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INHERITANCE OF POWER IN MERCIA BY PRINCESS AELFWYNN

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The period of the early Middle Ages is controversial among scholars, especially with regard to gender studies, which have intensified since the late twentieth century. It is believed that in the Middle Ages women were restricted in their rights and the role of a noble woman was limited to strengthening alliance by contracting dynastic marriage. This was the case with the Carolingians, but the end of the early Middle Ages is also known as the beginning of the Viking's Age, where women were treated with honor and respect, a woman could rule the odal while her husband was absent, and participate in the campaign. The territories of Britain of 9–10 centuries were constantly attacked by Scandinavians, culminating in the establishment of Danelag (area of Danish law), so England at that time was on the border of two civilizations – Western European and Scandinavian. The Kingdom of Mercia lost part of its territory and bordered on Five Viking burs, while Wessex was able to maintain independence from the Danes. Thus, in the two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with common traditions, religion and law, different patterns in the realm of women were formed. In 911, a woman who accompanied her husband for a long time in all his campaigns was recognized as the ruler of Mercia, and the question remains whether she could hand over the reins of power to her daughter. The main purpose of the article was to determine the characteristics of the succession to the throne of the Anglo-Saxons and to analyze the possibility of recognizing this right for a woman on the example of the Mercian Princess Elfwynn. The transition of power to the woman's heir was not typical of the Anglo-Saxons, which aroused interest in a more thorough study of this issue.

Based on the analysis and comparison of primary sources, as well as historiography, the article considers the basic principles of succession to the Anglo-Saxons in the early Middle Ages and analyzes the possible transfer of power to the heiress, taking into account the recognition of this right by the nobility. The foreign policy processes that influenced the domestic policy of the Kingdom of Mercia and, as a result, were reflected in the position of the ruling elite on the succession to the throne, are considered in the study. The scientific paper provides a deeper understanding of the status and role of women in the political arena of Anglo-Saxon society by determining the level of their involvement in the government of the kingdom.

Key words: Elfwynn, Mercia, witenagemot, Ethelfled, Ethelred II, Edward the Elder, Wessex, Anglo-Saxons, inheritance.

Problem statement. The early Middle Ages in Europe from the point of view of historical feminology¹, to a greater extent, is covered according to the model of the

¹ Historical feminology, or women's history, is a branch of science that develops and studies the problems of femininity in the historical process, as well as the dynamics of changes that occurred during the development of society in relation to women.

Franks, where the woman was an object and not a subject of the historical process. In the history of Anglo-Saxon Britain, the fact that the territories of the then kingdoms on the peninsula were constantly raided by Scandinavians encourages tracing the situation of women in the political life of these states on the border of two cultures – Scandinavian and Western European. As part of this study, it is important to analyze the probability of transferring power to a woman and recognizing her as a ruler on the basis of inheritance law, which will allow us to more clearly outline the position of women in the Anglo-Saxon state apparatus.

Purpose of the article. To determine the characteristic features of the Anglo-Saxon succession to the throne and analyze the possibility of recognizing this right for a woman on the example of the Mercian Princess Elfwynn.

Presentation of the main material. Before the unification of Britain by Athelstan and the Norman conquest in 1066, the territory of England was divided into kingdoms that constantly fought for hegemony. The era of Heptarchy was initially dominated by the kingdom of Northumbria, and later the right to primacy was fought by the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex. To consolidate the power of the leading ruler, military agreements and dynastic marriages were concluded between the kingdoms, but this process became especially active with the beginning of Viking raids. The appearance of a strong external enemy at the beginning of the IX century contributed to the political consolidation of kingdoms, but these were still separate state entities. Despite their separateness, the Anglo-Saxons were one ethnic group that was united by a common religion and customary law, the so-called Anglo-Saxon law. These legislative acts were modified in the process of dominance of a particular kingdom, but they covered the system of customs that extended to all kingdoms with minor territorial differences. Based on an analysis of the laws of the Wessex Kings Ine and Alfred in Anglo-Saxon Britain, a woman was not disenfranchised. The socio-economic rights of women were clearly defined and provided for the procedure for their inheritance of property, marriage, and responsibility for crimes committed against both women and by women, taking into account violations of the moral norms of society². However, if a woman's social life was mostly defined by legal statutes, then the political powers of the wives and daughters of the rulers of that time can only be estimated by the degree of assessment of their involvement in the political life of the kingdom.

Anglo-Saxon rulers bore the title of King, for women this title appeared quite rarely. Royal power among the Anglo-Saxons was hereditary, but there is no reliable information about how the succession to the throne took place. Kingdoms were constantly at war, so it was necessary for rulers to appeal to blood rights to the throne, which would strengthen the authority of the king and confirm his right to power. This is also confirmed by the fact that this period was characterized by maintaining genealogical branches, where the pedigree was tried to be drawn to the

² Ирина Болдырева, “Правовое положение женщины в Уэссексе VII–IX веков”, *Научный диалог* 4(52) (2016): 190.

oldest ancestor of the royal family. It is also obvious that power passed to the eldest son, as is evident by the example of Alfred coming to power in Wessex, who became king only after the death of his older brother³.

Given the lack of a well-known algorithm for inheriting the throne, the issue of participation of the nobility in this process, which formed an advisory body under the King, remains debatable – Witenagemot. Witenagemot was formed from the owners of the booklands – earls, the secular and spiritual social elite⁴. This body was a state structure with a fairly wide range of powers, which included: legislative activity and land distribution, implementation of the Supreme Court and appointment to church positions, tax authorization, consideration of foreign and domestic policy issues, as well as choosing or removing of the King. Most likely, the choice of the King required the participation of the Witans in the absence of a direct heir, or the presence of several applicants, which does not exclude the need to confirm this right by kinship with the ruling dynasty⁵. So, for example, in Mercia, unlike Wessex, there was no single permanently ruling dynasty due to civil strife within the kingdom, in particular, Ethelred II became the ruler of Mercia after the death of Ceolwulf II in 879, although his origin is not known for certain, it is believed that he was from a noble family, but was not connected to the royal dynasty⁶. Thus, it can be argued that the succession to the throne among the Anglo-Saxons was hereditary and passed from father to son, or the closest relative, and the supreme power of the King was recognized and supported by the church and the nobility, who had to swear allegiance and whose interests were also protected by royal power. In the absence of a direct heir, with the consent of the members of Witenagemot, a representative of a non-royal family could be elected king. However, the ruler's connection to the royal dynasty was fundamental to his right to the throne, and his kinship with another branch of the ruling dynasties ensured the strength of his position in succession.

Given the need to argue for the rights to the throne by blood, an important role in the formation of political alliances was assigned to women whose origin was no less significant. Dynastic marriages also had a special place considering the external threat and served as a kind of guarantor of the established alliance between the kingdoms. To support this claim, several examples can be given, in particular, the military campaign of Mercia and Wessex to North Wales coincides with the marriage between Alfred's sister Ethelwith and the Mercian King Burgred in 853. Alfred himself was related to

³ Ли Беатрис Аделейд, *Альфред Великий, глашатай правды, создатель Англии 848–899 гг.* (СПб.: Евразия, 2017), 107.

⁴ Леонтій Войтович, Юрій Овсінський, *Історія війн і військового мистецтва (бл. 3060 до Христа – початок XVI ст.)*. (Харків: Фоліо, 2017), 337.

⁵ Клара Савело, *Раннефеодальная Англия*. (Ленинград: Издательство Ленинградского университета, 1977), 113–114.

⁶ Timothy Venning, *The Kings & Queens of Anglo-Saxon England*. (Gloucestershire: Amberley, 2013), 137.

Ealhswith, who belonged to a noble Mercian family⁷. As Asser points out, Alfred's marriage took place in 868, and in the same year, the two kingdoms jointly attacked the Danes in Nottingham⁸. Marriage of Elfwynn's parents – Ethelred and Princess Ethelfled of Wessex became the third concluded alliance between the royal dynasties of Wessex and Mercia since the beginning of Ethelwulf's reign (king of Wessex 839–858). Ethelfled was already related to the Mercian royal dynasty, as her maternal grandmother was the daughter of the Mercian King Offa Eadburg, who also had the title of Queen. The marriage of Ethelfled and Ethelred was most likely concluded in 886, since this time was marked by the transfer of Mercia, which was recaptured from the Vikings from London, as a symbol of the union between the kingdoms⁹. For Ethelred, this marriage was beneficial not only in view of the necessary alliance with Wessex but also in terms of securing his rights to power in Mercia. As for Ethelfled, her historical significance did not end only on the dynastic unification of the two kingdoms, the result of this marriage was the future coming to power of a woman in Mercia. Due to her Mercian roots, Ethelfled had a solid foundation for recognition in the Kingdom, and her charismatic leadership ensured that she would later become a full-fledged ruler after her husband's death.

The period of Ethelfled's reign is one of the most interesting, given the study of women's issues in the early Middle Ages. There is no information that would convey to us evidence about how power was assigned to Ethelfled after Ethelred's death, and whether there were other contenders for her place. By the time Ethelfled came to power, her brother Edward the Elder had become king of Wessex after Alfred's death. According to the records of manuscript A of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 911: "*King Edward received London and Oxford and all the lands that belong to them*"¹⁰. It is not entirely clear whether these lands were forcibly annexed or perhaps this was a condition under certain agreements between the kingdoms. We can only assume that Ethelfled could have returned to Wessex the territories that were given to her husband by Alfred. Another question is why this need arose. Perhaps this was a condition for the recognition of her power in Mercia by Wessex, or it was stipulated in the agreements of Alfred and Ethelred. Do not forget the fact that during the reign of Alfred, Ethelred recognized the superiority of Wessex and no longer held the title of King, but of earl, as evidenced by the charters of that period.¹¹ Thus, the annexation

⁷ Ли Беатрис Аделейд, *Альфред Великий, глашатай правды, создатель Англии 848–899 гг.* (СПб.: Евразия, 2017), 290.

⁸ *Old English chronicles: including Ethelwerd's chronicle, Asser's Life of Alfred, Geoffrey of Monmouth's British history, Gildas, Nennius, together with the spurious Chronicle of Richard of Cirencester*, ed. Giles Allen John. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1906), 53.

⁹ Jeremy Haslam, "King Alfred the Great, Mercia and London, 874–886: A reassessment", *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 17 (2011): 139.

¹⁰ *Англосаксонская хроника*, пер. с др.-англ. Зоя Метлицкая. (СПб.: Евразия, 2010), 83.

¹¹ *Cartularium saxonicum: a collection of charters relating to Anglo-Saxon history*, ed. by Walter de Gray Birch. (London: Whiting and Company, 1887. Vol. II), 375: "Grant by Aethelred, olderman, and Aethelflaed of privileges to Worcester Monastery".

of the kingdom could well take place after the death of the last male ruler. Ethelfled and Ethelred had no male heir, and at the time of his death, only his daughter Elfwynn remained, so Ethelfled did not claim to be regent under the infant ruler and could be removed from the administration of the kingdom. However, the kingdom retained its separateness under Ethelfled's rule until her death, after which it was finally annexed to Wessex.

Ethelfled received broad powers during her husband's life and, as noted by chroniclers of that time, due to Ethelred's serious and prolonged illness, she managed the kingdom independently long before his death. Recognition of a woman as ruler under such conditions could well provide for the possibility of further transfer of power to the heiress. The text of manuscript A of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that after the death of Ethelfled in June 918, power in Mercia passed to Edward and that "*all the inhabitants of Mercia and Wales submitted to him*"¹². Based on manuscript A, it can be assumed that Edward quite legitimately took over power after his sister. On the other hand, when comparing this information with the materials of the Mercian register, there is no doubt that at first the rule in the kingdom could have been recognized after the only daughter of Ethelred and Ethelfled Elfwynn, since it is indicated that it was "*that all her possessions were taken away from her*"¹³. If we take into account the information provided in the "Mercian register", then in 919 Elfwynn's possession was taken away three weeks before the middle of winter. According to an analysis of chronological indicators in the Mercian register, it is more likely that we are talking about 918, rather than 919, so Elfwynn was in power for about half a year before she was taken to Wessex¹⁴. Conducting a comparative analysis of the manuscripts A, B and C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, we can trace the disregard in manuscript A of Ethelfled's military campaigns and political alliances, which are confirmed not only by the "Mercian register", but also by the "fragmentary annals of Ireland", which refers to her alliance with the Scots of Alba and the Britons of Strathclyde to jointly oppose the Scandinavians¹⁵. Considering this fact, it is quite logical that there is no information about Elfwynn's coming to power, especially if Wessex did not recognize this power.

Another source confirming the theory of the inheritance of power by the Elfwynn is the "history of the angles" of the English historian of the XII century. Henry of Huntingdon, which states that Edward deprived Elfwynn of her inheritance rights: "*King Edward, in the 26th year of his reign, more concerned with utility than justice, deprived Elfwynn, Ethelfled's sister, who ruled the kingdom after her, of*

¹² *Англосаксонская хроника*, 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴ Frederick Threlfall Wainwright, "The Chronology of the "Mercian Register", *The English Historical Review* 60(238) (1945): 388–389.

¹⁵ *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments*, ed. J. O'Donovan. (Dublin: Printed at the University Press for the Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1860), 247: "Etheldrida, through her own wisdom, made a treaty with the men of Alba and the Britons, that whenever the same race should come to attack her, they would rise up to assist her; and that should they come to them, she would assist them".

*hereditary possession over all of Mercia*¹⁶. Despite the false definition of Elfwynn as a sister, and not as Ethelfled's daughter, the author still mentions her as an heir who was deprived of power.

The Kingdom of Mercia recognized Wessex as the hegemon, and the fact that Ethelred also gave up the title of King is interpreted as the beginning of the merger of the kingdoms. So the English historian of the 12 century. William of Malmesbury, in the *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, portrays a somewhat idealized image of a brother and sister fighting together against the Vikings¹⁷. Thus, the unification of the kingdoms seemed quite logical. However, if we reject the theory of usurpation of power from Elfwynn, and recognition by the Mercians of the ruler of Wessex, then it is more obvious that power would either be immediately recognized for Edward, or it would be likely that the transfer of rule in the kingdom would be to Ethelstan, the eldest son of Edward, who was brought up at the court of Ethelred and Ethelfled. As of 918, Ethelstan would have been 23 years old, raised in Mercia, and could well have been chosen to rule the kingdom if the succession was to pass to the Wessex dynasty. It was Ethelstan who was declared king of Mercia after Edward's death, so it is obvious that Elfwynn's election was not a favourable scenario for Wessex and forced Edward to assert his power in the kingdom on his own¹⁸.

The existence of dynasties and legitimate rulers provided not only the power of these rulers but also the right of the kingdom to an independent existence. The bishops, the earls, the abbots, and the thegns, who formed the upper Mercian nobility and the Witenagemot, in the absence of an heir, could well support the most influential representative of the nobility, to whom they could transfer power, as happened with Ethelred. Undoubtedly, the same recognition of Ethelfled's power after the death of her husband without the support of the Witans was unlikely. But if Ethelfled's support could have come from her successful rule and successful military campaigns during her husband's lifetime, then Elfwynn's support by this body is more likely justified by her inheritance law. This theory is also confirmed by the fact that Elfwynn was most likely prepared to participate in the political life of the kingdom because her signature is on the Worcester Charter of 904, which records the transfer of lands to Ethelred and Ethelfled. In this document, Elfwynn was listed as the heiress of these lands after the death of her parents¹⁹. She also witnessed several charters, which indicates her

¹⁶ Генрих Хантингдонский, *История Англов*, перевод с латинского, вступительная статья, примечания, библиография и указатели Станислава Мереминского. (Москва: Русский Фонд Содействия Образованию и Науке, 2015), 235.

¹⁷ Malmesbury William, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the kings of England. From the earliest period to the reign of King Stephen*, ed. by John Sharpe, John Allen Giles. (London: H. G. Bohn, 1847), 123.

¹⁸ Tom Holland, *Athelstan. The Making of England*. (UK: Allen Lane, 2016), 44.

¹⁹ *Cartularium saxonicum: a collection of charters relating to Anglo-Saxon history*, ed. by Walter de Gray Birch. (London: Whiting and Company, 1887. Vol. II), 266–267: “A.D. 904. Wærferth, bishop, and the community at Worcester, to Æthelred and Æthelflæd, their lords; lease, for their lives and that of Ælfwyn, their daughter, of a messuage (*haga*) in Worcester and land at Barbourne in North Claines, Worcs., with reversion to the bishop. Latin with English and English bounds of appurtenant meadow west of the Severn”.

involvement in state affairs during the life of Ethelfled, which could also be justified by the support among the Witans²⁰. We should not ignore the fact that the secular and spiritual elite of Mercian society did not want a complete merger of the kingdoms, as evidenced by the constant uprisings on the territory of the kingdom under the rule of Ethelstan, despite the termination of his existence. Therefore, the inheritance of power by Elfwynn could be quite natural and profitable from the point of view of the nobility of that time, who also defended their interests within a separate kingdom with their own legitimate ruler.

These facts suggest that first of all, after the death of Ethelfled, power in Mercia was inherited and transferred to her daughter Elfwynn. The change of ruler, and perhaps a little less authority of Elfwynn than that of her mother, prompted Edward to finally remove his niece from the rule in the Kingdom and consolidate his influence in the Mercian lands. The very fact of the usurpation of power makes it possible to assert that this power was recognized not only for the male heir, as was customary in Anglo-Saxon society but in particular that in Mercia this right was also recognized for the woman. Thus, the last rulers of one of the once most powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were women, which also shows the influence of Scandinavian traditions, since Mercia was particularly under pressure from Danelagus.

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²⁰ Ibid., 258–259.

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УСПАДКУВАННЯ ПРИНЦЕСОЮ ЕЛЬФВІНОЮ ВЛАДИ У МЕРСІЇ

Марта ЄПІК

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Період раннього Середньовіччя викликає суперечки серед науковців, особливо щодо гендерних досліджень, які активізувалися з кінця ХХ ст. Вважається, що в Середні віки жінки були обмежені в правах, а роль знатної жінки зводилася до укладення династичного шлюбу. Так було з Каролінгами, але кінець раннього Середньовіччя також відомий як початок епохи вікінгів, коли до жінок ставилися з пошаною: жінка могла керувати одою, поки її чоловік був відсутній. Територія Великої Британії впродовж ІХ–Х століть постійно зазнавала нападів скандинавів, що завершилося створенням Данелагу (області данського права), тому Англія в той час перебувала на кордоні двох цивілізацій – західноєвропейської та скандинавської. Королівство Мерсія втратило частину своєї території, а Уессекс зміг зберегти незалежність від данців. Таким чином, у двох англосаксонських королівствах із спільними традиціями, релігією та правом, сформувалися різні моделі ставлення до жінок. У 911 році правителькою Мерсії була визнана жінка, яка довгий час супроводжувала свого чоловіка в усіх його походах, і залишається питання, чи могла вона передати кермо влади своїй дочці. Основна мета статті полягає в тому, щоб визначити особливості престолонаслідування англосаксонців та проаналізувати можливість визнання цього права за жінкою на прикладі мерсійської принцеси Ельфвіни. Перехід влади в рамках спадкоємства до жінки був не властивий англосаксам, що викликало інтерес до ґрунтовнішого вивчення цього питання. На основі аналізу та порівняння першоджерел, а також історіографії, в статті розглянуто основні принципи спадкоємності англосаксів в епоху раннього Середньовіччя. У дослідженні розглянуто зовнішньополітичні процеси, які вплинули на внутрішню політику Королівства Мерсія і, як наслідок, відбилися на позиції правлячої еліти щодо успадкування престолу. Дослідження покликане забезпечити глибше розуміння статусу та ролі жінки на політичній арені англосаксонського суспільства шляхом визначення рівня їхньої участі в управлінні королівством.

Ключові слова: Ельфвіна, Мерсія, Вітенагемот, Етельфледа, Етельред II, Едуард Старший, Уессекс, англосакси, престолонаслідування.

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