

= Wulfhere of Mercia =

Wulfhere or Wulfar (died 675) was King of Mercia from 658 until 675 AD . He was the first Christian king of all of Mercia , though it is not known when or how he converted from Anglo @-@ Saxon paganism . His accession marked the end of Oswiu of Northumbria 's overlordship of southern England , and Wulfhere extended his influence over much of that region . His campaigns against the West Saxons led to Mercian control of much of the Thames valley . He conquered the Isle of Wight and the Meon valley and gave them to King Æthelwealh of the South Saxons . He also had influence in Surrey , Essex , and Kent . He married Eormenhild , the daughter of King Eorcenberht of Kent .

Wulfhere 's father , Penda , was killed in 655 at the Battle of Winwaed , fighting against Oswiu of Northumbria . Penda 's son Peada became king under Oswiu 's overlordship but was murdered six months later . Wulfhere came to the throne when Mercian nobles organized a revolt against Northumbrian rule in 658 and drove out Oswiu 's governors .

By 670 , when Oswiu died , Wulfhere was the most powerful king in southern Britain . He was effectively the overlord of Britain south of the Humber from the early 660s , although not overlord of Northumbria as his father had been . In 674 , he challenged Oswiu 's son Ecgrif of Northumbria , but was defeated . He died , probably of disease , in 675 . Wulfhere was succeeded as King of Mercia by his brother , Æthelred . Stephen of Ripon 's Life of Wilfrid describes Wulfhere as " a man of proud mind , and insatiable will " .

= = Mercia in the seventh century = =

England in the early 7th century was ruled almost entirely by the Anglo @-@ Saxon peoples who had come to Britain from northwestern Europe , starting in the early 5th century . The monk Bede , who wrote in the 8th century , considered the Mercians to be descended from the Angles , one of the invading groups ; the Saxons and Jutes settled in the south of Britain , while the Angles settled in the north . Little is known about the origins of the kingdom of Mercia , in what is now the English midlands , but according to genealogies preserved in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle and the Anglian collection the early kings were descended from Icel ; the dynasty is therefore known as the Iclingas . The earliest Mercian king about whom definite historical information has survived is Penda of Mercia , Wulfhere 's father .

According to Bede 's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* , a history of the English church , there were seven early Anglo @-@ Saxon rulers who held imperium , or overlordship , over the other kingdoms . The fifth of these was Edwin of Northumbria , who was killed at the battle of Hatfield Chase by a combined force including Cadwallon , a British king of Gwynedd , and Penda . At the time of this victory , Penda was probably not yet king of Mercia . His children included two future kings of Mercia : Wulfhere and Æthelred .

After Edwin 's death , Northumbria briefly fell apart into its two constituent kingdoms . Within a year Oswald killed Cadwallon and reunited the kingdoms , and subsequently re @-@ established Northumbrian hegemony over the south of England . However , on 5 August 642 , Penda killed Oswald at the battle of Maserfield , probably at Oswestry in the northwest midlands . Penda is not recorded as overlord of the other southern Anglo @-@ Saxon kings , but he became the most powerful of the Anglo @-@ Saxon kings after he defeated Oswald . On Oswald 's death , Northumbria was divided again : Oswald 's son Oswiu succeeded to the throne of Bernicia , and Osric 's son Oswine to Deira , the southern of the two kingdoms .

The main source for this period is Bede 's *History* , completed in about 731 . Despite its focus on the history of the church , this work also provides valuable information about the early pagan kingdoms . For other kingdoms than his native Northumbria , such as Wessex and Kent , Bede had an informant within the ecclesiastical establishment who supplied him with additional information . This does not seem to have been the case with Mercia , about which Bede is less informative than about other kingdoms . Further sources for this period include the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle , compiled at the end of the 9th century in Wessex . The Chronicle 's anonymous scribe appears to

have incorporated much information recorded in earlier periods .

= = Ancestry = =

Wulfhere was the son of Penda of Mercia . Penda 's queen , Cynewise , is named by Bede , who does not mention her children ; no other wives of Penda are known and so it is likely but not certain that she was Wulfhere 's mother . The Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle gives Penda 's age as fifty in 626 , and credits him with a thirty @-@ year reign , but this would put Penda at eighty years old at the time of his death , which is generally thought unlikely as two of his sons (Wulfhere and Æthelred) are recorded as being young when he was killed . It is thought at least as likely that Penda was 50 years old at his death , rather than at his accession . Wulfhere 's date of birth is unknown , but Bede describes him as a youth at the time of his accession in 658 , so it is likely he was in his middle teens at that time ; Penda would then have been in his thirties at the time Wulfhere was born .

Nothing is known of Wulfhere 's childhood . He had two brothers , Peada and Æthelred , and two sisters , Cyneburh and Cyneswith ; it is also possible that Merewalh , king of the Magonsæte , was Wulfhere 's brother . He married Eormenhild of Kent ; no date is recorded for the marriage and there is no record of any children in the earliest sources , though Coenred , who was king of Mercia from 704 to 709 , is recorded in John of Worcester 's 12th century chronicle as Wulfhere 's son . Another possible child is Berhtwald , a subking who is recorded as a nephew of Æthelred , and a third child , Werburh , is recorded in an 11th @-@ century manuscript as a daughter of Wulfhere . An 11th @-@ century history of St. Peter 's Monastery in Gloucester names two other women , Eadburh and Eafe , as queens of Wulfhere , but neither claim is plausible .

= = Accession and overlordship = =

In 655 Penda besieged Oswiu of Northumbria at Iudeu , the location of which is unknown but which may have been Stirling , in Scotland . Penda took Oswiu 's son , Ecgrith , as hostage , and Oswiu paid tribute , in the form of treasure , to secure Penda 's departure . On the way back to Mercia , Oswiu overtook Penda and on 15 November 655 Oswiu and Penda fought on the banks of the (unidentified) river Winwaed . Penda was killed and beheaded by Oswiu , who divided Mercia into northern and southern halves . The northern portion was kept under direct Northumbrian control ; the southern kingdom was given to Penda 's son Peada , who had married Oswiu 's daughter Ealhflæd ca 653 .

Peada did not remain king long . He was murdered at Easter in 656 , perhaps with the connivance of his wife , Oswiu 's daughter . Oswiu then ruled all Mercia himself . Bede lists Oswiu as the seventh and last king to hold imperium (or bretwalda in the language of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle) over the other Anglo @-@ Saxon kingdoms . Overlordship was a common relationship between kingdoms at this time , often taking the form of a lesser king under the domination of a stronger one . Oswiu went further than this , however , and installed his own governors in Mercia after the deaths of Penda and Peada . This attempt to establish close control of Mercia failed in 658 when three Mercian leaders , Immin , Eafa and Eadbert , rebelled against the Northumbrians . Bede reports that they had kept Wulfhere in hiding , and when the revolt succeeded Wulfhere became king . It has been suggested that the Mercian revolt succeeded because Oswiu may have been occupied with fighting in Pictland , in northern Britain . His nephew the Pictish king Talorgan , son of Eanfrith , had died in 657 .

How much direct control Oswiu exerted over the southern kingdoms during his imperium is unclear . Bede describes Oswiu 's friendship and influence over Sigeberht of the East Saxons , but generally the pattern in the southeast is of more local domination , with Oswiu 's influence unlikely to have been particularly strong . Wulfhere appears to have taken over Oswiu 's position in many instances . Bede does not list him as one of the rulers who exercised imperium , but modern historians consider that the rise to primacy of the kingdom of Mercia began in his reign . He seems to have been the effective overlord of Britain south of the Humber from the early 660s , though not overlord of Northumbria as his father had been .

A document called the Tribal Hidage may date from Wulfhere 's reign . Drawn up before many smaller groups of peoples were absorbed into the larger kingdoms , such as Mercia , it records the peoples of Anglo @-@ Saxon England , along with an assessment in hides , a unit of land . The Tribal Hidage is difficult to date precisely ; it may have been written down in Wulfhere 's reign , but other suggested origins include the reign of Offa of Mercia , or Edwin or Oswiu of Northumbria .

= = A convert king = =

Britain had been Christianized under the Romans , but the incoming Anglo @-@ Saxons practiced their indigenous religion (Anglo @-@ Saxon paganism) and the church in Great Britain was limited to the surviving British kingdoms in Scotland and Wales , and the kingdom of Dumnonia in the southwest of England . Missionaries from Rome began converting the Anglo @-@ Saxons to Christianity at the end of the 6th century , and this process was well under way in Penda 's reign , though Penda himself remained pagan throughout his life . Records survive of the baptism of other kings at this time ? Cynegils of Wessex was baptized in about 640 , for example , and Edwin of Northumbria was converted in the mid 620s . However , later kings , such as Cædwalla of Wessex , who ruled in the 680s , are recorded as pagan at their accession .

Bede writes that after Wulfhere became king : " Free under their own king , they [the Mercians] gave willing allegiance to Christ their true king , so that they might win his eternal kingdom in heaven " . While Wulfhere 's father had refused to convert to Christianity , and Peada had apparently converted in order to marry Oswiu 's daughter , the date and the circumstances of Wulfhere 's conversion are unknown . It has been suggested that he adopted Christianity as part of a settlement with Oswiu . Bede records that two years before Penda 's death , his son Peada converted to Christianity , influenced partly by Oswiu 's son Ealhfrith , who had married Peada 's sister Cyneburh . Peada brought a Christian mission into Mercia , and it is possible that this was when Wulfhere became a Christian . Wulfhere 's marriage to Eormenhild of Kent would have brought Mercia into close contact with the Christian kingdoms of Kent and Merovingian Gaul , which were connected by kinship and trade . The political and economic benefits of the marriage may therefore also have been a factor in Wulfhere 's Christianization of his kingdom .

Wulfhere 's relationship with Bishop Wilfrid is recorded in Stephen of Ripon 's Life of Wilfrid . During the years 667 ? 9 , while Wilfrid was at Ripon , Wulfhere frequently invited him to come to Mercia when there was need of the services of a bishop . According to Stephen , Wulfhere rewarded Wilfrid with " many tracts of land " , in which Wilfrid " soon established minsters for servants of God " .

According to the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle , Wulfhere endowed a major monastery at Medeshamstede , in modern Peterborough . The monastery had initially been endowed by Peada ; for the dedication of Wulfhere 's gift both Archbishop Deusdedit (died 664) , and Bishop Jaruman (held office from 663) , were present . The endowment was signed by Wulfhere and Oswiu , and by Sigehere and Sæbbi , the Kings of Essex .

= = West Saxons , South Saxons and Hwicce = =

In 661 , Wulfhere is recorded in the Chronicle as harrying Ashdown , in West Saxon territory . The Gewisse , thought to be the original group from which the West Saxons came , appear to have originally settled in the upper Thames valley , and what records survive of the 6th century show them active in that region . The Mercian resurgence under Wulfhere placed them under severe pressure . Also in the early 660s , the West Saxon see of Dorchester , in the same area , was divided , and a new bishopric set up at Winchester . This decision was probably a reaction to the advance of the Mercians into the traditional heartland of the West Saxons , leaving Dorchester dangerously close to the border . Within a few years , the Dorchester see was abandoned ; the exact date is not known , but it was probably in the mid 660s .

In addition to the attack on Ashdown , Wulfhere raided the Isle of Wight in 661 . He subsequently gave both the island and the territory of the Meonware , which lay along the river Meon , on the mainland north of the Isle of Wight , to his godson King Æthelwealh of the South Saxons . It seems

likely that the ruling dynasty on the island found these arrangements acceptable to some degree , since the West Saxons , under Cædwalla , exterminated the whole family when they launched their own attack on the island in 686 . After the conquest of the Isle of Wight , Wulfhere ordered the priest Eoppa to provide baptism to the inhabitants . According to the Chronicle , this was the first time Christian baptism had reached the island .

In the early 670s , Cenwealh of Wessex died , and perhaps as a result of the stress caused by Wulfhere 's military activity the West Saxon kingdom fragmented and came to be ruled by underkings , according to Bede . Eventually these underkings were defeated and the kingdom reunited , probably by Cædwalla but possibly by Centwine . A decade after Wulfhere 's death , the West Saxons under Cædwalla began an aggressive expansion to the east , reversing much of the Mercian advance .

In addition to being Wulfhere 's godson , King Æthelwealh of the South Saxons had a connection to the Mercians via marriage . His wife was Queen Eafe , the daughter of Eanfrith of the Hwicce , a tribe whose territory lay to the southwest of Mercia . The Hwicce had their own royal family , but it appears that at this date they were already subordinate to Wulfhere : the marriage between Æthelwealh and Eafe may well have taken place at Wulfhere 's court , since it is known Æthelwealh was converted there . The kingdom of the Hwicce is sometimes regarded as a creation of Penda 's , but it is equally likely that the kingdom existed independently of Mercia , and that Penda and Wulfhere 's increasing influence in the area represented an extension of Mercian power rather than the creation of a separate entity .

= = East Anglia and the East Saxons = =

In 664 , Æthelwald of East Anglia died , and was succeeded by Ealdwulf , who reigned for fifty years . Almost nothing is known of Mercian relations with East Anglia during this time ; East Anglia had previously been dominated by Northumbria , but there is no evidence that this continued after Wulfhere 's accession . Swithelm of the East Saxons also died in 664 ; he was succeeded by his two sons , Sigehere and Sæbbi , and Bede describes their accession as " rulers ... under Wulfhere , king of the Mercians " . A plague the same year caused Sigehere and his people to recant their Christianity , and according to Bede , Wulfhere sent Jaruman , the bishop of Lichfield , to reconvert the East Saxons . Jaruman was not the first bishop of Lichfield ; Bede mentions a predecessor , Trumhere , but nothing is known about Trumhere 's activities or who appointed him .

It is apparent from these events that Oswiu 's influence in the south had waned by this time , if not before , and that Wulfhere now dominated the area . This becomes even clearer in the next few years , as some time between 665 and 668 Wulfhere sold the see of London to Wine , who had been expelled from his West Saxon bishopric by Cenwealh . London fell within the East Saxons ' territory in that period . From the archaeological evidence , it appears to be about this time that the Middle Saxon settlement in London began to expand significantly ; the centre of Anglo -@- Saxon London was not at the old Roman centre , but about a mile west of that , near what is now the location of the Strand . Wulfhere may have been in control of the city when this expansion began .

= = Kent , Surrey and Lindsey = =

Eorcenberht was the king of Kent at Wulfhere 's accession , and the two families became connected when Wulfhere married Eorcenberht 's daughter Eormenhild . In 664 Eorcenberht 's son Egbert succeeded to the Kentish throne . The situation in Kent at Egbert 's death in 673 is not clearly recorded . It appears that a year passed before Hlothhere , Egbert 's brother , became king . Wulfhere may have had an interest in the succession , as through his marriage to Eormenhild he was the uncle of Egbert 's two sons , Eadric and Wihtred . It has been speculated that Wulfhere acted as the effective ruler of Kent in the interregnum between Egbert 's death and Hlothhere 's accession . Another Mercian connection to Kent was through Merewalh , the king of the Magonsæte , and hence a subking under Wulfhere . Merewalh , who may have been Wulfhere 's brother , was married to Hlothhere 's sister , Eormenburh .

Surrey is not recorded as ever having been an independent kingdom , but was at least a province that was under the control of different neighbours at different times . It was ruled by Egbert until the early 670s , when a charter shows Wulfhere confirming a grant made to Bishop Eorcenwald by Frithuwold , a sub @-@ king in Surrey , which may have extended north into modern Buckinghamshire . Frithuwold himself was probably married to Wilburh , Wulfhere 's sister . The charter , made from Thame , is dated between 673 and 675 , and it was probably Egbert 's death that triggered Wulfhere 's intervention . A witness named Frithuric is recorded on a charter in the reign of Wulfhere 's successor , Æthelred , making a grant to the monastery of Peterborough , and the alliteration common in Anglo @-@ Saxon dynasties has led to speculation that the two men may have both come from a Middle Anglian dynasty , with Wulfhere perhaps having placed Frithuwold on the throne of Surrey . The charter is witnessed by three other subkings , named Osric , Wigheard , and Æthelwold ; their kingdoms are not identified but the charter mentions Sonning , a province in what is now eastern Berkshire , and it may be that one of these subkings was a ruler of the Sunningas , the people of that province . This would in turn imply Wulfhere 's domination of that province by that time .

Wulfhere 's influence among the Lindesfara , whose territory , Lindsey , lay in what is now Lincolnshire , is known from information about episcopal authority . At least one of the Mercian bishops of Lichfield is known to have exercised authority there : Wynfrith , who became bishop on Chad 's death in 672 . In addition it is known that Wulfhere gave land at Barrow upon Humber , in Lindsey , to Chad , for a monastery . It is possible that Chad also had authority there as bishop , probably no later than 669 . It may be that the political basis for Mercian episcopal control of the Lindesfara was laid early in Wulfhere 's reign , under Trumhere and Jaruman , the two bishops who preceded Chad .

= = Defeat and death = =

When Wulfhere attacked Oswiu 's son Ecgrith in 674 , he did so from a position of strength . Stephen of Ripon 's Life of Wilfrid says that Wulfhere " stirred up all the southern nations against [Northumbria] " . Bede does not report the fighting , nor is it mentioned in the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle , but according to Stephen , Ecgrith defeated Wulfhere , forcing him to surrender Lindsey , and to pay tribute .

Wulfhere survived the defeat but evidently lost some degree of control over the south as a result ; in 675 , Æscwine , one of the kings of the West Saxons , fought him at Biedanheafde . It is not known where this battle was , or who was the victor . Henry of Huntingdon , a 12th @-@ century historian who had access to versions of the Anglo @-@ Saxon Chronicle now lost , believed that Mercians had been the victors in a " terrible battle " and remarks upon Wulfhere having inherited " the valour of his father and grandfather " . Kirby , however , presumes Æscwine was sufficiently successful to break Wulfhere 's hold over Wessex .

Wulfhere died later in 675 . The cause of death , according to Henry of Huntingdon , was disease . He would have been in his mid @-@ thirties . His widow , Eormenhild , is thought to have later become the abbess of Ely . Æthelred , Wulfhere 's brother , succeeded to the throne and reigned for nearly thirty years . Æthelred recovered Lindsey from the Northumbrians a few years after his accession , but he was generally unable to maintain the domination of the south achieved by Wulfhere .