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### The Anonymous, Executed Widow of Ailsworth<sup>1</sup>

Sometime in or before the year 948, an aristocratic widow lived on her own small estate, centered on the Northamptonshire village of Ailsworth. This woman, along with her son, was accused of practicing some kind of vindictive, possibly magical aggression against a man named Ælfsige; as evidence, an iron stake or pin was reportedly discovered in an inner room of the widow's house. The widow was then drowned in the local River Nene, while the son escaped and became a fugitive. The estate subsequently forfeited to King Eadred, who then granted it to the alleged victim Ælfsige, who was also known as a loyal minister to the king.

This is the sum total we can know directly about this woman from the documentary evidence. She survives as a barely legible figure existing only in trace form in Sawyer 1377 (S.1377), a twelfth-century copy of a tenth-century charter in Old English from Peterborough Abbey. This charter, along with another (S.533), archives the all but total erasure of this woman's property, life, family, and perhaps most revealing through its omissive scheme, her name:

*Here it is made clear, in this document, that Bishop Athelwold and Wulfstan Ucca exchanged lands in witness of King Edgar and his councilors. The bishop gave Wulfstan the land at Washington, and Wulfstan gave him the land at Yaxley and at Ailsworth. Then the bishop gave the land at Yaxley to Thorney, and at Ailsworth to Peterborough. And that land at Ailsworth had previously been forfeited by a widow and her son because they drove an iron stake into Ælfsige, Wulfstan's father, and it was discovered, and someone took that murderous thing from her inner chamber. Then someone seized that woman, and drowned her at London Bridge, but her son broke out and became an outlaw. And then the land went to the hands of the king, and the king gave it back to Ælfsige, and Wulfstan Ucca, his son, again gave it to Bishop Athelwold, as it here before is stated.*

Earlier scholarship on the charter tends to read this woman in terms of a gendered stereotype: the widow-witch, and as rare evidence for the practice of a kind of sympathetic magic or voodoo in Anglo-Saxon England. But charters are usually written for the (named) winners, and need to be read skeptically in terms of the institutional power they serve, here through the particulars of the gendered, cultural, legal, religious and authoritarian contexts that converge at the moment of this woman's prosecutorial killing.

S.1377 carefully tracks the property transactions between the male network of King Eadred, the faithful Ælfsige, his son Wulfstan, and Bishop Athelwold of Winchester, but remains vague on significant aspects of the widow's identity and circumstance. The charter registers a conflicted desire - expunging her and her son (who becomes a literal outlaw (*uhtlah*) as much as possible from the written record while still acknowledging a necessity of her existence. The widow and her son are never named, and the individuals who discovered the iron stake and drowned her are referred to in the Old English only as *man* ("someone"). The categorical ambiguity of the widow and son's crime is also curious; the charter describes their attack but never specifically names it as a form of witchcraft, and instead asks *the reader* to conclude this widow was, in fact, a witch – a rhetorical strategy that destabilizes the event recounted, and suggests the basis for the widow's disenfranchisement and death may have been rooted less in fact than in the invention of convenience.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own. For the Old English text of charter S.1377 charter, see Rabin, "The Peterborough 'Witch'." The 948 date and size of the Ailsworth estate are attested in [the Anglo-Latin](#) charter S.533, in which King Eadred also describes Ælfsige as "my most loyal minister" (*ministro mihi fidelissimo*).

If the widow's estate had been part of her wedding *morgengifu* (morning gift), she would have inherited it outright, shifting her own social status from quasi-property herself to an individual independent of any domestic or familial masculine control. But such secular widows also could live in a state of alien precarity and isolation, no longer part of the normative social network of protection engendered by male kinship. This vulnerability is reflected in the increasing number of compensatory references for crimes against widows in Anglo-Saxon law codes in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and in the special status ostensibly accorded to widows by the Church, the institution to which widows often then in return bequeathed their property and lands. The widow's execution in S.1377 also seems extreme compared to penalties for similar acts of witchcraft in penitential or legal texts, where fasting is prescribed. *Morgengifu* or not, the transformation of landed widow to executed witch, and her son to a fugitive from the law, allowed the Ailsworth lands to legally forfeit to royal control, securing them from future claims from any of the widow's kin.

Ultimately, this widow's estate becomes part of a complicated land deal to support Bishop Athelwold of Winchester's ambitious program of restoring Peterborough Abbey, which had been destroyed by Vikings the century before. At Ailsworth in 948, the widow and her son would have lived on the southern cultural border of the almost vanishing Danelaw, during a time when penitential and legal codes reveal a growing condemnation of magic practices as associated with a Viking, pagan culture. So S.1377's narrative of witchcraft literally (in the charter) and culturally centers this woman at the intersection of a powerful set of spiritual and institutional beliefs, anxieties and desires. The textual process by which a once real and documentable widow is actively reconstructed as a generic and unidentifiable witch inverts the religious model of the widow as a sanctified ideal to be protected by the Church, and instead provides a neat theological formulation for how this land-owning, independent woman may have been undone by the mechanism of her own gendered and exceptional status. Witch or not, the church still gets this widow's lands in the end. And in her end, when we read the widow of Sawyer 1377 as only a witch, we drown her again, this time in words.

### Primary Sources:

The texts of the two charters referenced (S.533 and S.1377) are available online through the *Electronic Sawyer* database: <http://www.esawyer.org.uk/>

The most recent Old English edition of Sawyer 1377 is by Andrew Rabin (see below).

### Further Reading:

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