

On Women in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

by

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1.0 The grant (1997-1999) offered by the graduate school of Tokyo Kasei University for the joint study of the "Studies towards a Variorum Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" gave me a valuable opportunity to look minutely into the texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It deals with the history of England from about the birth of Christ to about a hundred years after the Norman Conquest. The main purpose of the joint study is the comparison of the various manuscripts¹⁾ and careful reading of them, the result of which is to be presented on another occasion. Studying the Chronicle, however, has led me to muse on a particular subject prior to the examination of the manuscripts themselves: the women in the Anglo-Saxon period. This *Chronicle* is quite resourceful about women in a ruling class, though they are much fewer in number than leading men in Anglo-Saxon England.

2.0 The interest of the writers of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* falls mainly on the accession and demise of kings, their wars, consecration of abbeys as well as abbots and natural calamities. Their range of interest leaves little room for a woman to be described in detail no matter how high in rank she was born. We can find, however, about forty female proper names in the book and the most important of those will be discussed in this study.

Mere mentioning of a name of a woman is of little significance sometimes, for instance, when a queen goes somewhere with a king

without further explanation about the place, the purpose, etc., her appearance in the *Chronicle* is rather meaningless. On the other hand, there are cases in which the lady played an important part, even though she is described merely as "a mother of Harold," "daughter of Offa," etc. as we shall see. Usually, however, we can find the woman's name in some other places in the *Chronicle*, so we can easily refer to it. We will see the examples.

2.1 In the *Chronicle*, there seem to be several patterns of descriptions about woman. First come those whose names are merely mentioned, though showing no or little consequence. Aethelburg is widow of Edwin who was dispossessed by the strong Northumbrian King Penda. She fled to Kent by sea and the description on the occasion is thus:

633E²⁾ þa þ(æt) Paulinus ge seah. þa ge
nam Ædelburge Eadwines lafe. &
ge wat on schipe to Cent.

She was accompanied by Paulinus, the Archbishop of York. He had converted her husband King Edwin into Christianity, and the rest of the description of the year 633 is devoted to this great Christian missionary.

A similar attitude of description is seen in case of Gunhild, a wife of an aristocrat called Earl Hacun:

1045D & þæs geres man draf Gunnilde ut
þ(æt) ædele wif.

Independent descriptions which are rather irrelevant to the context are often seen in case of marriage or divorce of royal ladies. For

instance, the marriages of King Offa's daughter to Beorhtric and of Aelfled to Ethelred are simply written as follows:

787E Her nam Beorhtric cining Offa dohter
Eadburge.

792E Æðelred cining feng to niwan wife.
seo wæs Ælfled ge haten. on • iii •
k(alendas) Octob'r.³⁾

Offa (d. 796) is a great Mercian king, famous for Offa's dyke which was delved in his time to keep off the Welsh⁴⁾, and it was a matter of great imminence to have a close tie with him, through marriage, for Beorhtric, the king of Wessex. Beorhtric benefited little from this marriage, however, and fought desperately with the Danes to death in 800. His kingship was overtaken by Ecgbert, the grandfather of Alfred the Great, who fought successfully the invading Dane, Guthrum.

As for the example passage of the year 792, Aelfled was married to a Northumbrian king Ethelred who is not so conspicuous. Besides, she was his third wife and there is no mention of his first and second wives.

When there are several wives to a king, the *Chronicle* says that such and such a person was then his queen e.g.

946D Æþelflæd æt Domer hame, Ælfgares
dohter ealdormannes, wæs þa his
cwen.

This is a case of Edmund, a Wessex king. His former wife Aelfgifu had been noted for her devotion to churches and borne him Edwy and Edger the Peaceable. This fact may be the reason for the blunt statement of his second marriage.

A brief description of divorce of a royal lady is found in the case of another Aelfgifu, a wife of Edwy.

958D Her on þissum geare Oda arce biscop
to twæmde Eadwi cyning & Ælgyfe.
forþæm þe hi wæron to ge sybbe.

2.2 There are some women of high ranks whose names are not mentioned but their deeds are to be noted. Cynethryth, a wife of Offa is an example in the case. She helped Offa establish his position in Mercia by secretly supporting those who murdered his foe, Ethelberht, the East Anglian king. One of her daughters' names was mentioned in the example of the year 787E in 2.1 of this paper, and another was said to be a candidate for a wife of Chalemagne's son in the Continent.

The third wife of Edward the Elder, who is a son of Alfred the Great, is also said to have helped consolidate her husband's kingdom. True unification of the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was yet to be reached but Wessex was already the strongest kingdom among them and consolidation of it against the Danes as well as the neighbouring English kingdoms was an imminent task. She was an active woman, yet she appears in the *Chronicle* only as a wife of Edward.

Ealdgyth who is wife of Edmund Ironside (d.1016), a grandson of the famous Edgar the Peaceable, and Adela, a daughter of the William the Conqueror are also called, only by the titles, not by the personal names.

3.0 Most eminent ladies in the Anglo-Saxon Dynasty are naturally given names and almost full description of their main behaviors in the *Chronicle*.

3.1 Aethelburg, who is queen of Ine, who had a famous Ine's laws proclaimed in Wessex, was politically conspicuous in Somerset.

722A Her Æþelburg cuen to wearp Tantun
þe Ine ær timbrede.

According to a tenth-century legend, Ine used to be a ceorl herding cattle in Somerset and he was chosen king by the divine inspiration of his followers. Aethelburg, on the other hand, was

of royal blood and she chased her husband out of the fortress he had built in Taunton toward the end of his long reign in 722 as quoted above⁵).

Two hundred years later, Aelfwyn, daughter of Ethelred, an earl of Mercia, was taken to the kingdom of Wessex for her excessive political activity. Although the detail of the matter is little known, the *Chronicle* writes thus:

919C Her eac wearð Æþelredes dohtor
Myrcna hlafordes ælces anwealdes
on Myrcum benumen, & on West
Sexe aleded. þrim wucum ær middan
wintra. seo wæs haten Ælfwyn.

3.2 Queen Emma (Aelfgifu-Emma) about whom I wrote in "the Studies in English Linguistics and Literature,"⁶ is unique in marrying two kings of England, Ethelbert II (reign: 978-1016) and Canute (reign: 1016-35). She is a daughter of Duke Richard of Normandy and came to England to marry Ethelred in 1002. He was then under the influence of Earl Harold Godwin of Wessex in order to fight off the Danes.

The first appearance of Emma in the *Chronicle* as queen of Ethelred is in 1013 in relation to the attack by the Danes -- King Swein and his son Canute. In this year the raid was so violent that she had to seek refuge in Normandy with her brother Richard:

1013E seo hlafdige wende þa ofer seo to hire
broðor Ricarde.

Later, Ethelred followed her to Normandy to stay until the time of revenge would come.

Although Ethelred was restored to the throne after the death of Swein, he died in 1016 worrying about his successor. Swein's son, Canute, became king of England in 1017, after the brief joint reign with Edmund Ironside, Ethelred's most reliable son. Canute did not hesitate in marrying Ethelred's widow, Emma, when he became the sole ruler of England. The *Chronicle* describes the scene as follows:

1017E þa to foran k(a)l(endas) Aug het se
cyng feccan him Æðelredes lafe þes
oðres cynges him to cwene Ricardes
dohter.

Emma was queen of Canute for seventeen years until his death and her name as Aelfgifu appears at the burial of Canute:

1035D Ælfgyfa seo hlaefdie sat þa(=Winches-
ter) þær binnan.

After Canute's death, Emma's name is mentioned only in relation to her sons, Hardicanute (her son by Canute) and Edward (her son by Ethelred). She stayed at Winchester to hold this area for Hardicanute in 1036, who became king of England later (reign: 1040-42):

1036E man gerædde þa þ(æt) Ælfgifu
Hardacnutes modor sæte on Win
ceastre mid þæs cynges huscarlum
hyra suna.

But in 1037 when his half-brother Harold (the eldest son of Canute and his former wife) was still on the throne, she had to flee to Normandy again for a while:

1037E Her man dræfde ut Ælfgifu Cnutes
cynges lafe. seo wæs Hardacnutes
cynges modor. & heo ge sohte þa
Baldewines grið be sudan sæ.

When Harold died in 1040, Edward, who had been raised in Normandy, came back to England. Emma's name is again mentioned in order to tell about his lineage:

1040E On ðis ilcan geare com Eadward
Æðelredes sunu cinges hider to hande
of Weallande. se wæs Hardacnutes
cynges broðor, hi wæron begen
Ælfgiues suna. seo wæs Ricardes
dohtor eorles.

Emma also returned to England and saw Edward succeed his half-brother Hardicanute on the throne in 1043. Edward, however, was antagonistic to his mother, perhaps because she had not given him priority to the throne when

Harold died, even though he was her eldest son. The *Chronicle* merely says that the reason for his ill-treatment of her was that "she had been too harsh to him" (=forþan þe heo wæs æror þam cyngre hire suna swiðe heard 1043D).

Emma had another son besides Edward, by Ethelred, whose name was Alfred. He came back to England at about the same time as his brother Edward. He hurried to see his mother in Winchester but was treacherously murdered on the way. The *Chronicle* calls Emma only "his mother" in the relevant passage:

1036C Her com Ælfred se unscedðiga
æþeling. Æþelradæs sunu cinges
hider inn, & wolde to his meder þe
on Wincetre sæt.

There is no description of Emma's reaction or deploration about the loss of her beloved son whose return she was said to have longed for.

The last occasion that her name is found in the *Chronicle* is her death.

1052E Her on ðisum geare forðferde
Ælfgiue Ymma Eadwardes cynges
moder & Hardacnutes cynges.

3.3 Another woman who played an important role in the history of Anglo-Saxon England is the wife of Edward Confessor, Edith. She is a daughter of Earl Godwin who was the most powerful earl of Wessex. The Danes were yet to be pacified completely, and in order to repel them King Edward needed the help from the earl. Edith's marriage to Edward is described thus:

1043E Her nam Ædward cyng Godwines
dohter eorles him to cwene.

Manuscript (=MS) C (1044) adds the time of their marriage "x nihtum ær Candel mæssan."

Five years later, however, she was forced to live away in Wetherwell because of the dispute between her father and the king over the treatment of the inhabitants of Kent:

1048E & sona þæs þe þis wæs. þa forlet
se cyng þa hlæfdian. seo wæs ge
halgod him to cwene. & let niman
of hire eall þ(æt) heo ahte. on lande.
& on golde. & on seolfre & on eallon
þingon. & be tæhte hy his swyster
to Hwerwillon.

When Edward reconciled with Godwin in 1052, he returned all her possessions and restored her as queen. She was said to be a faithful wife in spite of his ill treatment of her and was at his bedside caressing his feet in her bosoms when he died.

She survived him nearly 10 years. When she died in 1075, William the Conqueror who thought highly of her virtue, buried her beside King Edward in Westminster with great pomp. We find the description of her mortification in the *Chronicle* as follows:

1075E Eadgið seo hlæfdig forðferde on
Winceastre · vii · nihton ær X'pes
mæssan. & se cyng hi let bryngan
to West mynstre mid mycclan wurð-
schipe. & lægde hi wið Eadward
kyng hire hlaforde.

4.0 There are several Matildas in the *Chronicle*, particularly concerning Henry I, who is one of the four sons of William the Conqueror. He became king after his brother, William II, and died in 1100. The two Matildas about whom there are ample descriptions are the queen of Henry and a daughter of the queen and Henry I.

4.1 The first Matilda (also called Edith-Matilda), wife of Henry I, is a daughter of Malcolm III, the king of Scotland. She is a great granddaughter of the famous Edmund Ironside. The *Chronicle* commends her royal blood thus:⁷⁾

1100E And siðpan sona her æfter se cyng genam
Mahalde him to wife Malcolmes cynges
dohter of Scotlande. & Margareta þære

goda cwæne Eadwardes cynges magan.
& of þan rihtan Ængla landes kyne
kynne. & on s'ce Martines mæsse dæg
heo wearð him mid mycelan weorð-
schipe for gifen on West mynstre. & se
arce bisc(op) Ansealm hi him be
wæddade. & siððan to cwene gehalgode.

Beside her royal lineage, the *Chronicle* finds little interest in her and only writes about her demise and burial:

1118E And seo cwen Mahald forðferde on
West mynstre þæs dæges k(a)l
(endas) Mai & þær wæs bebyrged.

4.2 Their daughter, Matilda (also called Athelic) was wedded to the German Emperor. She was a favorite of Henry I and given a large dowery for crossing over the sea:

1110E Pises geares sende se cyng to foran
længtene his dohter mid mænig
fealdan madman ofer sæ. & hi þam
Casere forgeaf.

She was with her parents when they visited the Continent:

1126E Eall þis gear wæs se kyng Heanri
on Normandi eall to æfter heruest.
þa com he to þis lande betwux
natiuitas s'ce Marie & Michaelles
messe. mid him com se cwen & his
dohter þ(æt) he æror hafde giuen
þone kasere Heanri of Loherenge to
wife.

After the death of Henry I's son, William the Atheling, in the sea in 1120, Matilda was the only legitimate child, and Henry I forced his thanes to give oath of loyalty to her. Then he married her (now a widow) to a son of the earl of Anjou, who was one of the most powerful lords in France. The *Chronicle* tells a detail of this account as follows:

1127E Þis gear heald se kyng Heanri his
hird æt Cristes mæsse ... þær he let

sweren ercebiscopes ... & ealle þa
ðeines ða þær wæron his dohter
Æðelic Engla land & Normandi to
hande æfter his dæi. þe ær wæs þes
Caseres wif of Sexlande. & sende
hire siððen to Normandi. ... & leot
hire be weddan þes eorles sunu of
Angeow Gosfreið Martæl wæs
gehaten. ... se kyng hit dide for to
hauene sibbe of se eorl of Angeow.
& for helpe to hauene to gænes his
neue Willelm.

She was to fight with her first cousin Stephen for the kingship when her father died, and the throne went to Stephen with a promise, however, that the crown will be handed to Matilda's son, not to Stephen's son, after Stephen's death. Matilda's son became Henry II in 1154.

4.3 Little is known about Matilda (Mathild), mother of Henry I and wife of William the Conqueror. She is a sister of Baldwin VI of Flanders, and only her coronation after coming to England and her burial are mentioned in 1067D and 1083E of the *Chronicle*.

1067D sona æfter þam com Mathild seo
hlæfdie hider to lande. & Ealdred
arce b(iscop) hig gehalgode to cwene
on Westmynstre on Hwitan Sunnan
dæg.

1083E on þæs ilcan geares forðferde
Mahtild Willelmes cynges cwen.
on þone dæg æfter ealra halgena
mæsse dæg.

She is known as a patron for the weaving of the famous Bayeux Tapestry in Normandy, which shows every detail of the events concerning the Norman Conquest of England.

4.4 Matilda, Henry I's daughter-in-law, appears in the *Chronicle* only in the capacity of being the wife of William the Atheling. She was

never a queen, as William died of shipwreck as stated in 4.2, but connection with her through this marriage was important for Henry I in keeping his territory safe in France because she was a daughter of Fulk V of Anjou.

4.5 Another Matilda of whom we know only by the title in the *Chronicle* is wife of Stephen, nephew of Henry I. She besieged Winchester in the fight against Stephen's cousin Matilda in 1140 as it was described thus:

1140E þa hi (=Stephen's cousin Matilda, the former Empress and her team) þær inne wæren. þa com þe kinges cuen mid al hire strengthe. & besæt heom. ð(æt) þer wæs inne micel hungær.

Her name was not mentioned again, but in the last year of the *Chronicle* she appears again as wife of Stephen when he was buried at Faversham.

1154E On is gær wærd þe king Stephne ded & bebyried þer. his wif & his sune wæron bebyried æt Faures feld.

5.0 We have seen that there are various ways in which women are treated in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. There are those whose names are mentioned but only in the connection with the kings whom they were married or with the father who was great (ex. Aethelburg --Edwin's wife--, Gunhild, Aelfled, Aelfgyfe, etc.). The ones whose gallant deeds were praised but only their ranks or positions were mentioned are King Offa's wife, Edward the Elder's wife, Edmund Ironside's wife, etc.

The most eminent ladies in the history of early England are paid due respect in the *Chronicle* and the representatives are: Aethelburg -- wife of King Ine--, Emma, wife of King Ethelred and of King Canute, and Edith, wife of King Harold. Several Matildas occupy impor-

tant positions in the reign of Henry I. His wife and daughter as well as other ladies in aristocracy had the same name. It might have been a common name of that class in those days. Aelgifu, which was shared by Queen Emma and Canute's former wife was another example of an aristocratic name, which meant 'saintly ancestress.'

Although the *Chronicle* mainly deals with the matters accomplished by men, we can see how vividly women, prominent or otherwise, played a role in the early history of England. The writers of the *Chronicle* seem to have recognized the indispensability of the women as consorts, mothers and daughters of great men in the Anglo-Saxon period, if not also as independent individuals.

Notes:

- 1) The main manuscripts(=MSS) of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and their abbreviation are: A (the Parker MS), B (Cotton Tiberius A vi), C (Cotton Tiberius B i), D (Cotton Tiberius B iv), E (Laud 636), and F (Cotton Domitian A viii). The text from which the examples are quoted in this thesis is: Charles Plummer and John Earle eds. *Two of the Saxon Chronicles; Parallel*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1972.
- 2) The numeral denotes the year, and the alphabet following the numeral shows the kind of manuscript quoted. The abbreviated "Þæt" (written with a barred thorn in MSS) is written "P(æt)" in this thesis.
- 3) The single quotation mark denotes contraction.
- 4) *The Dictionary of National Bibliography*, Oxford University Press, 1973, s.v. Offa.
- 5) *Op. cit.*, s.v. Ine.
- 6) "The Journal of the English Language and Literature," English Language and Literature Association, Tokyo Kasei University, 1998.

7) The *Chronicle* writes in 1121E that Henry I married Adelaide of Louvain at Windsor. Matilda had been dead for 3 years then.

1121E Her wæs se cyng Henri...on Windlesoran
him to wife forgyfen Aðelis & siððan
to cwene ge halgod. seo wæs þæs
heretogan dohtor of Luuaine.

Her name is mentioned in 1123 and 1126 in connection with her appointment of Godfrey, a bishop at Bath, and that she accompanied Henry I to Normandy.

『『アングロ・サクソン年代記』にあらわれる女性達』

歴史書の一形態である年代記は各種の戦争、王位継承、政策決定、聖職者叙任などの記録であるので、その記述は男性中心にならざるを得ないが、『アングロ・サクソン年代記』には女性達も40人余登場している。王侯貴族の伴侶としてだけでなく、独立した意志を持った女性として親族を助けたり、寄進や寄付を通じてキリスト教に貢献した人もいるし、その知性や美しさを讃えられた人もいた。同年代記がとりあげたこれらの女性達についてその記述の頻度、内容、方法などを考察した。