

## Chapter 5 – WESSEX



**Map of Anglo-Saxon England**

Mike Christie released this into the Public Domain

As with so many stories about medieval times the origins of the Kingdom of Wessex are shrouded in myths, exaggerations and inaccuracies. In the worst cases, they are interwoven with the Arthurian legends or some of the Norse sagas.

Most of the information available for the years up to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century comes from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which, whilst an invaluable and fascinating source, was not commenced until the second half of that century.

The truth is that, until then, the stories about kings and other leaders and their battles and other adventures were handed down in oral histories which changed as they passed from one storyteller to another. They would have been embroidered to suit the teller or to glorify, flatter or excite the listener.

Added to this, there seems to have been a strong desire by the later Kings of Wessex to prove their line and to ensure that their claims to the throne could not be questioned. The existence of an unbroken line of descent back to the founder of Wessex seemed to be a key objective.

## The Early Wessex Kings

Cerdic (467-534) is generally acknowledged as the founder of the House of Wessex. However, his origins, his parentage, family links and the details of his life are far from certain. In fact, there are so many different theories that it seems foolish to list them all. The theory which seems to make most sense is the one which goes against most of the older stories which centred on Saxon invaders landing in South Hampshire and conquering the local people.

Cerdic may actually have been the son of a Romano-British leader called Elesa or Elasius. Cerdic's name and those of his immediate descendants were British rather than Saxon and, contrary to legend, the Saxon invaders did, in many cases, coexist and intermarry with the locals.

So, Cerdic, quite probably, was a member of a noble British family which had intermarried with and become accepted as kin by the Saxon and Jute settlers. In the power vacuum created by the collapse of Roman authority, there would have been an opportunity to eliminate any effective opposition and take power. Cerdic is believed to have started to rule as King in 519.

The earliest settlement for the West Saxons was believed to be at Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire and so a competing British/Saxon power base in central Hampshire could easily have developed and, in time, conquered or absorbed other groups to create the larger Kingdom of Wessex.

Cerdic was probably succeeded by his grandson Cynric (d.560). It is believed that Cynric extended the kingdom from its core, in the area around today's Winchester in Hampshire, some 40 kilometres to the west capturing Old Sarum, near Salisbury, in 552. And, with his son Ceawlin, he defeated the Britons based at the old hill fort of Barbury Castle, near today's Swindon in Wiltshire and 80 kilometres north of Winchester.

Ceawlin (d.593) reigned after his father for 32 years. He was defeated by his nephew Ceol (d.597) in a battle at Woden's Barrow, now called Adam's Grave at Alton Priors in Wiltshire, 13 kilometres south west of Marlborough. Ceawlin was exiled with his other two surviving brothers and their families; he died the following year.

Ceol is described as extremely ruthless and, together with his brother Ceolwulf (d.611) he spent the next few years trying to extend his kingdom and to eliminate what remained of the original ruling family.

Ceolwulf succeeded his brother because Ceol's son Cynegils (d.643) was too young to rule. Little is known about his reign although there were definitely significant changes to the boundaries of the kingdom; when Cynegils took charge, he was recorded as ruling parts of Somerset, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire as well as Hampshire and Wiltshire.

Cynegils had a relatively long reign although he appears to have been paying tribute to King Edwin of Northumbria for a good deal of this time. He and his son Cwichelm were recorded as having defeated 'the Welsh' at Beandun, now Bindon, near Axmouth in Devon. It is said that the Welsh dead totalled 2,046. These 'Welsh' would have been Britons from what had been called Dumnonia and was now Devon; they were often called the West Welsh.

Another of Cynegils sons, Cenwalh (d.674) succeeded him. He is said to have

married the sister of Penda, King of Mercia, and then divorced her to marry someone else. A war ensued and it is believed that, from 645 to 648, he was exiled. Cenwalh extended the kingdom further west during his rule but also lost the Meon valley in south Hampshire.

Cenwalh's wife, Saxburh, ruled for about a year after he died and a sub-king Æscwine for about two years after that. There was some fragmentation of the kingdom during that time but it was reunited when Cenwalh's son, Centwine (d.685) took control of the kingdom. Centwine is recorded as having fought three battles with the Britons and to have 'driven them into the sea'.

Centwine was succeeded by Cædwalla (d.689). Cædwalla's parentage is not known but was said to be a descendant of the exiled ruling family. Whilst in exile, he had attacked the south Saxons and killed their king Æthelwealh in Sussex. He was driven back out but, when he became King of Wessex, he took Sussex again.

He also gained the Isle of Wight, Surrey and Kent. Wounded whilst taking the Isle of Wight, he abdicated in 688 and travelled to Rome for baptism. He arrived in April 689, was baptised on the Saturday before Easter and died ten days later.

Cædwalla was succeeded by Ine (676-726); although, some believe that Ine's father Coenred ruled for a short time or that they ruled together. Coenred and Ine claimed to be able to trace their ancestry back to Ceawlin's family who were exiled and persecuted by Ceol.

Ine eventually lost control of the south eastern counties which Cædwalla had conquered but he kept the Isle of Wight and extended Wessex further into Devon and Cornwall. During Ine's reign a code of law was published, trade through Hamwic, which is now the city of Southampton, had blossomed and Christianity was fostered and extended.

Like his predecessor, Ine abdicated in 726 and travelled to Rome where he died. He said he was 'leaving his kingdom to younger men'.

He was succeeded by Æthelheard (d.740) after a dispute with one Oswald who was another claimant of descent from Ceawlin. The parentage of Æthelheard is unknown. He had the support of Æthelbald of Mercia in the fight against Oswald and, in return, had to pay homage to him after that. Æthelbald also took a good deal of Wessex territory.

Æthelheard was succeeded by Cuthred (d.756) who was a relative and may have been his brother. Æthelbald of Mercia was still overlord but there was often skirmishing between the two kingdoms. Nevertheless, Æthelbald demanded support against the Welsh in 743.

In 748, Cuthred's heir, Cynric was killed in a mutiny. In 750, there was an unsuccessful rebellion led by one, Æthelhun. But, in 752 Cuthred defeated Æthelbald of Mercia at Battle Edge in Burford, Oxfordshire. He gained independence for Wessex for the rest of his reign.

Cuthred was succeeded by a distant relative Sigebert (d. 757) who ruled for less than a year. He was accused of murder, driven out along with his brother Cyneheard and then killed.

Cynewulf (d.786), whose ancestry is unknown, succeeded Sigebert. Shortly afterwards, Æthelbald of Mercia was assassinated and, whilst Mercia went through a spell of infighting, Cynewulf took Berkshire. It is said that he also often fought 'the Welsh'.

Offa of Mercia defeated Cynewulf and his army at the Battle of Bensington, now Benson in Oxfordshire about 2 kilometres north of Wallingford, in 779 and the Mercians took back Berkshire.

In 786, Cynewulf was killed at Merantune, now Martin in Wiltshire 16 kilometres south west of Salisbury, by Cyneheard, the exiled brother of Sigeberht.

Beorhtric (d.802), whose parentage is not known, and Ecgberht (775-839), who claimed descent back to Cerdic, vied for the throne but Beorhtric was supported by Offa of Mercia. The exact reasons for this are not known but it may have been because Ecgberht was the son of Æahlmund of Kent who had rebelled against Mercia and defeated Offa in 776 at the Battle of Otford in Kent, 5 kilometres north of Sevenoaks.

Offa may also have regarded Beorhtric as more malleable and he certainly does seem to have accepted Offa's authority. In 787, together they held the Synod of Cealchythe, believed to be modern day Chelsea. And, in 789, Beorhtric married Eadburh, one of Offa's daughters. His kingdom also used Offa's coinage.

In 789, the first Viking raids were recorded and they landed on the Dorset coast near Portland where they killed the shire reeve (the old name for sheriff).

When Offa died, Beorhtric may have had a little more independence for a while and he did issue some coins. However, Coenwulf, Offa's successor was in the ascendance by 799.

It is suggested that, in 802, Beorhtric was poisoned by his wife who fled to a nunnery in France.

This introduction has many facts about the Kings of Wessex but the dates quoted and some of the facts about lineage may be wrong. This is why the reign of these early kings is condensed into one section.