

= Egbert of Wessex =

Egbert ( 771 / 775 ? 839 ) , also known as Ecgerht , Ecgbert , or Ecgbriht , was King of Wessex from 802 until his death in 839 . His father was Ealhmund of Kent . In the 780s Egbert was forced into exile by Offa of Mercia and Beorhtric of Wessex , but on Beorhtric 's death in 802 Egbert returned and took the throne .

Little is known of the first 20 years of Egbert 's reign , but it is thought that he was able to maintain the independence of Wessex against the kingdom of Mercia , which at that time dominated the other southern English kingdoms . In 825 Egbert defeated Beornwulf of Mercia , ended Mercia 's supremacy at the Battle of Ellandun , and proceeded to take control of the Mercian dependencies in southeastern England . In 829 Egbert defeated Wiglaf of Mercia and drove him out of his kingdom , temporarily ruling Mercia directly . Later that year Egbert received the submission of the Northumbrian king at Dore . The Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle subsequently described Egbert as a *bretwalda* , or " Ruler of Britain " .

Egbert was unable to maintain this dominant position , and within a year Wiglaf regained the throne of Mercia . However , Wessex did retain control of Kent , Sussex , and Surrey ; these territories were given to Egbert 's son Æthelwulf to rule as a subking under Egbert . When Egbert died in 839 , Æthelwulf succeeded him ; the southeastern kingdoms were finally absorbed into the kingdom of Wessex after Æthelwulf 's death in 858 .

= = Family = =

Historians do not agree on Egbert 's ancestry . The earliest version of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle , the Parker Chronicle , begins with a genealogical preface tracing the ancestry of Egbert 's son Æthelwulf back through Egbert , Ealhmund ( thought to be Ealhmund of Kent ) , and the otherwise unknown Eoppa and Eafa to Ingild , brother of King Ine of Wessex , who abdicated the throne in 726 . It continues back to Cerdic , founder of the House of Wessex . Egbert 's descent from Ingild was accepted by Frank Stenton , but not the earlier genealogy back to Cerdic . Heather Edwards in her Online Dictionary of National Biography article on Egbert argues that he was of Kentish origin , and that the West Saxon descent may have been manufactured during his reign to give him legitimacy , whereas Rory Naismith considered a Kentish origin unlikely , and that it is more probable that " Egbert was born of good West Saxon royal stock " .

Egbert 's wife 's name is unknown . A fifteenth century chronicle now held by Oxford University names Egbert 's wife as Redburga who was supposedly a relation of Charlemagne that he married when he was banished to Francia , but this is dismissed by academic historians in view of its late date . He is reputed to have had a half @-@ sister Alburga , later to be recognised as a saint for her founding of Wilton Abbey . She was married to Wulfstan , ealdorman of Wiltshire , and on his death in 802 she became a nun , Abbess of Wilton Abbey . He was believed at one time to also be the father of Saint Eadgyth of Polesworth and Æthelstan of Kent .

= = Political context and early life = =

Offa of Mercia , who reigned from 757 to 796 , was the dominant force in Anglo @-@ Saxon England in the second half of the eighth century . The relationship between Offa and Cynewulf , who was king of Wessex from 757 to 786 , is not well documented , but it seems likely that Cynewulf maintained some independence from Mercian overlordship . Evidence of the relationship between kings can come from charters , which were documents which granted land to followers or to churchmen , and which were witnessed by the kings who had power to grant the land . In some cases a king will appear on a charter as a subregulus , or " subking " , making it clear that he has an overlord . Cynewulf appears as " King of the West Saxons " on a charter of Offa 's in 772 ; and he was defeated by Offa in battle in 779 at Bensington , but there is nothing else to suggest Cynewulf was not his own master , and he is not known to have acknowledged Offa as overlord . Offa did have influence in the southeast of the country : a charter of 764 shows him in the company of

Heahberht of Kent , suggesting that Offa 's influence helped place Heahberht on the throne . The extent of Offa 's control of Kent between 765 and 776 is a matter of debate amongst historians , but from 776 until about 784 it appears that the Kentish kings had substantial independence from Mercia .

Another Egbert , Egbert II of Kent , ruled in that kingdom throughout the 770s ; he is last mentioned in 779 , in a charter granting land at Rochester . In 784 a new king of Kent , Ealhmund , appears in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle . According to a note in the margin , " this king Ealhmund was Egbert 's father [ i.e. Egbert of Wessex ] , Egbert was Æthelwulf 's father . " This is supported by the genealogical preface from the A text of the Chronicle , which gives Egbert 's father 's name as Ealhmund without further details . The preface probably dates from the late ninth century ; the marginal note is on the F manuscript of the Chronicle , which is a Kentish version dating from about 1100 .

Ealhmund does not appear to have long survived in power : there is no record of his activities after 784 . There is , however , extensive evidence of Offa 's domination of Kent during the late 780s , with his goals apparently going beyond overlordship to outright annexation of the kingdom , and he has been described as " the rival , not the overlord , of the Kentish kings " . It is possible that the young Egbert fled to Wessex in 785 or so ; it is suggestive that the Chronicle mentions in a later entry that Beorhtric , Cynewulf 's successor , helped Offa to exile Egbert .

Cynewulf was murdered in 786 . His succession was contested by Egbert , but he was defeated by Beorhtric , maybe with Offa 's assistance . The Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle records that Egbert spent three years in Francia before he was king , exiled by Beorhtric and Offa . The text says " iii " for three , but this may have been a scribal error , with the correct reading being " xiii " , that is , thirteen years . Beorhtric 's reign lasted sixteen years , and not thirteen ; and all extant texts of the Chronicle agree on " iii " , but many modern accounts assume that Egbert did indeed spend thirteen years in Francia . This requires assuming that the error in transcription is common to every manuscript of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle ; many historians make this assumption but others have rejected it as unlikely , given the consistency of the sources . In either case Egbert was probably exiled in 789 , when Beorhtric , his rival , married the daughter of Offa of Mercia .

At the time Egbert was in exile , Francia was ruled by Charlemagne , who maintained Frankish influence in Northumbria and is known to have supported Offa 's enemies in the south . Another exile in Gaul at this time was Odberht , a priest , who is almost certainly the same person as Eadberht , who later became king of Kent . According to a later chronicler , William of Malmesbury , Egbert learned the arts of government during his time in Gaul .

= = Early reign = =

Beorhtric 's dependency on Mercia continued into the reign of Cenwulf , who became king of Mercia a few months after Offa 's death . Beorhtric died in 802 , and Egbert came to the throne of Wessex , probably with the support of Charlemagne and perhaps also the papacy . The Mercians continued to oppose Egbert : the day of his accession , the Hwicce ( who had originally formed a separate kingdom , but by that time were part of Mercia ) attacked , under the leadership of their ealdorman , Æthelmund . Weohstan , a Wessex ealdorman , met him with men from Wiltshire : according to a 15th @-@ century source , Weohstan had married Alburga , Egbert 's sister , and so was Egbert 's brother @-@ in @-@ law . The Hwicce were defeated , though Weohstan was killed as well as Æthelmund . Nothing more is recorded of Egbert 's relations with Mercia for more than twenty years after this battle . It seems likely that Egbert had no influence outside his own borders , but on the other hand there is no evidence that he ever submitted to the overlordship of Cenwulf . Cenwulf did have overlordship of the rest of southern England , but in Cenwulf 's charters the title of " overlord of the southern English " never appears , presumably in consequence of the independence of the kingdom of Wessex .

In 815 the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle records that Egbert ravaged the whole of the territories of the remaining British kingdom , Dumnonia , known to the author of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle as the West Welsh ; their territory was about equivalent to what is now Cornwall . Ten years later , a

charter dated 19 August 825 indicates that Egbert was campaigning in Dumnonia again ; this may have been related to a battle recorded in the Chronicle at Gafulford in 823 , between the men of Devon and the Britons of Cornwall .

= = The battle of Ellendun = =

It was also in 825 that one of the most important battles in Anglo @-@ Saxon history took place , when Egbert defeated Beornwulf of Mercia at Ellendun ? now Wroughton , near Swindon . This battle marked the end of the Mercian domination of southern England . The Chronicle tells how Egbert followed up his victory : " Then he sent his son Æthelwulf from the army , and Ealhstan , his bishop , and Wulfheard , his ealdorman , to Kent with a great troop . " Æthelwulf drove Baldred , the king of Kent , north over the Thames , and according to the Chronicle , the men of Kent , Essex , Surrey and Sussex then all submitted to Æthelwulf " because earlier they were wrongly forced away from his relatives . " This may refer to Offa 's interventions in Kent at the time Egbert 's father Ealhmund became king ; if so , the chronicler 's remark may also indicate Ealhmund had connections elsewhere in southeast England .

The Chronicle 's version of events makes it appear that Baldred was driven out shortly after the battle , but this was probably not the case . A document from Kent survives which gives the date , March 826 , as being in the third year of the reign of Beornwulf . This makes it likely that Beornwulf still had authority in Kent at this date , as Baldred 's overlord ; hence Baldred was apparently still in power . In Essex , Egbert expelled King Sigere , though the date is unknown . It may have been delayed until 829 , since a later chronicler associates the expulsion with a campaign of Egbert 's in that year against the Mercians .

The Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle does not say who was the aggressor at Ellendun , but one recent history asserts that Beornwulf was almost certainly the one who attacked . According to this view , Beornwulf may have taken advantage of the Wessex campaign in Dumnonia in the summer of 825 . Beornwulf 's motivation to launch an attack would have been the threat of unrest or instability in the southeast : the dynastic connections with Kent made Wessex a threat to Mercian dominance .

The consequences of Ellendun went beyond the immediate loss of Mercian power in the southeast . According to the Chronicle , the East Anglians asked for Egbert 's protection against the Mercians in the same year , 825 , though it may actually have been in the following year that the request was made . In 826 Beornwulf invaded East Anglia , presumably to recover his overlordship . He was slain , however , as was his successor , Ludeca , who invaded East Anglia in 827 , evidently for the same reason . It may be that the Mercians were hoping for support from Kent : there was some reason to suppose that Wulfred , the Archbishop of Canterbury , might be discontented with West Saxon rule , as Egbert had terminated Wulfred 's currency and had begun to mint his own , at Rochester and Canterbury , and it is known that Egbert seized property belonging to Canterbury . The outcome in East Anglia was a disaster for the Mercians which confirmed West Saxon power in the southeast .

= = Defeat of Mercia = =

In 829 Egbert invaded Mercia and drove Wiglaf , the king of Mercia , into exile . This victory gave Egbert control of the London Mint , and he issued coins as King of Mercia . It was after this victory that the West Saxon scribe described him as a *bretwalda* , meaning " wide @-@ ruler " or " Britain @-@ ruler " , in a famous passage in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle . The relevant part of the annal reads , in the [ C ] manuscript of the Chronicle :

? *py geare geeode Ecgbriht cing Myrcna rice ? eall þæt be supan Humbre wæs , ? he wæs eahtapa cing se ðe Bretenanwealda wæs .*

In modern English :

And the same year King Egbert conquered the kingdom of Mercia , and all that was south of the Humber , and he was the eighth king who was ' Wide Ruler ' .

The previous seven *bretwaldas* are also named by the Chronicler , who gives the same seven

names that Bede lists as holding imperium , starting with Ælle of Sussex and ending with Oswiu of Northumbria . The list is often thought to be incomplete , omitting as it does some dominant Mercian kings such as Penda and Offa . The exact meaning of the title has been much debated ; it has been described as " a term of encomiastic poetry " but there is also evidence that it implied a definite role of military leadership .

Later in 829 , according to the Anglo -Saxon Chronicle , Egbert received the submission of the Northumbrians at Dore ( now a suburb of Sheffield ) ; the Northumbrian king was probably Eanred . According to a later chronicler , Roger of Wendover , Egbert invaded Northumbria and plundered it before Eanred submitted : " When Egbert had obtained all the southern kingdoms , he led a large army into Northumbria , and laid waste that province with severe pillaging , and made King Eanred pay tribute . " Roger of Wendover is known to have incorporated Northumbrian annals into his version ; the Chronicle does not mention these events . However , the nature of Eanred 's submission has been questioned : one historian has suggested that it is more likely that the meeting at Dore represented a mutual recognition of sovereignty .

In 830 Egbert led a successful expedition against the Welsh , almost certainly with the intent of extending West Saxon influence into the Welsh lands previously within the Mercian orbit . This marked the high point of Egbert 's influence .

= = Reduction in influence after 829 = =

In 830 , Mercia regained its independence under Wiglaf ? the Chronicle merely says that Wiglaf " obtained the kingdom of Mercia again " , but the most likely explanation is that this was the result of a Mercian rebellion against Wessex rule .

Egbert 's dominion over southern England came to an end with Wiglaf 's recovery of power . Wiglaf 's return is followed by evidence of his independence from Wessex . Charters indicate Wiglaf had authority in Middlesex and Berkshire , and in a charter of 836 Wiglaf uses the phrase " my bishops , dukes , and magistrates " to describe a group that included eleven bishops from the episcopate of Canterbury , including bishops of sees in West Saxon territory . It is significant that Wiglaf was still able to call together such a group of notables ; the West Saxons , even if they were able to do so , held no such councils . Wiglaf may also have brought Essex back into the Mercian orbit during the years after he recovered the throne . In East Anglia , King Æthelstan minted coins , possibly as early as 827 , but more likely c . 830 after Egbert 's influence was reduced with Wiglaf 's return to power in Mercia . This demonstration of independence on East Anglia 's part is not surprising , as it was Æthelstan who was probably responsible for the defeat and death of both Beornwulf and Ludeca .

Both Wessex 's sudden rise to power in the late 820s , and the subsequent failure to retain this dominant position , have been examined by historians looking for underlying causes . One plausible explanation for the events of these years is that Wessex 's fortunes were to some degree dependent on Carolingian support . The Franks supported Eardwulf when he recovered the throne of Northumbria in 808 , so it is plausible that they also supported Egbert 's accession in 802 . At Easter 839 , not long before Egbert 's death , he was in touch with Louis the Pious , king of the Franks , to arrange safe passage to Rome . Hence a continuing relationship with the Franks seems to be part of southern English politics during the first half of the ninth century .

Carolingian support may have been one of the factors that helped Egbert achieve the military successes of the late 820s . However , the Rhenish and Frankish commercial networks collapsed at some time in the 820s or 830s , and in addition , a rebellion broke out in February 830 against Louis the Pious ? the first of a series of internal conflicts that lasted through the 830s and beyond . These distractions may have prevented Louis from supporting Egbert . In this view , the withdrawal of Frankish influence would have left East Anglia , Mercia and Wessex to find a balance of power not dependent on outside aid .

Despite the loss of dominance , Egbert 's military successes fundamentally changed the political landscape of Anglo -Saxon England . Wessex retained control of the south -eastern kingdoms , with the possible exception of Essex , and Mercia did not regain control of East Anglia . Egbert 's victories marked the end of the independent existence of the kingdoms of Kent and

Sussex . The conquered territories were administered as a subkingdom for a while , including Surrey and possibly Essex . Although Æthelwulf was a subking under Egbert , it is clear that he maintained his own royal household , with which he travelled around his kingdom . Charters issued in Kent described Egbert and Æthelwulf as " kings of the West Saxons and also of the people of Kent . " When Æthelwulf died in 858 his will , in which Wessex is left to one son and the southeastern kingdom to another , makes it clear that it was not until after 858 that the kingdoms were fully integrated . Mercia remained a threat , however ; Egbert 's son Æthelwulf , established as king of Kent , gave estates to Christ Church , Canterbury , probably to counter any influence the Mercians might still have there .

In the southwest , Egbert was defeated in 836 at Carhampton by the Danes , but in 838 he won a battle against them and their allies the West Welsh at the Battle of Hingston Down in Cornwall . The Dumnonian royal line continued after this time , but it is at this date that the independence of one of the last British kingdoms may be considered to have ended . The details of Anglo @-@ Saxon expansion into Cornwall are quite poorly recorded , but some evidence comes from place names . The river Ottery , which flows east into the Tamar near Launceston , appears to be a boundary : south of the Ottery the placenames are overwhelmingly Cornish , whereas to the north they are more heavily influenced by the English newcomers .

= = Succession = =

At a council at Kingston upon Thames in 838 , Egbert and Æthelwulf granted land to the sees of Winchester and Canterbury in return for the promise of support for Æthelwulf 's claim to the throne . The archbishop of Canterbury , Ceolnoth , also accepted Egbert and Æthelwulf as the lords and protectors of the monasteries under Ceolnoth 's control . These agreements , along with a later charter in which Æthelwulf confirmed church privileges , suggest that the church had recognised that Wessex was a new political power that must be dealt with . Churchmen consecrated the king at coronation ceremonies , and helped to write the wills which specified the king 's heir ; their support had real value in establishing West Saxon control and a smooth succession for Egbert 's line . Both the record of the Council of Kingston , and another charter of that year , include the identical phrasing : that a condition of the grant is that " we ourselves and our heirs shall always hereafter have firm and unshakable friendships from Archbishop Ceolnoth and his congregation at Christ Church . "

Although nothing is known of any other claimants to the throne , it is likely that there were other surviving descendants of Cerdic ( the supposed progenitor of all the kings of Wessex ) who might have contended for the kingdom . Egbert died in 839 , and his will , according to the account of it found in the will of his grandson , Alfred the Great , left land only to male members of his family , so that the estates should not be lost to the royal house through marriage . Egbert 's wealth , acquired through conquest , was no doubt one reason for his ability to purchase the support of the southeastern church establishment ; the thriftiness of his will indicates he understood the importance of personal wealth to a king . The kingship of Wessex had been frequently contested among different branches of the royal line , and it is a noteworthy achievement of Egbert 's that he was able to ensure Æthelwulf 's untroubled succession . In addition , Æthelwulf 's experience of kingship , in the subkingdom formed from Egbert 's southeastern conquests , would have been valuable to him when he took the throne .

Egbert was buried in Winchester , as were his son , Æthelwulf , his grandson , Alfred the Great , and his great @-@ grandson , Edward the Elder . During the ninth century , Winchester began to show signs of urbanisation , and it is likely that the sequence of burials indicates that Winchester was held in high regard by the West Saxon royal line .