

## **Aethelflaed: History and Legend**

*Kim Klimek*

*Metropolitan State University of Denver*

*This paper examines the place of Aethelflaed, Queen of the Mercians, in the written historical record. Looking at works like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Irish Annals, we find a woman whose rule acted as both a complement to and a corruption against the consolidations of Alfred the Great and Edward's rule in Anglo-Saxon England. The alternative histories written by the Mercians and the Celtic areas of Ireland and Wales show us an alternative view to the colonization and solidification of West-Saxon rule.*

### **Introduction**

Aethelflaed, Queen and Lady of the Mercians, ruled the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia from 911–918. Despite the deaths of both her husband and father and increasing Danish invasions into Anglo-Saxon territory, Aethelflaed not only held her territory but expanded it. She was a warrior queen whose Mercian army followed her west to fight the Welsh and north to attack the Danes. She lost two battles and won at least three. Aethelflaed should be an Anglo-Saxon icon; however, she is barely a footnote in mainstream contemporary Anglo-Saxon sources. Bits and pieces of her story appear in charters, annals, poems, and stories; not enough material has been gathered on her for a modern monograph, or even a full-length article. But her reign was important enough to warrant inclusion in at least four major annals and chronicles. The few Anglo-Saxon mentions of Aethelflaed outlined the basics of her place in history as a small part in the unification of England from Alfred to Aethelstan. Yet, there is more to Aethelflaed's story. Within the canonical Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Aethelflaed is just another forgotten memory destroyed by the vagaries of time and the chronicler's pen but in the Mercian Register, the Anglo-Saxon Charters, and the Irish Annals, she is part of an alternative history. In these records of the conquered or almost conquered, her reign and the subsequent absorption of Mercia

into Wessex are part of a wider narrative that undermines the ideology of Wessex conquest. Considering all these sources helps us to understand Aethelflaed both as her father's daughter and as a ruler in her own right. These sources show us that her rule as Queen of Mercia, while it complemented her father's and brother's consolidation of England against the Danes, could also be seen as a corruption against that consolidation.

### **The Sources**

One of the most important sources for this period is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC). The complicated text compiled from seven manuscripts and two fragments is a unique source of information about England from the ninth to twelfth centuries. The Chronicle consists of six extant versions (A, B, C, D, E, and F) and several fragments. The Main, or Canonical, Chronicle is cited as versions A, from Winchester, a West-Saxon area, and E, from Peterborough, which was inscribed long after the Viking invasions. Versions B, C, and D were written in Abingdon and Worcester, two areas once in Mercian control, but by the early tenth century under West-Saxon rule. The Chronicle is an annalistic history, where monks jotted important notes like comets or deaths in the abbey. Occasionally, dates would be written in advance, and a monk would have to fit details into a small space. The format offered little narrative, but the chroniclers were dedicated to God, not history. The Chronicle may read like a mere listing of achievements, but it is far more than that—each entry has significance and meaning. We should read the accounts concerned primarily with women with this in mind—the chronicler chose to craft each entry with forethought and energy. Aethelflaed is mentioned by name eight times in the full Chronicle, with six of the eight mentions in the Mercian chronicles, C and D.

Several additional chronicles mention Aethelflaed: the West-Saxon chronicles of Asser's *Life of Alfred the Great*, Aethelweard's *Chronicle*, the *Welsh Annales Cambriae*, and the Irish chronicles, including *The Three Fragments*. Asser and Aethelweard's chronicler refer to Aethelflaed in similar fashion to the Canonical versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Sources outside of Wessex's influ-

ence, like versions C and D of the ASC and the Celtic sources, refer to Aethelflaed in less traditional forms. Unlike the West-Saxon chronicles, Aethelflaed is not paired in an obligatory fashion to the men in her life. She is not Aethelflaed, daughter of Alfred, sister of Edward, wife of Aethelred. She is Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians. I contend that this characterization of Aethelflaed is an alternative reading of history written by men whose homes and regions had been conquered by Wessex. Aethelflaed's history corrupts the easy colonization and consolidation of England and the British Isles by West-Saxon kings like Alfred and his son Edward.

Noblewomen are often understood in relation to their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Undoubtedly, in the world of familial politics, one's relations were paramount to understanding one's place within the world. Even in modern histories, we understand medieval women within their familial relations. Aethelflaed herself is consistently paired with men in the majority of modern secondary sources. For example, F. T. Wainwright, who wrote the first modern article on Aethelflaed, states: "Aethelflaed was the daughter of Alfred the Great, sister of Edward the Elder, the wife of Ealdorman Aethelred of the Mercians and herself ruler of the Mercians for seven years after her husband's death."<sup>1</sup> Feminist scholars have attempted to elevate Aethelflaed but even in their work, the men still take center stage. Helen Jewell does not mention Aethelflaed at all in her 2007 monograph on women in early medieval Europe and has only a brief paragraph describing Aethelflaed's biography in her 1997 book on medieval English women. Yet, Jewell writes twice as much on her husband Aethelred, who appears in half as much source material as his wife.<sup>2</sup>

Other modern historians briefly discuss Aethelflaed as a military leader, and their work tends to be based on the canonical West-Saxon sources. David Jones writes that Aethelflaed "vowed a life of chastity after nearly dying in childbirth" and applied her energies

1 Damico and Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, 44.

2 Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 39, Jewell, *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe*.

to military pursuits, echoing the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman historian William of Malmesbury.<sup>3</sup> Pauline Stafford calls Aethelflaed one of the greatest warrior queens of the age.<sup>4</sup> In one of the longest modern recitations of Aethelflaed's reign, Christine Fell in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* devotes four pages to the Mercian queen.<sup>5</sup> *Battle Cries and Lullabies* repeats the idea about Aethelflaed's chastity but presents a more nuanced view of her military campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

These descriptions of Aethelflaed are so common as to be unremarkable. How could Aethelflaed be other than an extension of her father Alfred's military campaigns? Yet, many of the primary sources outside of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle offer us much more than a woman who was merely a daughter and sister of a mighty military king. She was Lady and ruler of the Mercians, not just her father's daughter. But, of course, the canonical history of Wessex wrote to prove Wessex's superiority over the rest of the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish kingdoms.

### **Canonical History: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's Life of Alfred**

Alfred the Great is a figure well-known to historians of England, partially because of the wealth of information the canonical historians left for us. During the tumultuous Danish colonization of England in the ninth century, Alfred, alone of the Anglo-Saxon kings of the heptarchy, remained standing against the Viking incursions. Ruling the central kingdom of Wessex from 871 to 899, Alfred defended his kingdom with military and diplomatic actions. He built military fortifications and convinced the Danish king Guthrum to convert to Christianity. His educational programs rivaled those of the Carolingian Renaissance, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle owes

3 Jones, *Women Warriors*, 57.

4 Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 118.

5 Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066*, 91-93.

6 De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies*, 83.

much to Alfred's belief in vernacular education. He deserved the twelfth-century appellation of "the Great" and he remains the only English monarch to carry that title.

Wessex was not, however, the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom to maintain freedom during this period. In the eighth century, three kingdoms amongst the heptarchy controlled most of the Anglo-Saxon lands: Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. Scandinavian raiding armies changed this dynamic in 865. Thetford in East Anglia fell to the Vikings in 865; York in 867; and Danes wintered in London by 871. By 877, Scandinavian lords controlled most of Northumbria, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Eastern Mercia. Wessex lost territory in the east, but maintained control over its central and western territory. Mercia, despite losing much of its eastern half, controlled a land mass similar in size to that of its southern, and still Anglo-Saxon, neighbor. The last Mercian king, Burhred, died in 874. That same year, a "foolish king's thegn was grated the kingdom of Mercia to hold, but does not seem to have been crowned king."<sup>7</sup> By 878 only one true Anglo-Saxon king remained, Alfred. Nevertheless, Mercia also remained, albeit as a kingdom without a king. Alfred had a built-in diplomatic agent: Aethelflaed was the first child of Alfred of Wessex and his Mercian wife, Ealhswith.

To secure power over the neighboring kingdom of Mercia, Alfred married this daughter to a powerful local ealdorman, Aethelred, at the previous Mercian king's death. Alfred then acknowledged Aethelred and Aethelflaed as Lord and Lady of Mercia. Her marriage cemented the relationship between Mercia and Wessex. Aethelflaed was the daughter of one king and sister to another, and to Mercia, through her mother and aunt, one a royal lady and the other a queen. Alfred also granted to Aethelred a sword at his death, a gift that Simon Keynes marks as a "sign of his special position as effective ruler of Mercia."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *ASC*, Winchester Manuscript A, year 874.

<sup>8</sup> Asser, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, 323, n. 391.

Despite her pivotal import to these bonds, the canonical versions of the ASC (versions A, and E) mention Aethelflaed infrequently. Version A mentions her by name once, at her death. Mercia is written of 7 times from 876 to 918. Version E mentions her by name once, at her death. Mercia is mentioned 5 times from 878 to 918. Her army and her boroughs appear under Edward's aegis, as his name and army appear by name previous to any mention of the Mercians.

Perspective may have everything to do with Aethelflaed's absence. Historian Christine Fell notes the West Saxon bias of much of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and considers that suppression of women's achievements could be more about their place of birth than their sex. A desire that "Mercian achievement should not be seen to outshine West Saxon" could have relegated Aethelflaed's achievements to the background.<sup>9</sup> Alistair Campbell, in his introduction to the *Chronicle of Aethelweard* suggests that Aethelflaed and Aethelred's removal from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle might have been because Edward was intent on looking forward and "may well have found it [Aethelflaed's deeds] irritating."<sup>10</sup>

The second essential work about Alfred and his reign is Asser's *Life of Alfred*, written in late 893. The author seemed concerned with portraying his patron as a great king, particularly to newly conquered areas. There is little negative information about Alfred in this manuscript. Because the work ends abruptly in 893, before Aethelflaed's rule in Mercia, Asser's work provides us with only a few details of her life before becoming a ruler. Asser leads us to believe that, because she and her sister Aethelgifu were born before her father's educational program was complete, neither of them benefited from his interest in education. Instead Alfred's two sons, Edward and Aethelweard, and his youngest daughter Aelfthryth were "devoted and intelligent students of the liberal arts." Perhaps Aethelflaed was too old to profit from Alfred's new program. Still, as the eldest daughter of Alfred, she was important to her father and in 882/3 he married her off in a politically expedient move.

9 Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066*, 12.

10 Aethelweard, *The Chronicle of Aethelweard*, xxix.

### **Alternative History: The Mercian Register**

The story of Aethelflaed appears mainly in the Mercian Register, which was inserted into the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The oldest manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, cited as A, does not use the Mercian Register. The Register was, however, added wholesale to manuscripts B and C “without any attempt to dovetail its annals into those of the Chronicle.”<sup>11</sup> The register forms then a discreet part of the Chronicle. The Mercian Register fills a gap within those manuscripts B and C, which have no entries for the years 915 to 934. The D and E forms of the Chronicle also use the Mercian Register, but here the register is inserted into the regular annals. The E version is closely tied to the D form and has interpolations of the Mercian Register. The Mercian Register disappears from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as abruptly as it appears. The last entry is in 927 when Athelstan succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbria and accepted the oaths of other kings on the island. The majority of the entries in Version C, the least modified version of the Mercian Register, concern Aethelflaed: She is in eight of the twenty notes. Twelve notes concern Aethelflaed’s immediate family—her father’s death, her brother’s accession, her husband’s death, and her daughter’s removal. The Mercians clearly had more interest in Aethelflaed than the West-Saxons.

When Alfred died around 900, his son Edward faced serious challenges. Edward succeeded to a divided and invaded land, and his cousin Aethelwold and his Danish allies also contested his inheritance. Edward found needed support through his sister Aethelflaed and her husband. In 903, Aethelwold and his army “harried all over Mercia” and the Mercians joined Edward against Aethelwold and the Danes. Battle broke out again in 910 and the Mercians had a great victory at Tettenhall, killing many Danish men. Notwithstanding it being a Mercian victory, the battle is mentioned in the ASC versions C, D, and E and in the Mercian Register, but only in Mercian Register is Aethelflaed mentioned by name. Shortly after the

11 Whitelock, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, xiv.

battle at Tettenhall, Aethelred died, perhaps as a result of wounds he received during the battle. Aethelflaed would act as independent leader for the first time.

She may have led well before her husband's death. F. T. Wainwright suggests that Aethelred was in poor health for much of his reign, stating that he "could do no more than offer advice from a sickbed."<sup>12</sup> His sources for Aethelred's continuing illness are the Irish Three Fragments, where Aethelred is "in a disease" from at least 902,<sup>13</sup> and a mention from Henry of Huntingdon, who wrote that Aethelred was "long infirm" before his death.<sup>14</sup> Following that logic, Aethelflaed ruled Mercia as early as 902.

Nevertheless, Aethelflaed truly became the leader of Mercia when she began her concentrated building program in 910. Her construction of boroughs (or burhs) continued a process her father had begun during his reign, and we may suppose that Alfred trained his daughter in these practices, whether actively or passively. Alfred's building campaign was a system of defense meant to protect his territory from Danish incursions. Based on a reading of the tenth-century document "Burghal Hidage," Alfred's burhs were designed to be permanent settlements of people and fortresses for his semi-permanent garrisons.<sup>15</sup> Historian Richard Abels writes that "the defensive system that Alfred sponsored, and its extension to Mercia under Ealdorman Aethelred and the 'Lady Aethelflaed', enabled his kingdom to survive."<sup>16</sup> The burghal system of Wessex "became a tool for conquest and territorial consolidation . . . by Edward the Elder, Ealdorman Aethelred and the Lady Aethelflaed. . . ."<sup>17</sup> In

12 Damico and Olsen, *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, 46.

13 *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments*, 227.

14 Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 167.

15 Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 199.

16 Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 199.

17 Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 217-218.



fact, a Mercian charter talks of the building up of Worcester by both Aethelred and Aethelflaed “for the protection of all the people.”<sup>18</sup> The building of burhs, particularly for defense, shows us Aethelflaed’s military and social stratagems. She might not have held the formal title of queen for the Wessex monastic chroniclers, but she behaved like one.

The Welsh border posed Aethelflaed’s first military test as queen. Early in her rule, the burhs of Gloucester, Hereford, and Worcester were built. Aethelweard writes that the Danes had built fortifications in Gloucester in 877, so re-building this city as Mercian may have been of importance to Aethelflaed and her husband. Of the eleven towns built during Aethelflaed’s reign, five were on the border with Wales. Although poorer in resources, the Welsh border was still a significant boundary that needed protection. Welsh leaders had taken oaths of loyalty to Aethelred, which probably extended to Aethelflaed upon his death. However, in 916, a Mercian abbot was killed while in Welsh territory. Three days later, Aethelflaed sent an army into Wales where she destroyed Brecon Mere and took thirty-four hostages, including a Welsh king’s wife.<sup>19</sup> Aethelflaed thus proved that she was not to be discounted in the military arena. With the Welsh quieted, Aethelflaed and her Mercian army focused on repelling the Danes to the north and west of Mercia.

She continued to fortify towns and assist her brother in repelling the Danish forces for the next two years. Her remaining seven burhs were situated along Danish borders. Some, like those of Tamworth and Stafford, were even in Danish-held lands. Aethelflaed fought not only against the Danes, but also against the Irish-Norwegians who invaded Northumbria in 914. She fortified two burhs in 914/915, Eddisbury and Runcorn—both of which were further north than those burhs in central Mercia that were directed against the Danes. According to the Irish Chronicle, The Three Fragments, Aethelflaed directed these fortresses against the Irish-Norwegian

18 Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce*, 104.

19 *ASC*, Abingdon Manuscript (Version C), year 916. *Brecon Mere* has been identified as Langorse Lake, near Brecon.

leader Ragnald, whom she met in battle in 918 where “her fame spread abroad in every direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Aethelflaed and Edward, her brother and king of Wessex, had an easy alliance. One of her more important conquests for Edward was Derby, which continued to hold a Danish garrison. The Mercian Register tells us that Aethelflaed “obtained the borough which is called Derby, with all that belongs to it” while Edward fought due south and east and occupied Towcester and Huntingdon.<sup>21</sup> Their armies were not conjoined, but their building policies leave little doubt that brother and sister prepared and executed their plans in conjunction with the other.

We cannot doubt that the creation of burhs impressed Alfred’s, and Aethelflaed’s royal power upon their subjects, both old and new. New towns were a part of Alfred’s defensive scheme against the Danes and we can assume the same for the towns built by his daughter and son. While Aethelflaed concentrated on building burhs in the northwest portion of Mercia, Edward built fortifications in the east, only moving north after his sister’s death. We can see, then, that Aethelflaed’s building continued her father’s protective stance. Aethelflaed acted as a military commander when she built burhs in her territory. The building processes might also have been her way of solidifying her own power over Mercia and signaling this power to her enemies, her subjects, and perhaps even her brother.

With her death, the cooperation between Mercia and Wessex was at an end, and Edward needed no more pretext to Mercian freedom. In 918, the Mercian Register reports that she “died twelve days before midsummer in Tamworth, in the eighth year in which with lawful authority she was holding dominion over the Mercians.”<sup>22</sup> Version A tells us that Edward “rode and occupied

20 Fragmentary Annal, FA 429, year ?907.

21 *ASC*, Abingdon Manuscript (Version C), year 917.

22 *ASC*, Abingdon Manuscript (Version C), year 918.

the stronghold at Tamworth, and all the nation of the land of Mercia which was earlier subject to Aethelflaed turned to him.”<sup>23</sup> The Mercian Register completes our description of Edward’s capture of Mercia from Aethelflaed’s daughter, Alfwynn, who was “deprived of all authority in Mercia and taken into Wessex.”<sup>24</sup> We can surmise that Aethelflaed meant her daughter to succeed her, as the Mercian Register confers upon her “authority” in Mercia. And, since Edward needed to “occupy” Tamworth in order to subject the Mercians to his authority, Alfwynn must have actually held some authority there. All these events happened directly after Aethelflaed’s death in Tamworth, indicating a sudden regime change.

### **Aethelflaed’s Mercian Legacy**

Given the events that appear in the Mercian register, Aethelflaed was obviously important to the Mercians. Their male chroniclers assigned her a starring role. Yet, later versions of events cast Aethelflaed as bit player. During the same period, in the Canonical ASC, she is mentioned by name only at her death, in version A. The Mercian army, as commanded by Aethelflaed, is mentioned three times in the versions A, C, and D. The Mercian monks could also have written this story without its main actor, but they chose to include her and her most significant events, both before and after her husband’s death. For monks whose allegiances and family ties most probably lay within the district of Mercia, Edward’s abrupt invasion of Tamworth and his removal of Alfwynn must have struck these writers as close to the military advancements he had made on London and Oxford, two former Mercian cities, which he conquered at Aethelflaed’s husband’s death. The canonical tale here is of Edward finishing his father’s consolidation of England under one king. To the Mercians, it may well have felt like a new invasion. Perspective is paramount in history.

23 *ASC*, Winchester Manuscript (Version A), year 922.

24 *ASC*, Abingdon Manuscript (Version C), year 918.

### **Alternative History: Charters**

Aethelflaed's importance is also clear in the Anglo-Saxon charter.<sup>25</sup> In it, she and Aethelred appear as "rulers of Mercia" and they exchange land with a church and grant a gold chalice to an abbess. She appears with Aethelred in one other charter (S 223) and on her own in two charters (S 224 and S 225). Interestingly, the reliability of all five charters in which Aethelred appears alone has been questioned. Only one of Aethelflaed's charters has received such a charge. In total, Aethelflaed appears in four of nine charters for the period between Ceolwulf II and Edward the Elder (874-924). This total is more frequent than any previous Mercian queen, most of whom only appear once. Prior to Aethelflaed, Mercian queens appear in three of forty-nine charters. Of 604 charters of the West Saxons and Wessex, only one queen, Frithugyth, Aethelweard's wife, appears as a co-benefactor (S 253). Out of the total 1163 Anglo-Saxon charters, queens appear as co-sponsors only twelve times. This gives Aethelflaed one-third, and Mercian women over half, of all the representations of women in 400 years.

The charters represent Aethelflaed's actions: she works with her husband before his death, and she acts alone in her widowhood. Aethelred's and Aethelflaed's lack of royal titles and coinage has suggested submission to Alfred and Edward. While there is a lack of royal title, both the kings of Wessex treated Aethelred and Aethelflaed as allies. In three Wessex charters, S 367, S 367a, and S 371, Edward acts "with Aethelred and Aethelflaed of Mercia." Edward's charters all concern requests made by a duke Aethelfrith—the land in question existed in border areas between Mercia and Wessex. Edward may have been acting in concert with the Mercian rulers to stave off any accusations of impropriety in oft-disputed territory. Mercia was the weaker territory, but it nonetheless avoided external invasion, at least during Aethelflaed's lifetime.

<sup>25</sup> Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*. Hereafter, charters from this work will be referred to by their Sawyer number only.

### **Alternative History: Celtic Sources**

The Annals of Ulster, the most prominent of Irish Chronicles, lists Aethelflaed only at her death: “918. Ethelfled, a very famous queen of the Saxons, dies.”<sup>26</sup> These annals often list the deaths of queens and prominent women; from 439 to 1047, twenty-three women’s deaths are mentioned. Of those twenty-three women, only three are mentioned without their concomitant men: the Saint Brigid, the Abbess of Cell Dara, and Aethelflaed.<sup>27</sup>

Aethelflaed’s military actions may have earned her note by the Irish. The Fragmentary Annals provides the most tantalizing view of Aethelflaed. These annals were probably written prior to 1040 and the relative brevity of years (covering the years 573 to 914) is matched only by their verbosity and storytelling. Fragmentary Annal 429 begins in 907 and abruptly ends in 914.<sup>28</sup> The annal concerns the Norwegians in Britain and their encounters with Aethelflaed, Queen of the Saxons. Like other alternative, non-canonical, sources, Aethelflaed’s agency is direct and active: at signs that the Danes were amassing in Chester, “The Queen then gathered a large army about her from the adjoining regions, and filled the city of Chester with her troops.” According to the Three Fragments, she directed fortresses against the Irish-Norwegian leader Ragnald, whom she met in battle in 918 where “her fame spread abroad in every direction.” The Queen “holds authority over all the Saxons” and she specifically requests Irish help in defeating the Danes at Chester. She actively commands the battle and ends the seizure of the city: “The pagans were slaughtered by the Queen like that, so that her fame spread in all directions. Aethelflaed, through her own cleverness, made peace with the men of Alba and with the Britons, so that

26 *Annals of Ulster to 1131*, 369.

27 Aethelflaed does not appear in the Annals of Tigernach or the Annals of Inisfallen, despite those two chronicles relying on the Annals of Ulster. These last two works only mention women without their male relatives in two instances: Brigid and Abbesses.

28 Fragmentary Annal, FA 429, year ?907.

whenever the same race should come to attack her, they would rise to help her. If it were against them that they came, she would take arms with them. While this continued, the men of Alba and Britain overcame the settlements of the Norwegians and destroyed and sacked them.” Thus ends the Fragmentary Annal, with Aethelflaed making peace with the Irish and Welsh and commanding the island of Britain against the Scandinavian invaders.

Surprisingly, Aethelflaed’s male relatives receive little attention in the Fragments. Aethelred’s illness and death are noted; Alfred and Edward are not mentioned. The strong warrior who consolidates England is a woman. And while she is a Saxon, she rules the entire south without a distinction made between Wessex and Mercia, controlling an expanded territory, even by eighth-century Mercian standards. It is not unusual that the Irish sources would not write about Anglo-Saxon history—with Viking invasions and settlements of their own, and various kings battling for supremacy, Irish history was itself enough for the chronicles.

If the Anglo-Saxons make so few entrances into Irish history, can these two mentions of Aethelflaed be true alternative histories? The battle scenes in the Fragmentary Annals are detailed and complex (boiling cauldrons, beehives, and tunneling) and the peace treaty is outlined with a complete speech from the Queen’s messenger. The Viking invasions had brought the British Isles into closer proximity than they had been in years. For two annals to detail Aethelflaed as an important queen seems significant. In the histories, Brigid is the only other woman to whom the chroniclers attend. In the Irish ballads and legends, the poets often portray strong, often dangerous, and always beautiful women—and their men fare no differently. In the Fragmentary Annals, I believe we see a composite view of Aethelflaed. She met the requirement of Irish hero: she was a strong, dangerous, warrior able to throw off a foreign yoke—a yoke familiar to all the Irish writers.

### **Alternative History: Folklore**

Two years ago, a student and native of Ireland relayed a story he had heard from his grandmother concerning Aethelflaed. An Irish-woman, his grandmother told him stories that dwelt on English perfidy against rightful rulers. I asked him to write the story down for me, as best he could recall. His tale outlined Aethelflaed and her daughter as the rightful rulers of Mercia, rulers who had close connections and warm relations with Irish kings. This remained true until Aethelflaed's death, when Edward claimed Mercia as his own and killed his niece, Alfwynn. The story ended with Aethelflaed and Alfwynn being invited to live with the Tuatha de Danaan in their barrows under the earth, as rightful queens and beautiful women, where they then became responsible for deceitful tricks against any English on Irish soil, or against any English sympathizers.

Stories about the Tuatha de Danaan abound in Irish folklore and histories. The Tuatha de Danaan, or children of the goddess Dana, were pre-Christian deities of Ireland who supplanted the original inhabitants of Ireland. Once later cultures supplanted the Tuatha, they became Fairy Folk, ageless gods and goddesses who could appear and disappear almost at will into the human realm of Ireland, or Tara. They dwelt in underground barrows and often exited their realm to claim spouses, interfere in human political affairs, or invite popular human rulers to dwell forever in their realms, in an apparent apotheosis of popular rulers. The tale of Aethelflaed and Alfwynn's acceptance into the Tuatha de Danaan mirrors these Fairy Folk Tales.

This encounter supports two useful ideas: 1) there are oral histories about the Middle Ages, and 2) Aethelflaed had been more than "Lady of the Mercians" and her story had outlived her small part in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Despite this oral morsel, I have found no reference to Aethelflaed in written Irish Folktales or stories. Further work with oral history may bring to light additional tales, which may also lead to connections between the conquered Aethelflaed and the conquered Tara.

## Conclusions

Perhaps Mercian nobles accepted Aethelflaed as ruler as a way to keep Mercia independent from Wessex.<sup>29</sup> The nobles did not seek Edward's protection, and Edward did not advance into Mercia at Aethelred's death. Instead, Mercian nobles chose to maintain Mercia and its traditions by supporting their Lady and her daughter, the latter of whom could later be married to an ealdorman, who in turn would rule them as king. Aethelflaed remained a widow in the seven years between her husband's death and her own, thereby smoothing the way for her daughter's accession and maintaining her own power. Whether this was her choice, the Mercian noblemen's, or her brother's, we do not know. We do know, however, that Edward did not challenge her supremacy in Mercia, although he did gain control over the traditional Mercian cities of London and Oxford.

The Wessex writers had more than a passing interest in removing Mercian players from the scene. Yet Annals from outside of Wessex control show Aethelflaed as a strong queen and leader of the Mercian forces. Aethelflaed is remembered, even in the tersest of contemporary sources, as the Mercian leader and a builder of military garrisons. But when we look at Aethelflaed in a larger context, outside of the canonical history written in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, we find a woman as strong as her father and brother, a woman whose territory ceased to be a kingdom after her death.

Further work with Irish and Welsh oral histories may bring more new light to Aethelflaed and other lesser-known figures. We might find people who became sites of resistance and subversion against the stronger story of English hegemony. Perhaps Mercia needed to fall for the larger story of Anglo-Saxon England to be complete. But in the Mercian Register and the Irish Annals, the hegemony of Wessex is challenged by the rule of a strong, and nearly forgotten, queen.

29 Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England*, 97.



Kim Klimek is Assistant Professor of History at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Her particular research interests include the intersections of gender and intellectual history, with a particular focus on women and their impact on historical writing. At MSU Denver, I am the co-chair of the Feminist First Fridays Forum, a local feminist research forum with participation from three colleges and community members, and chair of the department's Faculty Colloquium. She a council member of the Medieval Association of the Pacific and the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association. At present, she is working on a larger project concerning noblewomen's access to, and use of, political power during the period from 850 to 1150.

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*Aethelflaed as depicted in The Cartulary and Customs  
of Abingdon Abbey, c. 1220*