, *Gender, Family and the Legitimation of Power: England from the Ninth to Early Twelfth Century* (Aldershot, 2006), pp.1-33, at p.13.
- ⁶³ See for example: 'Hlothere und Eadric', c. 6, in F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (Halle, 1903), p. 10; 'Ine', c. 38, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, pp. 105-6; 'Wer', c. 3, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, p. 392; 'II Æthelstan', c. 11, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, p. 156; 'Alfred', c. 27, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, pp. 66-7.
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⁶⁸ 'Wer', c. 3, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, p. 392; 'II Æthelstan', c. 11, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, p. 156.

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⁷⁰ 'Ine', c. 21.1, in Liebermann, *Die Gesetze*, p. 98.

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