

= Seaxburh of Ely =

Seaxburh ( Old English : Sexburh ) ; also Saint Sexburga of Ely , ( died about 699 ) was the queen of King Eorcenberht of Kent , as well as an abbess and a saint of the Christian Church .

Seaxburh 's sisters were Æthelburg of Faremoutiers , Saethryth , Æthelthryth and possibly Withburga . Her marriage to Eorcenberht produced two sons , both of whom ruled , and two daughters . After her husband 's death in 664 , Seaxburh remained in Kent to bring up her children . She acted as regent until her young son Ecgberht came of age .

Seaxburh founded the abbeys at Milton Regis and Minster @-@ in @-@ Sheppey , where her daughter Ermenilda was also a nun . She moved to the double monastery at Ely where her sister Æthelthryth was abbess and succeeded her when Æthelthryth died in 679 . According to Bede , in 695 , Seaxburh organised the movement ( or translation ) of Æthelthryth 's remains to a marble sarcophagus , after they had lain for sixteen years in a common grave . On opening the grave , it was discovered that her body was miraculously preserved . The legend is described in Bede 's Ecclesiastical History of the English People , which celebrates the saintly virtues of Æthelthryth , but speaks less highly of Seaxburh , referring only to her marriage , succession as abbess and translation of her sister 's relics . The date of Seaxburh 's death at Ely is not known . The surviving versions of the Vita Sexburge , compiled after 1106 , describe her early life , marriage to Eorcenberht , retirement from secular life and her final years as a nun and abbess at Ely .

= = Family = =

Seaxburh was a daughter of Anna , King of East Anglia , the son of Eni , who ruled the East Angles from the early 640s and was slain together with his son Jurmin , at the Battle of Bulcamp in 653 or 654 . She was the sister of Æthelburg and Saethryth , who were both abbesses of Faremoutiers Abbey in Brie , and also the sister of Æthelthryth , who married firstly Tonberht , an ealdorman of the South Gyrwe in the Fens , and secondly Ecgfrith of Northumbria . Withburga , who died in 743 , may also have been her sister .

Seaxburh married Eorcenberht of Kent , and was the mother of kings Ecgberht ( d . 673 ) , Hlothhere ( d . 685 ) , and of Saints Eormenhild and Ercengota . Seaxburh was buried at Ely with her sisters Æthelthryth Wihtburh , and with her daughter Eormenhild .

= = Marriage and widowhood = =

Seaxburh was connected with the royal family of the Magonsætan by her marriage to Eorcenberht , who was king of Kent from 640 to 664 . Eorcenberht was the great @-@ uncle of Mildburh and her sisters , the daughters of King Merewalh of the Magonsætan .

Their sons Ecgberht and Hlothhere both became kings of Kent . Their daughter Ercongota was a nun at Faremoutiers , who was eventually canonised . Eorcenberht is mentioned in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle within the annal for 640 : " Then his son Eorcenberht succeeded to the kingdom ; he overthrew all devil @-@ worship in his kingdom , and was the first of the English kings to establish the Easter festival " . In the same passage is the Chronicle 's single reference to Seaxburh and Eorcengota , " ... paes dohter wæs ge haten Erchongata halifemne. and wundorlic man. thære modor wæs Sexburh Annan dohter East Engla ciningas " ? ' ... his daughter was called Eorcengota , a holy and a remarkable person , whose mother was Seaxburh , daughter of Anna , king of the East Anglians ' . Seaxburh and Eorcenberht had a second daughter , Ermenilda , who married Wulfhere of Mercia and after his death became a nun and was later canonised . According to Barbara Yorke , Seaxburh 's marriage was itself of seminal importance in the establishment of monastic life for women during the Anglo @-@ Saxon period , as she became an example of an ex @-@ queen who made retreating to a nunnery a desirable royal vocation .

Eorcenberht died on 14 July 664 , in an outbreak of plague that occurred that year . After her husband 's death , Seaxburh remained in Kent to bring up her children . She played an important political and religious influence in the kingdom : she acted as regent for her son Ecgberht , ruling

Kent until her young son came of age , and was the founder of Kent 's first abbey for women at Milton . Thereafter , Seaxburh became a nun and founded the abbey of Minster @-@ in @-@ Sheppey . According to the Liber Eliensis , a 12th @-@ century chronicle and history written at Ely , an English source related that Seaxburh received " the veil of holiness " from Theodore , the Archbishop of Canterbury , in her church on the Isle of Sheppey and that her daughter Eormenhild also became a nun there . Seaxburh is said by her hagiographer to have sought refuge as a nun after living a secular role that she had found hard to tolerate : having reluctantly submitted to marriage , she hastened from queenhood to " a timely widowhood and a hasty withdrawal to the religious life " , according to Susan Ridyard .

For a family tree of the ancestors of Seaxburh , see Wuffingas .

= = Religious life at Ely = =

Shortly afterwards Seaxburh moved to the double monastery at Ely , which was the precursor to Ely Cathedral , and where her sister Æthelthryth was abbess . The historian Barbara Yorke mentions the possibility that Seaxburh and her namesake Seaxburh of Wessex were the same person , but also notes that the accounts of Seaxburh 's religious life at Ely contradict this suggestion .

According to Yorke , Seaxburh 's retirement to Ely is an example an Anglo @-@ Saxon custom , represented in a law , whereby a married woman remained the responsibility of the paternal side of her family , perhaps to spend the rest of her days as a nun or an abbess . Described by the Liber Eliensis as a " pretiosa virago " , or precious lady @-@ warrior , she succeeded as abbess when Æthelthryth died , probably of plague , in 679 . Seaxburh 's previous political experience in East Anglia and Kent would have been useful in preparing her for the role of abbess at the double monastery at Ely .

In 695 , in a vivid demonstration of the dynastic value of the cult of royal saints in Anglo @-@ Saxon England , Seaxburh decided to translate the remains of her sister Æthelthryth , who had been dead for sixteen years , from a common grave to the new church at Ely . Professor Patrick Sims @-@ Williams has identified Seaxburh as " the chief mover behind the translation of her body and the promulgation of her cult " . The Liber Eliensis describes these events in detail . When her grave was opened , Æthelthryth 's body was discovered to be uncorrupted and her coffin and clothes proved to possess miraculous powers . A sarcophagus made of white marble was taken from the Roman ruins at Grantchester , which was found to be the right fit for Æthelthryth . The architectural historian John Crook questions how such miraculous coincidences feature in hagiographies ( the studies of the lives of saints ) , when he observes that " the miraculous discovery of a suitable coffin is , however , a hagiographic commonplace " . Seaxburh 's supervised the preparation of her sister 's body , which was washed and wrapped in new robes before being reburied . She apparently oversaw the translation of her sister 's remains without the supervision of her bishop , using her knowledge of procedures gained from her family 's links with the abbey at Faremoutiers as a basis for the ceremony .

The fourth book of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People , completed by the Northumbrian monk Bede in 731 , celebrates the monastery at Ely and focuses on Æthelthryth 's piety and the translation of her relics . Bede does not mention the matrilinear succession established at Ely by Æthelthryth , where power passed in turn to Seaxburh before subsequently transferring to Seaxburh 's daughter Eormenhild and to her granddaughter , Werburh . He praises the virtues of Æthelthryth , a princess who was married twice but still preserved her virginity . Seaxburh receives little praise from Bede , as she had borne children before becoming a nun . He only mentions Seaxburh 's marriage to Eorcenberht , succession as abbess and translation of her sister 's relics .

= = Death and veneration = =

The date of Seaxburh 's death is not known , but when she died at Ely , she was at " a good , late age " , according to the Liber Eliensis , which also related that ' Richard , Bishop of Ely ' translated the remains of Seaxburh and of " all the saintly women reposing in that place " . Her feast day is 6

July .

Seaxburh is mentioned in a written account of Kent 's earliest Christian kings and their canonised relatives , known as the Kentish Royal Legend ( Old English : *Þá hálgan* ) . These kings , queens and princesses were unified by their holiness and royal connections . Pauline Stafford notes that the Legend " may have been a Christian alternative to pagan genealogy " to the rulers of 10th- and 11th @-@ century mediaeval England , as it described an earlier period of sustained Christian piety within the royal dynasty of Kent . Being both a queen and a saint , Seaxburh was held in high regard within the Legend : within it her role as queen and the founder of the minster at Sheppey was highlighted .

The 1913 edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia lists several separate accounts of the saint 's deeds and miracles , or so @-@ called Lives . The Life ( or Vita ) printed in John Capgrave 's *Nova , Legenda* and used by the Bollandists , was perhaps copied from a Cotton manuscript in the British Museum . There is another Vita in Latin in the same collection , but it was so damaged by fire that it is useless . The surviving versions of the Vita Sexburge were compiled after 1106 ( the year the relics of Seaxburh were translated ) and are copies from an earlier manuscript , now lost . The Vita describes Seaxburh 's early life , marriage to Eorcenberht , withdrawal to Milton and then Minster @-@ in @-@ Sheppey , and her final years as a nun and the abbess at Ely . The section relating to her life at Sheppey is similar to another fragment , dating between the 9th and 11th centuries , and currently kept at Lambeth Palace . It has been suggested that part of the Vita Sexburge was derived from this manuscript , or that both parts originated from an earlier version of Seaxburh 's Life .