

Osthryth

Osthryth (died 697), queen of the Mercians, was the wife of King **Æthelred** and daughter of King **Oswiu of Northumbria** and his second wife **Eanflæd**. She was murdered by the nobles of **Mercia**.^[1]

Osthryth was not the first of her family to become a Mercian queen. Her sister **Alhflæd** had married **Peada**, King of South Mercia 654-656.^[2] After Peada's death, allegedly murdered with **Alhflæd's** connivance, she retreated to **Fladbury** in Worcestershire, to judge both from the place-name, which means "stronghold of Flæde", and from its subsequent history:^[3] sometime in the 690s **Æthelred** granted Fladbury to **Oftfor**, Bishop of Worcester, to re-establish monastic life there;^[4] however, this grant was later contested by **Æthelheard**, son of **Oshere**, who maintained that **Æthelred** had no right to give Fladbury away, as it had been the property of Osthryth. **Æthelheard** claimed it as her kinsman and heir.^[5]

Æthelred and Osthryth loved and favoured **Bardney Abbey** in Lincolnshire. Osthryth placed there the bones of her uncle **Oswald of Northumbria**, who was venerated as a saint. It is clear from this story that Osthryth played a part in promoting the cult of **St Oswald**.^[6] Many years later she persuaded Oswald's widow **Cyneburh** to take the veil.^[7]

Osthryth had to contend with major conflicts of loyalty. In 679 her brother **Ecgrith of Northumbria** fought a battle against **Æthelred**, in which Ecgrith's brother **Ælfwine** was killed. Bede tells us that he was "a young man of about eighteen years of age and much beloved in both kingdoms, for King **Æthelred** had married his sister."^[8]

The murder of Osthryth in 697 by Mercian nobles is unexplained in the sources that mention it.^[9] **Ann Williams** attributes it to the hostility between the Mercians and the Northumbrians,^[10] while **D. P. Kirby** suggests that it may have been revenge for her sister's alleged involvement in Peada's murder.^[11] **Finberg** speculates that she and her kinsman **Oshere** were suspected of trying to detach the kingdom of the **Hwicce** from Mercian overlordship.^[12]

Osthryth was buried at **Bardney Abbey**.^[1]

Osthryth was probably the mother of **Æthelred's** son, **Ceolred**, king of Mercia from 709 to 716.^[1]

1 Notes

[1] Kelly, F. E. (2004). "Osthryth (d. 697)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press.

doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/20909. Retrieved 20 May 2012. (subscription or UK public library membership required)

- [2] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (1994), 144.
- [3] Hooke, in *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (1985), p. 11, argues that Fladbury could have belonged to another sister of Osthryth, **Ælflæda**, Abbess of Whitby, but she had no known connection with Mercia and died in 713, after Osthryth, so Osthryth could not have inherited Fladbury from her.
- [4] S76 Anglo-Saxons.net: **Æthelred's grant of Fladbury**
- [5] H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester 1961), p.170.
- [6] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (1994), 126.
- [7] H.P.R.Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester 1961), p.165.
- [8] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (1994), 207.
- [9] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed. J. McClure and R. Collins (1994), 292; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.
- [10] Ann Williams, 'Osthryth', in Ann Williams et al, eds, *A Biographical Dictionary of Dark Age Britain*, Seaby, 1991
- [11] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, Routledge, 1991, p. 127
- [12] H.P.R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester 1961), pp. 176-7.

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2.1 Text

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