

= Wihtrred of Kent =

Wihtrred ( c . 670 ? 23 April 725 ) was king of Kent from about 690 or 691 until his death . He was a son of Ecgberht I and a brother of Eadric . Wihtrred acceded to the throne after a confused period in the 680s , which included a brief conquest of Kent by Cædwalla of Wessex and subsequent dynastic conflicts . His immediate predecessor was Oswine of Kent , who was probably descended from Eadbald of Kent , though not through the same line as Wihtrred . Shortly after the start of his reign , Wihtrred issued a code of laws ? the Law of Wihtrred ? that has been preserved in a manuscript known as the Textus Roffensis . The laws pay a great deal of attention to the rights of the Church , including punishment for irregular marriages and for pagan worship . Wihtrred 's long reign had few incidents recorded in the annals of the day . He was succeeded in 725 by his sons , Æthelberht II , Eadberht I , and Ælfric .

= = Kent in the late seventh century = =

The dominant force in late @-@ seventh @-@ century politics south of the River Humber was Wulfhere of Mercia , who reigned from the late 650s to 675 . The king of Kent for much of this time was Ecgberht , who died in 673 . Ecgberht 's sons , Eadric and Wihtrred , were probably no more than infants of two or three years old when their father died , and Wulfhere was their uncle by virtue of his marriage to Eormenhild , Ecgberht 's sister . Hlothhere , Ecgberht 's brother , became king of Kent , but not until about a year later , in 674 , and it may be that Wulfhere opposed the accession of Hlothhere and was the effective ruler of Kent during this year @-@ long interregnum .

Eadric raised an army against his uncle and Hlothhere died of wounds sustained in battle in February 685 or possibly 686 . Eadric died the following year , and according to Bede , whose Ecclesiastical History of the English People is one of the primary sources for this period , the kingdom fell apart into disorder . Cædwalla of Wessex invaded in 686 and established his brother Mul as king there ; Cædwalla may have ruled Kent directly for a period when Mul was killed in 687 . When Cædwalla departed for Rome in 688 , Oswine , who was probably supported by Æthelred of Mercia , took the throne for a time . Oswine lost power in 690 , but Swæfheard ( son of Sebbi , the king of Essex ) , who had been a king in Kent for a year or two , remained . There is clear evidence that both Swæfheard and Oswine were kings at the same time , as each witnessed the other 's charters . It seems that Oswine was king of east Kent , which was usually the position of the dominant king , while Swæfheard was king of west Kent .

= = Accession and reign = =

Wihtrred emerged from this disarray and became king in the early 690s . Bede describes his accession by saying that he was the " rightful " king , and that he " freed the nation from foreign invasion by his devotion and diligence " . Oswine was also of the royal family , and arguably had a claim to the throne ; hence it has been suggested that Bede 's comments here are strongly partisan . Bede 's correspondent on Kentish affairs was Albinus , abbot of the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul ( subsequently renamed St. Augustine 's ) in Canterbury , and these views can almost certainly be ascribed to the Church establishment there .

Two charters provide evidence of Wihtrred 's date of accession . One , dated April 697 , indicates Wihtrred was then in the sixth year of his rule , so his accession can be dated to some time between April 691 and April 692 . Another , dated 17 July 694 , is in his fourth regnal year , giving a possible range of July 690 to July 691 . The overlap in date ranges gives April to July 691 as the likely date of his accession . Another estimate of the date of Wihtrred 's accession can be made from the duration of his reign , given by Bede as thirty four and a half years . He died on 23 April 725 , which would imply an accession date in late 690 .

Initially Wihtrred ruled alongside Swæfheard . Bede 's report of the election of Beorhtwald as Archbishop of Canterbury in July 692 mentions that Swæfheard and Wihtrred were the kings of Kent , but Swæfheard is not heard of after this date . It appears that by 694 Wihtrred was the sole ruler of

Kent , though it may also be that his son Æthelberht was a junior king in west Kent during Wihtred 's reign . Wihtred is thought to have had three wives . His first was called Cynegyth , but a charter of 696 names Æthelburh as the royal consort and co @-@ donor of an estate : the former spouse must have died or been dismissed after a short time . Near the end of his reign , a new wife , Wærburh , attested with her husband and son , Alric .

It was also in 694 that Wihtred made peace with the West Saxon king Ine . Ine 's predecessor , Cædwalla , had invaded Kent and installed his brother Mul as king , but the Kentishmen had subsequently revolted and burned Mul . Wihtred agreed compensation for the killing , but the amount paid to Ine is uncertain . Most manuscripts of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle record " thirty thousand " , and some specify thirty thousand pounds . If the pounds are equal to sceattas , then this amount is the equal of a king 's wergild ? that is , the legal valuation of a man 's life , according to his rank . It seems likely that Wihtred ceded some border territory to Ine as part of this settlement .

= = Laws = =

The earliest Anglo @-@ Saxon law code to survive , which may date from 602 or 603 , is that of Æthelberht of Kent , whose reign ended in 616 . In the 670s or 680s , a code was issued in the names of Hlothhere and Eadric of Kent . The next kings to issue laws were Ine of Wessex and Wihtred .

The dating of Wihtred ? s and Ine ? s laws is somewhat uncertain , but there is reason to believe that Wihtred ? s laws were issued on 6 September 695 , while Ine ? s laws were written in 694 or shortly before . Ine had recently agreed peaceful terms with Wihtred over compensation for the death of Mul , and there are indications that the two rulers collaborated to some degree in producing their laws . In addition to the coincidence of timing , there is one clause that appears in almost identical form in both codes . Another sign of collaboration is that Wihtred ? s laws use *gesith* , a West Saxon term for noble , in place of the Kentish term *eorlcund* . It is possible that Ine and Wihtred issued the law codes as an act of prestige , to re @-@ establish authority after periods of disruption in both kingdoms .

Wihtred 's laws were issued at " Berghamstye " ; it is not known for certain where this was , but the best candidate is Bearsted , near Maidstone . The laws are primarily concerned with religious affairs ; only the last four of its twenty @-@ eight chapters do not deal with ecclesiastical affairs . The first clause of the code gives the Church freedom from taxation . Subsequent clauses specify penalties for irregular marriages , heathen worship , work on the sabbath , and breaking fasts , among other things ; and also define how members of each class of society ? such as the king , bishops , priests , *ceorls* , and *esnes* ? can clear themselves by giving an oath . In addition to the focus of the laws themselves , the introduction makes clear the importance of the Church in the legislative process . Bertwald , the Archbishop of Canterbury , was present at the assembly which devised the decrees , and so was Gefmund , the Bishop of Rochester ; and " every order of the Church of that nation spoke in unanimity with the loyal people " .

The privileges given to the Church are notable : in addition to the freedom from taxation , the oath of a bishop is " incontrovertible " , which places it at the same level as the oath of a king , and the Church receives the same level of compensation for violence done to dependents as does the king . This has led one historian to describe the Church 's power , less than a century after the original Roman mission landed in Kent , as " all but co @-@ ordinate with the king himself in the Kentish state " , and it has also been described as presupposing " a frightening degree of royal power " . However , the presence of clauses that provide penalties for any of Wihtred 's subjects who " sacrifice to devils " makes it clear that although Christianity was dominant , the older pagan beliefs of the population had by no means died out completely .

Clause 21 of the code specifies that a *ceorl* must find three men of his own class to be his " oath @-@ helpers " . An oath @-@ helper would swear an oath on behalf of an accused man , to clear him from the suspicion of the crime . The laws of Ine were more stringent than this , requiring that a high @-@ ranking person must be found to be an oath @-@ helper for everyone , no matter what

class they were from . The two laws taken together imply a significant weakening of an earlier state in which a man 's kin were legally responsible for him .

= = Death and succession = =

On his death , Wihtred left Kent to his three sons : Æthelberht II , Eadberht I , and Alric . The chronology of the reigns following Wihtred is unclear , although there is evidence of both an Æthelbert and at least one Eadbert in the following years . After Wihtred 's death , and the departure of Ine of Wessex for Rome the following year , Æthelbald of Mercia became the dominant power in the south of England .