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The First Battle for Scottish Independence:
The Battle of Dunnichen, A.D. 685

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
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May 2002

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Dr. William Douglas Burgess
Dr. Colin Baxter

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ABSTRACT

The First Battle for Scottish Independence:

The Battle of Dunnichen, A.D. 685

by

Julie Fox Parsons

This study is an examination of the historiography of the ancient-medieval texts that record events related to the Northumbrian and the Pictish royal houses in the seventh century. The Picts, the Scots and the Celtic Britons fell into subjugation under the control of the expansionist Northumbrian kings and remained there for most of the seventh century. Northumbrian expansion was halted by Bridei, king of the Picts, when he put down the advancing Northumbrian forces of king Ecgfrith at the Battle of Dunnichen, also known as Nechtansmere, in the year A.D. 685. The outcome of the battle not only stopped Northumbrian expansion to the north, but began its reversal. The battle also allowed the Picts to gain back the lands they had lost to their Northumbrian enemy. For the Northumbrians, the battle had political and ecclesiastical implications that may have contributed to the later decline of their kingdom.

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INTRODUCTION

On a wintry night in January, in the year 1950, Miss E.S. Smith was traveling on foot from Brechin, returning to her home in Letham, to the south. The darkness the night provided was perfect for visions just as the one Miss Smith encountered on her journey. In the pitch dark ahead, Miss Smith saw lights in the distance, torchlights to be exact. Then Miss Smith saw that figures were holding the torches. She was close enough to the figures to see the clothing that the men bearing the torches were wearing. The torchbearers were coming from the direction of Dunnichen, the site of the infamous 685 A.D. commonly known as the Battle of Nechtansmere. The figures were apparently Pict warriors searching the ground for something, perhaps the remains of their comrades who had fallen at the victorious battle.¹

There were other visions surrounding the Battle at Dunnichen, visions more closely related in time to the event. For instance, Bede in chapter 24 of his *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, tells of the vision Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne, had regarding king Ecgrith of Bernicia. Cuthbert tells Ecgrith's sister Aelfflaed that her brother "happens to be in his last year with death at the gates."² Later in chapter 27 of his *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, Bede tells of how Cuthbert, upon hearing that Ecgrith was battling with the Picts, rushed to be with Ecgrith's queen in Carlisle, fearing that his prophecy to Aelfflaed was near.

¹ Graeme Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen* (Angus: The Pinkfoot Press, 1991), 26-27. Although there is no proof to vouch for Miss Smith's story, the psychiatrist who spoke with her after the incident claimed that she had experienced a true apparition. Cruickshank further says that there was no evidence "for other possibilities, ranging from a genuinely-held but nonetheless false memory, to a hoax, or a fraud." Therefore, there is no reason to doubt Miss Smith nor is there reason to dismiss her vision as bogus. However, there is not yet a place in the historical field, which allows for the use of visions and apparitions for documentation. Although the vision of Miss Smith holds no proof of the actual battle, the contents of what she experienced may have indeed been an actual incident following the battle. It was not uncommon for remaining warriors to return to the battle site to gather the remains of their fallen for proper burial.

² D.H. Farmer, ed., *The Age of Bede*, trans. J.F Webb (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 75-76.

Upon arrival Cuthbert was being shown around the city when he was suddenly disturbed by something. Bede claims that after Cuthbert regained his bearing he whispered, “perhaps at this moment the battle is being decided.”³ After the vision, Cuthbert spoke privately with the queen and warned her that the king would probably be dead by Sunday. Cuthbert was correct in assuming that his vision was exact, for king Ecgrith was slain by the Picts at the Battle of Dunnichen on Sunday, 20 May A.D. 685.

For my primary sources of study I will be using several chronicles and annals written in the ancient-medieval period: *The Chronicle of Holyrood*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *The Chronicles of the Picts and the Scots*, *The Annals of Tigernach*, *The Annals of Ulster*. Bede, the venerable English historian, is indispensable for my study of the Northumbrian kings and their relations with their neighbors. Since Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in 731, and since he is a native Northumbrian, he is the most contemporary source available for the study of the kingdom. Although he is sometimes partial to the English, he is nonetheless the best source for the history of the seventh century. In conjunction with Bede’s *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, I will also use Eddius Stephanus’ *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, as well as the anonymous *The Life of Saint Cuthbert* written by a monk at Lindisfarne and Bede’s *Life of St. Cuthbert*. Although hagiography has somewhat of a bad name among historians as propaganda pieces, some of them are helpful for the study of the events surrounding the saint during their lifetime. Therefore I must note that extreme caution was used in the survey of these saint’s lives and where possible, multiple sources were used to check the accuracy of the information procured from them. Other source material includes: Adamnan’s *Life of Columba*,

³ Ibid., 80.

Symeon of Durham, *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesia*, Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, and Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae*.

The goal of this paper is to discuss neither the battle nor the supernatural forces and visions that appeared to people either during or after the battle. The aim of this paper is, however, to discuss the Battle of Dunnichen, which occurred in 685, as it was recorded by the ancient-medieval sources from the period. It will also examine the way in which modern scholars have written about the battle. I also discuss the events leading up to the battle, such as the relationship between the kingdom of the Picts and the kingdom of Northumbria, more specifically Bernicia, as they are perceived by the ancient-medieval sources. Particular attention will be given to the Northumbrian royal house of Aethelfrith, especially his grandson Ecgfrith, whom partakes in the battle against king Bridei of the Picts. The medieval writer Eddius Stephanus in his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* records extensive information of the reign of Ecgfrith. The importance of Aethelfrith is also discussed, since it is with his reign that the power of the Northumbrian kingdom begins to expand and exert influence over neighboring peoples. Therefore, the study is confined to the seventh century, which encompasses both the Northumbrian rise to power and its fall from power as it is perceived by the ancient-medieval writers of the period.

Although little is known of the actual battle, I will discuss what is known through the ancient-medieval literature, modern archaeology and history. I will be using the recent historiography of the event in an attempt to reconstruct the battle scene and its immediate outcome in terms of the realignment of the border between the two kingdoms. Although this is not a geographical survey, some explanation of the geography of the

areas will be necessary for the continuity of the paper. It will also provide a better understanding of the pivotal pieces of land that provide a gateway into Pictland, such as the modern day Edinburgh and Stirling. Most importantly, I will be discussing the outcome of the battle and the impact it had on both southern Pictland and Northumbria as it is viewed by the ancient-medieval texts and the modern historians. The Battle of Dunnichen was an important battle for both the history of Pictland and the future of Scotland. The defeat of the Northumbrians defined the southern Scottish and northern English border forever and allowed the southern Picts the ability to regain their autonomy.

Written material for the study of the Picts is scarcer than source material for the Etruscans. However, through careful examination of the ancient-medieval English and British sources, as well as the Irish annalists and chroniclers, it is possible to get an idea about what was going on in and around Pictland during the seventh century. Also for the study of the Picts, the fields of modern archaeology and philology have proven to be indispensable. These fields, coupled with the field of history, are what make this historiographical account of the Battle of Dunnichen possible.

CHAPTER 1

THE ROYAL HOUSE OF NORTHUMBRIA

Located in Angus, Scotland, the village of Dunnichen lies at the bottom of the gently sloping Dunnichen Hill. The small town of Letham lies to the south, and to the north the town of Brechin. The road running through Dunnichen is small and winding. The parish church of Dunnichen sits at the northeast corner of the base of Dunnichen Hill, where king Ecgfrith led his Northumbrian troops through the mountain pass to their deaths. The small church with its tall grave-stones overlook what is generally thought to be the site of the Battle of Dunnichen. Today the battle site is well-cleared farmland, with the farmer's house standing at the base of the hill in the center of the lush land. On the day I visited the site, it was drizzling rain, but the sun was shining through the wet mist. The temperature was extremely cold and smoke was rising in curls from the farmer's home. Because it was Sunday, and church had already dismissed, there was not another person in sight, so I could view the battle site alone. The landscape has changed considerably since that fateful day in May when the Picts freed their homeland. The forest covering Dunnichen Hill that was once so useful to the Picts in their assault on the unsuspecting Northumbrians is now gone. Instead, only a few trees stand in an almost single file across the top of Dunnichen Hill, because the majority of the hill has been cleared for the pasturing of sheep. The farmer's house is also surrounded by a sparse arrangement of trees. The swampy marsh that once occupied the base of Dunnichen Hill is now covered with bright green cover crops alternating with rich, dark plowed land. All that remains of the deadly mire that once helped the Picts defeat the Northumbrians is a small pond that provides the habitat for the local waterfowl.

The events that led up to the Battle of Dunnichen began in the early seventh century with the rise to power of the Northumbrian kingdom:

Seventh and eight century Anglo-Saxon kings, like their Merovingian counterparts, inherited the tradition of violence, rivalry, mimetic desire, sacrifice, and scapegoating of their Germanic forebears. Their conversion to Christianity did not immediately free them to choose a higher and better mimesis, based on Christ as model/mediator. Neither were many of the clergy and bishops liberated from the same power struggles, even though they usually forwent slaughter and murder to achieve their goals.⁴

Through the constant interchange of allies and enemies, the Northumbrian kings were able to amass good fortunes for themselves in the seventh century. The kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia were continually being divided and passed between royal families as each one successfully overcame the other. This created great tension among the Northumbrians and their neighbors the Picts and Britons, because Deira and Bernicia were constantly making and breaking alliances with these surrounding kingdoms. It is this dynamic and unstable environment that exists throughout the kingdom of Northumbria when king Ecgrith assumes the throne. It is also with Ecgrith's assumption of the throne that Northumbrian conquest for total domination over her northern neighbors, the Picts, would be abandoned and the English northern border would be established once and for all. The end of Northumbrian ascendancy occurred with the Battle of Dunnichen and the death of Ecgrith in A.D. 685.

The power struggle for the Northumbrian royal house in the seventh century began with Aethelfrith, the king of Bernicia, grandson of Ida.⁵ According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Aethelfrith succeeded to the throne of Northumbria in the year 593.⁶ Aethelfrith is

⁴ George Hardin Brown, "Royal and Ecclesiastical Rivalries in Bede's History," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 52 (Fall 1999): 9.

⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, with David Douglas and Susie Tucker (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961), records that Ida succeeded to the Northumbrian throne in the year 547 (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 547). The *Chronicle* also claims that the royal Northumbrian house began its rise to power under Ida. Ida ruled Northumbria for twelve years at the royal stronghold at Bamburgh, which he built. Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London: Phillimore, 1980), 63, writes that it was under the reign of Aethelfrith that Bamburgh gets its

the first king to rule both Deira and Bernicia simultaneously.⁷ Bede gives evidence for this when he says that Aethelfrith was “a very brave king and most eager for glory” who ruled over “the kingdom of Northumbria.”⁸ Nennius, in his history of Britain refers to the Northumbrian king as “Aethelferth the Artful.”⁹

Bede uses the momentous battle of Degsastan to date king Aethelfrith’s reign.¹⁰ In the reference, Bede says that king Aedan, ruler of the Scots of Dalriada, waged war against King

name because he gave the place “Din Guaire to his wife, whose name was Bebbu, and it was named Bamburgh from his wife’s name.” Nennius lends further proof to the existence of Ida when he tells the story of the English upon their arrival in Britain: “When they were defeated in all their campaigns, the English sought help from Germany, and continually and considerably increased their numbers, and they brought over their kings from Germany to rule over them in Britain, until the time when Ida reigned, who was the son of Eobba. He was the first king in Bernicia, that is, in *Berneich*” (Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, 56).

⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 593.

⁷ Northumbria was the formation of the kingdom of Bernicia and Deira, both were Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Barbara Yorke, in her book *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Seaby, 1990): 74-77, places the center of Deira in East Riding of Yorkshire. The center of Bernicia was located in the area of the Tyne. Yorke says that the Tees valley was the boundary line between the two kingdoms during the seventh century. The kingdom of Deira was probably formed earlier than the kingdom of Bernicia. Yorke also claims that archaeological evidence found in cemeteries suggests that Deira was being settled as early as the fifth century by Germanic immigrants.

Aelle is the first king of Deira that can confidently be recognized as a real character. Edwin, the son of Aelle is the first king of Deira that is actually dated (Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 74-77). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in the year 477, “Aelle and his three sons, Cymen, Wlencing, and Cissa, came into Britain with three ships at the place which is called *Cymenesora*, and there they killed many Britons and drove some into flight into the wood which is called *Andredeslea*” (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 477). It was not until the year 560 that Aelle became king of Northumbria, after the death of Ida (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 560).

Colgrave and Mynors in, Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 212, say that the names Deira and Bernicia are latinized forms of names taken from Old English, *Dere* and *Bernice*, which are possibly Celtic in origin. They agree with Yorke that Bernicia extended north as far as the Tyne but they go further and say that it is possible that it reached as far north at one time as the Forth. The present day county Durham “formed a kind of no-man’s-land between the two” kingdoms until the ninth century. Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 74, claims that the Bernician stronghold was still the rock of Bamburgh, which Ida built on the east coast. Stenton also claims that the kingdom of Deira is more ancient than Bernicia and that it is in fact derived from the British word *deifr*, which means “waters”. Stenton says that this is an indication that the first settlements in Deira occurred where the rivers met on the Humber (Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 74).

⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, i.34.

⁹ Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, 63.

¹⁰ For a discussion on the relationship between the Northumbrians and the Scots of Dalriada see John Bannerman’s, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974). The *ASC* gives 603 as the year for the battle of *Degsastan*. The *Annals of Ulster*, eds. Sean Mac Airt and Gearoid Mac Niocaill (Ireland: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), records the date of the battle in the year 600. In *The Chronicle of the Picts and the Scots*, ed. William F. Skene (Edinburgh: H.M. General

Aethelfrith and the English. Bede suggests that the reason Aedan brought war upon Aethelfrith was due to the immense power the Northumbrian king was gathering. The defeated King Aedan and a few remaining Scots fled the battlefield when “Aethelfrith brought this war to an end in the year of our Lord 603, and the eleventh year of his reign, which lasted for twenty-four years.”¹¹ The outcome of the war was so devastating to the Scots that “From that time no Irish king in Britain has dared to make war on the English race to this day.”¹²

Through the description given by Bede, it appears that Aethelfrith was a true warrior king in that he gave no quarter to the other kingdoms surrounding Northumbria. Aethelfrith also waged war on the people of Caerlegion, which in modern times is known as Chester.¹³ Bede compares Aethelfrith to King Saul of Israel due to his continual devastation of the Britons and his large holdings of settled land; He also claims that Aethelfrith “exterminated or conquered the natives.”¹⁴ Aethelfrith’s relentless pursuit of Edwin of Deira is a prime example of how far he was willing to go to eliminate a possible obstacle in his quest for power. This pursuit, however, appears to have been more costly for Aethelfrith than he could have ever imagined, since it would eventually cost him his life. Regardless, Aethelfrith persisted and Edwin was apparently harassed and eventually forced into exile after he assumed the throne.¹⁵ The conflict that existed between these two men came from the fact that Edwin was the rightful successor of Deira and, therefore, as long as he was alive he posed a threat to Aethelfrith’s total supremacy over

Register House, 1867), 286, this is recorded about the battle: “*Aduentus Anglorum ad Britanniam cccc. et lxxix. ab incarnatione Domini. Obsessio Badonici montis ab aduentu Anglorum xliiij. Aidan filius Gobren ab incarnatione Dxxij. cum bellum commiserat Aidan et Cadfred in loco qui dicitur Dexastan.*”

¹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, i.34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., ii.2.

¹⁴ Ibid., i.34.

¹⁵ D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 63. Kirby gives the spelling for Edwin as Eadwine, however, for this paper I will be using Bede’s spelling of the name as Edwin.

all of Northumbria. Edwin fled and lived as a “fugitive” for several years throughout the surrounding kingdoms before he found refuge at the court of king Raedwald of the Angles.¹⁶ When Aethelfrith found out where Edwin was hiding, he offered Raedwald “large sums of money” if he would kill him and when this offer failed to persuade Raedwald, Aethelfrith sent another supposition “offering even larger gifts of silver and further threatening to make war on him if Raedwald despised his offer.”¹⁷ With this threat of war, Raedwald capitulated and agreed to either kill Edwin or hand him over.¹⁸ Upon hearing this news, a friend of Edwin rushed to him and informed him of Raedwald’s intentions. When Edwin’s friend offered to take him away from the threats of both kingdoms, Edwin refused. Edwin claimed that Raedwald had shown no ill will toward him thus far and if he must be killed he would rather be killed by Raedwald, who had shown him kindness, than be killed by the savage, Aethelfrith. Later that night, while Edwin was contemplating his fate, he received a vision from a man that prophesied his glory throughout the English kingdoms and his defeat of his enemies. In return for the good news the prophecy revealed, Edwin promised that he would be truly grateful to the person that made possible his life and his glory and he further promised to uphold the teachings of his savior. Immediately following the vision, his dear friend returned to him with the news that king Raedwald has changed his mind and was going to spare his life. Apparently Raedwald’s queen had persuaded him that no amount of money was worth the life of a friend. Raedwald then agreed to help Edwin overthrow Aethelfrith and

¹⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.12. The Whitby monk in *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby*, text, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 16, also speaks of Edwin’s exile to the court of Raedwald, who was king of “Uuestanglorum.”

¹⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.12.

¹⁸ Ibid. Bede remarks that he is not sure if the King gave in to the demands of Aethelfrith due to the bribery with gifts or whether it was the announcement that a declaration of war would be pronounced against him if he did not comply.

assume the throne as king. However, before Aethelfrith even had time to engage his full army, Raedwald attacked and killed Aethelfrith on the border of Mercia. After the defeat of the Bernician king, Edwin assumed the throne of his bitter enemy, Aethelfrith.¹⁹

Edwin was the son of Aelle,²⁰ who was once the king of Deira. Mention of Edwin's reign is made in *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, which was written by a monk at Whitby anonymously sometime between the years 680-704.²¹ The Whitby writer calls the English race at this time the *Humbrensiun*.²² The anonymous monk gives Edwin as much praise as Bede gives him throughout his history. The Whitby monk writes that some of his people, English people that is, went to Rome where Pope Benedict insisted on meeting these light haired people with fair eyes. Upon meeting the travelers the Pope asked them where they were from and what was the name of their people and in return:

They answered, "The people we belong to are called Angles." "Angels of God," he replied. Then he asked further, "What is the name of the king of that people?" They said, "Aelli," whereupon he said, "Alleluia, God's praise must be heard there." Then he asked the name of their own tribe, to which they answered, "Deire," and he replied, "They shall flee from the wrath of God to the faith."²³

These holy men, therefore, misunderstood the word "Angles" for "angels" and, henceforth, they were seen to be of a mysterious and divinely sent nature. Following this ecclesiastical meeting, Gregory, who was not yet Pope, asked Pope Benedict if he could

¹⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.12. Kirby in *The Earliest English Kings*, 63, claims that Bede's account of the battle between Raedwald and Aethelfrith is a simple explanation of what was the real cause of the clash. Kirby says that there was more to the story than a fight over the life of Edwin. This battle actually represents "a protracted struggle to determine the military and political leadership of the Anglian peoples in the first half of the seventh century."

²⁰ Aelle is mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the son of Yffe, who was a descendant of Woden. The *Chronicle* also says that Aelle succeeded to the Northumbrian throne in 560, a position in which he remained for the next thirty years (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 560). The chronicle records the death of Aelle as being in the year 588. Aethelric, who ruled the kingdom for five years, then succeeded Aelle (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 588).

²¹ *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

travel to this land of the angels. In his attempt at persuasion, Gregory claimed: “It would be a wretched thing for hell to be filled with such lovely vessels.”²⁴ The Pope accepted the plea made by Gregory and he was given permission to go and save their souls from eternal damnation. The Whitby writer totally ignores Aelle and Edwin’s previous pagan ways, but instead concentrates on Edwin’s virtuous and Christian conversion.

Frank Stenton remarks “Edwin’s overlordship marks an important stage in the movement of the English peoples toward unity, for it first brought the southern kingdoms into definite association with Northumbria.”²⁵ Edwin was also instrumental in putting the English in touch with kingdoms outside of Britain. For instance, by marrying Aethelberht of Kent and Bertha of Paris’s daughter, Aethelburh,²⁶ Edwin was able to gain recognition from the Merovingian dynasty, not to mention, he now had an important connection with the kingdom of Kent. Edwin ruled both Deira and Bernicia and eventually came to rule over Raedwald’s kingdom, which meant that he now also ruled the English south of the Humber.²⁷ In regard to Edwin’s ever expanding realm, Bede adds, “So, like no other

²⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁵ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 79.

²⁶ Bede says that when Edwin sent word of his request to marry Aethelburh, her brother Eadbald, then the king of Kent, refused his request because Edwin was not a Christian and therefore the marriage would not be lawful. In reply, Edwin made a promise that he would in no way obstruct Aethelburh nor anyone whom she brought with her from practicing their religion. Bede says that Edwin even hinted at the idea that if he found their God and their religion appropriate he may consider joining them in the Christian faith. Bishop Paulinus went with Aethelburh to the court of Edwin to ensure that she received her sacraments and that she remains pure in her faith, meaning free from the heathen practices of Edwin and his people (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.9). Edwin finally converted to the Christian faith in 627 in the eleventh year of his rule. The Baptism took place on April 12th in York at the Church of St. Peter the Apostle this was Easter Day. Bede also says that all of Edwin’s nobles and several of the common people were also baptized on this day with Edwin (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.14). Bede further writes that Edwin’s faith became so strong that he even became an advocate for the Christian religion, persuading other nobles from other kingdoms to convert, like Eorpwold the son of the king of the East Angles (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.15).

²⁷ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 79. Frank Stenton further points out that this unification was “a confederation of a barbarian type, and its basis was the mere allegiance of individuals.” This individual confederation is important in understanding how easy it was for a king to lose his status. There was no loyalty to crown and country but what existed instead was pride in individual achievement, essentially every man was looking out for himself.

English king before him, he held under his sway the whole realm of Britain, not only English kingdoms but those ruled over by the Britons as well. He even brought the islands of Anglesey and Man under his power.”²⁸ Bede furthers his affections for king Edwin by proclaiming: “It is related that there was so great a peace in Britain, wherever the dominion of king Edwin reached, that, as the proverb still runs, a woman with a new-born child could walk throughout the island from sea to sea and take no harm.”²⁹

Bede says that Edwin reigned for seventeen years as king until the twelfth day of October 633, when he was slain at age forty-eight in the battle at Haethfelth, or Hatfield Chase. King Caedwalla of the Britons and Penda, from the Mercian royal house, attacked and defeated Edwin and his army.³⁰ Bede says that Caedwalla “rebelled against him,” inferring that Edwin had previously attacked or taken control of Caedwalla’s territory.³¹ This attack by Caedwalla, king of Gwynedd, was perhaps a retaliation action taken against Edwin who had previously overtaken him at a place called Priestholm.³² At the battle of Hatfield Chase, Edwin’s son Osfrith was also killed. Edwin’s oldest son, Eadfrith, gave himself up to Penda, at whose court he was killed without regard to the promise of safety he had made to Eadfrith.³³ Following the untimely death of Edwin, Bede says, “At this time there was a great slaughter both of the Church and of the people of Northumbria,” which was brought about by Caedwalla and Penda.³⁴ With the death of Edwin came the end to his confederation, the end of his branch in the royal house and the

²⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ii.16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ii.20.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 80.

³³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.20.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Bede says that Bishop Paulinus took Queen Aethelburh and her daughter Eanflaed as well as Edwin’s son and grandson Uscfrea and Yffi back to Kent. Shortly thereafter Aethelburh sent the boys to Gaul because she feared for their safety. The boys died in Gaul shortly after their arrival (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.20).

destruction of the joint kingdom of Deira and Bernicia. There remained one survivor to the house of Edwin, his daughter Eanflaed, who eventually married Oswald's brother, Oswiu.³⁵

After the death of Edwin, the kingdom of Deira fell to his uncle Aelfric's son Osric.³⁶ The kingdom of Bernicia went to Aethelfrith's oldest son Eanfrith, the rightful successor to the kingdom. Bede claims that prior to Edwin's death, Aethelfrith's sons and many of the other young men from noble families fled in exile to live among either the Scots or the Picts.³⁷ After the defeat and death of Edwin, the exiles were allowed to return to their homelands and to assume their rightful positions as rulers of Bernicia and Deira. With the expulsion of Eanfrith and his brothers to surrounding kingdoms during the years 616-617, came the forging of relationships amongst the Northumbrians and their border neighbors. While in exile among the Picts, Eanfrith married a Pictish princess. This alliance was surely accepted amongst both royal houses or it would have never been allowed to take place, especially since Eanfrith was there as an exile. Molly Miller suggests that this Bernician and Pictish marriage was "from the Pictish point of view, highly prestigious, and must be taken as (among other things) an indication of unfriendliness to Edwin."³⁸ Talorcan was the name of the son that Eanfrith had with the

³⁵ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 81. Bede says that Edwin "gave his infant daughter to Bishop Paulinus to be consecrated to Christ. She was baptized on the holy day of Pentecost, the first of the Northumbrian race to be baptized" (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.9).

³⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 634.

³⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.1.

³⁸ Molly Miller, "Eanfrith's Pictish Son," *Northern History* 14 (1978): 57. Miller also adds that throughout the first half of the seventh century, during the time in which Penda of the Mercian kingdom was bullying the surrounding kingdoms, that if the Picts had chosen to align with the Penda, the kingdom of Northumbria would have been destroyed. Therefore she claims, it was in the interest of Northumbria to remain on good terms with the Picts in order to preserve their kingdom.

Pictish princess. The Pictish Chronicle records Tallorcen, another spelling for Talorcan, as king of the Picts and as the “son of Eanfrith.”³⁹

Shortly after the Osric and Eanfrith assumed control over their kingdoms, Caedwalla, king of the Britons, killed both of them. King Osric of Deira was Caedwalla’s first victim. Osric and his army were surprised and defeated by Caedwalla and his forces. Bede says, “After this he occupied the Northumbrian kingdom for a whole year, not ruling them like a victorious king but ravaging them like a savage tyrant, tearing them to pieces with fearful bloodshed.”⁴⁰ Caedwalla killed Eanfrith and twelve of his companions when they came to discuss peace. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the beginning of Eanfrith’s reign in the year 634. However, the *Chronicle* does not speak of Eanfrith’s death, but it instead says, “also in this year Oswald succeeded to the kingdom of Northumbrians,” which implies the death of Eanfrith.⁴¹

After the death of Eanfrith, Oswald, his brother, raised a small garrison of men to march upon the king of the Britons. Bede says that the clash between Caedwalla and Oswald took place at “Riuus Denisi”, which is called Denisesburn by the English.⁴² Upon the death of Caedwalla, Oswald was accepted as king of both Deira and Bernicia and the kingdoms were joined once again, possibly because no one from the Deiran royal

³⁹ Skene, *Chronicle of the Picts and Scots*, 7. Further attention will be given to Talorcan in the chapter 3, regarding the Pictish royal house in the seventh century.

⁴⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.1.

⁴¹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 634.

⁴² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.1. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 81, says that Caedwalla was killed “near Rowley Burn in the wild country south of Hexham.” It must also be pointed out that Stenton claims that these events, the rule and the death of Caedwalla forever changed the route of British and English history. Caedwalla was the most powerful of British rulers and the Britons were never as strong as they were under his leadership. Caedwalla was also the only British ruler to overthrow an English dynasty.

house sought revenge for the murder of Osric.⁴³ Bede says that Oswald was Edwin's nephew via Acha, Edwin's sister.⁴⁴ This relationship to Edwin would have given Oswald the connection he needed to rule the kingdom of Deira legitimately.

According to Bede, Oswald was a very kind and generous king who "In fact he held under his sway all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain, divided among the speakers of four different languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English."⁴⁵ Bede claims that Oswald was so pious that on Easter day one year he gave the food from his feasting table to a crowd of poor people outside his door. In return for his kind act, Bishop Aidan, who was dining with the king, took Oswald's right hand and said, "May this hand never decay"⁴⁶ Whether or not these pious acts of king Oswald are fact or fiction is irrelevant, but he was responsible for reconciling the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia, therefore bringing them together again as one kingdom.⁴⁷

The same men who were responsible for the death of Edwin killed Oswald also, writes Bede. Oswald was slain when he was thirty-eight by Penda at a place the English call Maserfelth, which is also known as Oswestry, or the tree or cross of Oswald. Bede

⁴³ Bede tells a magnificent miracle story regarding Oswald's victory over Caedwalla through his uncompromising faith in Christianity. When Oswald and his men reached the place of battle he commanded all of his men to kneel and pray to God for victory over the heathen enemy. Oswald's men did as he told them after they had erected a cross before which they could kneel. Bede then claims that through Oswald and the faith his men had in him and God, they were able to gain their much-deserved victory (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.2). Heavenfield is the name Bede records as the place that became a miracle site and a shrine where people came seeking splinters from the cross that gave Oswald and the English victory over the Britons. Bede also says that the monks at the monastery at Hexham make pilgrimage to this sacred place every year on the day prior to the day king Oswald was killed in order to keep vigilance for his soul. This place became so popular with the church and the laity that a church was erected there to as a symbol of the Christian faith. This pilgrimage and vigil occurred on August fourth every year and it came to be known as the vigil of St. Oswald's feast (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.2).

⁴⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

records the date of Oswald's death to be the fifth of August.⁴⁸ With the death of king Oswald once again came the division between the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia. Frank Stenton claims that another great change also occurred upon the death of Oswald, which "left Penda the most formidable king in England."⁴⁹

Upon the death of Oswald, his brother Oswiu, who at the time was approximately thirty-years-old, took the throne in Bernicia in 643.⁵⁰ Shortly after becoming king, Oswiu began his troubled reign warding off attacks from Penda and the neighboring Mercians and he even experienced great trouble within his own family with his son and nephew, Alhfrith and Oethelwald.⁵¹ According to *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* by Eddius Stephanus, Alhfrith actually ruled in tandem with his father Oswiu for a couple of years around 658: "Alhfrith, who was reigning with his father Oswiu..."⁵² If the account of Eddius is accurate, Alhfrith actually had quite a lot of pull within the kingdom, which would insinuate that he perhaps ruled equally with his father instead of under him, especially since he refers to him as king. In the year 660, Alhfrith gave Bishop Wilfrid the monastery at Ripon, which makes him joint ruler of the kingdom for at least two years.⁵³ Eddius continues calling Alhfrith king as late as 663-664, when Alhfrith and his father received a visit from bishop Agilberht.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid., iii.9.

⁴⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 83.

⁵⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.14. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in the year 641, "Oswald, king of the Northumbrians was slain by Penda, the Southumbrian, at *Maserfeld* on 5 August." The Chronicle continues in saying that Oswald was succeeded in death by his brother Oswiu who reigned "two years less than thirty" (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 641).

⁵¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.14.

⁵² Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, translated by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 7.

⁵³ *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

Bede begins the story of Oswiu's reign with a passage describing the new king of Bernicia: "At the beginning of his reign Oswiu had as a partner in the royal dignity a man called Oswine, of the family of King Edwin, a son of Osric who has already been mentioned. He was a man of great piety and religion and ruled the kingdom of Deira for seven years in the greatest prosperity, beloved by all."⁵⁵ Bede gives no explanation for the reason Deira wanted Edwin's kin to have the throne rather than Oswald's successor, but he instead avoids the issue by praising Oswine and his pious nature.⁵⁶ Perhaps it may be inferred that Oswald had subjected the kingdom of Deira in a manner that they would not soon forget. Bede does claim that Oswiu was hostile towards Oswine and, in fact, he even had the king of Deira killed.⁵⁷ Oswiu's nephew Oethelwald took the throne after the death of Oswine. Barbara Yorke suggests that perhaps Oethelwald replaced Oswine as a sub-king to Oswiu, which would lend reason as to why Oswiu did not take control of the kingdom himself.⁵⁸ As for why Oswiu waited until the ninth year of Oswine's reign to murder him is unclear, but lack of reason is a common occurrence in Bede's history.

Regarding Oswiu's treacherous relationship with the Mercians and Penda Bede says:

⁵⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.14. King Oswiu was very careful and patient regarding his uncontrollable lust for power. Perhaps his first tactical move in securing domination over all of Britain was his choice in marriage, Eanflaed, the daughter of Edwin. This marriage would give Oswiu the royal connection to Deira that he needed to ensure that someday he would rule all of Northumbria (*The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, 7).

⁵⁶ It might be that perhaps the people of Deira felt that their previous kings, that is those after Edwin, were not warlike enough in their ruling to satisfy the people's need for security and protection. It seems that Penda, king of the Mercians had been running around for years reeking havoc on his neighbors and why not with no one standing in his way. Penda was also responsible for the death of the previous king, Oswiu's brother, and if Oswiu would not revenge his own brother then he surely would not stand up for the people of his kingdom.

⁵⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.14. Bede says that after the death of Oswine, "Oidilwald, filius Osualdi regis, qui in Derorum partibus regnum habebat" (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.23). Colgrave and Mynors add that Oethelwald perhaps gained the throne of Deira with the help of Penda (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 286).

⁵⁸ Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 78.

About this time King Oswiu was exposed to the savage and insupportable attacks of Penda, so often mentioned before, the king of the Mercians who had killed Oswiu's brother. Oswiu was at last forced to promise him an incalculable and incredible store of royal treasures and gifts as the price of peace, on condition that Penda would return home and cease to devastate, or rather utterly destroy, the kingdoms under his rule. But the heathen king would not accept his offer, for he was determined to destroy and exterminate the whole people from the greatest to the least; so Oswiu turned to God's mercy for help seeing that nothing else could save them from this barbarous and evil enemy.⁵⁹

Bede says that Oswiu's army was small and that the army of Penda was thirty times larger than the Bernician king's.⁶⁰ Oethelwald, Oswiu's own blood was at the head of the enemy army, leading them against his uncle, at least until the time of the battle when he ran and hid in a safe place.⁶¹ The battle took place near Winwaed, which at the time Bede says was overflowing due to heavy rains. King Oswiu and his son Alhfrith were successful against the heathen army and Penda and the Mercians were put down at the battle.⁶² Because the river was swollen from the rain, many more of the enemy was drowned as they were attempting to flee the battle.⁶³

Even though Oswiu had been successful in the fight against Penda at Winwaed, the campaign was not yet over. Bede says that:

⁵⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.24.

⁶⁰ During the time of this battle, when Oswiu and Alhfrith were confronting their enemies, another of Oswiu's sons, Ecgfrith was being held at this time as a hostage at the Mercian court with Queen Cynewis (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.24). Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 79, says that one example of Oswiu's lust for power may be seen in the fact that he risked the life of his son Ecgfrith for a chance to defeat the Mercian king. If Oswiu had not been successful in the defeat of Penda, his son would have probably been murdered at the Mercian court for his father's failure to concede to Penda's power. Therefore, Yorke claims "Oswiu is the one ruler from Bede's gallery of early Northumbrian kings who displays clearly those qualities of ruthlessness which must have been an essential prerequisite of early medieval kingship" (Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 79).

⁶¹ Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 78-79, writes that Oethelwald, after being placed in office, obviously began to act independently of his uncle Oswiu since he sided with Penda in the battle of Winwaed. It is possible that king Oswiu had his nephew removed from his position in Deira because no mention is made of him after the battle.

⁶² The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records in the year 654 that "Oswiu killed Penda at Winwaedfeld, and 30 princes with him, and some of them were kings" (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 654).

⁶³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.24. Upon winning the battle against Penda, Oswiu kept the promise that he made to the Lord, which was his daughter Aelfflaed, who was given to the service of the church. Oswiu also promised to give land for the building of new monasteries. Bede says that Aelfflaed was not even a year old when she was consecrated.

King Oswiu brought the campaign to a close in the district of *Loidis* (Leeds) on 15 November in the thirteenth year of his reign, to the great benefit of both peoples; for he freed his own subjects from the hostile devastations of the heathen people and converted the Mercians and the neighbouring kingdoms to a state of grace in the Christian faith, having destroyed their heathen ruler.⁶⁴

After the final defeat of Penda, Bede claims that “King Oswiu ruled over the Mercian race, as well as the rest of the southern kingdoms, for three years after King Penda was killed. Oswiu also subjected the greater part of the Pictish race to the dominion of the English.”⁶⁵ The fact that the Picts are being “*subiecit*” suggests that the Northumbrian king was ruling them externally from within his own kingdom. Further proof of the extent of king Oswiu’s domination over the Picts may be inferred from Bede’s statement that “Wilfrid was administering the see of the church at York and of all the Northumbrians and Picts, as far as Oswiu’s power extended.”⁶⁶ Therefore, as of the year 655, the Northumbrian kingdom, ruled over by the Bernician line, dominated most of Britain and southern Scotland. However, Northumbria would not see its true climax until the reign of king Ecgfrith.

After Oswiu ruled the Mercians and had them under his control, he turned the southern part of Mercia over to Penda’s son, Peada. Unfortunately for Peada, Bede remarks, he was murdered by the doing of his wife who happened to be the daughter of Oswiu.⁶⁷ After the untimely death of Peada, three Mercian ealdormen rebelled against the rule of king Oswiu and placed Wulfhere, another of Penda’s sons, on the throne.

Bede says that king Wulfhere ruled the kingdom of Mercia for seventeen years.⁶⁸

However, Mercia and Deira were not king Oswiu’s only areas of concern. Bede remarks

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., iv.3.

⁶⁷ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 84.

⁶⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.24.

that Oswiu “overwhelmed and made tributary” on the Picts and Scots who lived in the northern regions of Britain.⁶⁹

As for king Oswiu, he spent the rest of his reign, according to Bede, pursuing a solution to the question of the true dating of Easter, an argument that had been on going between the Irish and the Roman church for years. In 670, king Oswiu became ill and died at age fifty-eight on the fifteenth of February.⁷⁰ Bede claims that Oswiu was so dedicated to the ways of the Roman church that he intended to travel to Rome and live until his death if he ever recovered.⁷¹ The kingdom of Northumbria fell to Oswiu’s son Ecgfrith. King Ecgfrith would continue his father’s legacy of power and domination until the year 685, when the Northumbrians were forced to pay “for having such brave Christian kings, they were a terror to all the barbarian nations.”⁷²

It appears that throughout the seventh century, the Bernician royal line was often ruthless in its desperate attempts to rule England exclusively. Aethelfrith, his sons, and his grandsons all clearly demonstrate their inability to coexist peacefully with other kingdoms. It is their war-like tendencies that would eventually make them the supreme rulers of England for a while, as well as pave the way for their demise.

⁶⁹ Ibid., ii.5.

⁷⁰ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also records the death of Oswiu in the year A.D. 670.

⁷¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.5.

⁷² Ibid., iv.2.

CHAPTER 2

KING ECGFRITH AND THE FALL OF THE KINGDOM OF NORTHUMBRIA

William Ferguson perhaps best sums up the early history of northern Britain in his work on the relationship between England and Scotland:

Little is known of North Britain in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and not until the second half of the sixth century does a clearer picture begin to come into focus. Two British kingdoms then existed in south-west Scotland-Strathclyde, with its capital at Dumbarton and Rheged covering Galloway and Cumberland, both speaking Cumbric, a P-Celtic congener of Old Welsh. These two kingdoms were often at feud, however, and largely because of this in the early seventh century they were being hard-pressed by the Angles of Northumbria, Germanic invaders closely related to the Saxons but speaking a different dialect of Anglo-Saxon. Barred from expanding southwards by the Mercians, the Angles were forced to look to the north and the west, and at its greatest extent the Anglian Kingdom of Bernicia covered south-eastern Scotland as far as the Firth of Forth. Attempts by the Angles to expand beyond the Forth ended in defeat by the Picts at Nechtansmere in 685, and in the next two centuries Anglian power slowly declined as, torn by internal dissensions, Northumbria was latterly shaken by Scandinavian assaults.⁷³

Under the charismatic leadership of king Ecgfrith, the Northumbrian royal house and its rise to power seemed unstoppable. King Ecgfrith was the fortunate one who was most able to enjoy the fruits of his successors labor. When he took the throne, he and the kingdom of Northumbria were in the convenient position of catapulting the English people into a position of domination over all of Britain, including Scotland. However, this comfortable situation at the time of Ecgfrith's ascension to the throne would be short-lived. Through his clever and ruthless battle tactics he would overpower and subjugate the Northumbrian neighbors the Picts, the Britons and the Scots. Ecgfrith was a wise and deliberate warrior king, born from three generations of fierce Anglo-Saxon kings. Just as his predecessors, however, Ecgfrith did not exercise discretion or restraint when it came

⁷³ William Ferguson, *Scotland's Relations With England: A Survey to 1707* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1977), 4.

to the enemy, either realized or potential. Just as his grandfather Aethelfrith had done in his relentless pursuit of Edwin, Ecgfrith would pursue his Pictish neighbors until he became blinded by his desire to exterminate them. Likewise, just as his grandfather before him had done, Ecgfrith would pay with his life for his constant pursuit for total domination.

Although the exact date is unsure, Ecgfrith married his first wife, Aethelthryth, sometime around the year 660. Aethelthryth was the daughter of king Anna, ruler over the kingdom of the East Angles. According to Bede, the marriage to Ecgfrith was her second, for Tondberht, an ealdorman of the kingdom of South Gyrwe, had previously made her a widow. Aethelthryth and Tondberht were not married long when he died, and shortly after his death, she was given in marriage to Ecgfrith.⁷⁴ The marriage between Ecgfrith and Aethelthryth was an interesting arrangement because according to Bede:

Though she lived with him for twelve years she still preserved the glory of perfect virginity. When I asked Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory whether this was true, because certain people doubted it, he told me that he had the most perfect proof of her virginity; in fact Ecgfrith had promised to give him estates and money if he could persuade the queen to consummate their marriage, because he knew that there was none whom she loved more than Wilfrid himself. Nor need we doubt that this which often happened in days gone by, as we learn from trustworthy accounts, could happen in our time too through the help of the Lord, who has promised to be with us even to the end of the age. And the divine miracle whereby her flesh would not corrupt after she was buried was token and proof that she had remained uncorrupted by contact with any man.⁷⁵

This passage is an indication that the marriage between Ecgfrith and Aethelthryth must have been strictly a political arrangement instead of a marriage of the heart, which according to Bede, was not unusual during this time. Eddius, in Chapter 19, also gives

⁷⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.19.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

reference to the piety of Aethelthryth and the nature in which her body was discovered some years after her death.⁷⁶

According to Bede, Aethelthryth pleaded with Ecgfrith for some time to allow her to join a convent, where she could serve Christ. Bishop Wilfrid, a trusted friend of the royal family and trusted counselor of the queen, constantly urged Aethelthryth to remain chaste and untouched by man. Ecgfrith was only a teenager when he married Aethelthryth, so it was not until several years afterwards that he began pressing for consummation of the marriage. The perpetual chastity of his wife created much anxiety for the viral young king and would also prove to be the source of his dislike for Wilfrid. After several years of imploring her, Ecgfrith acceded to the queen's wishes and allowed her to join a monastery in Coldingham, where Ecgfrith's aunt Aebbe was the Abbess. Bishop Wilfrid happily conferred upon Aethelthryth the veil and the habit of a nun around the year 672.⁷⁷ After a year in service to Christ at Coldingham, Aethelthryth was given the appointment of Abbess to Ely, where she erected a monastery.⁷⁸ Aethelthryth died seven years after she received her title of abbess, probably from a tumor on her neck. Bede gives the account of her death according to the doctor who administered to the queen. After her death, her sister Seaxburh, who had once been married to Eorcenberht, king of Kent, succeeded her as abbess at Ely.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, text, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 19. In a note, Colgrave says that Aethelthryth was also known as St. Audrey. According to Colgrave she was also much older than Ecgfrith, although he does not give the age difference. He also suggests that she died of the plague in 679 or 680, which would account for the tumor she had grown previous to her death.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Colgrave, in another note in Chapter 19, suggests it is Wilfrid's involvement in Aethelthryth's desire to become a nun and then his giving of the veil to her that accounts for Ecgfrith's hostility towards Wilfrid later.

⁷⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Wilfrid was one of the most important and powerful men in seventh century Britain. He was a key figure in helping the Christian church, in the Roman tradition, take shape in the seventh century. Wilfrid was the ruler of the Northumbrian church between the years 669-677. While he ruled over the entire spiritual life of Northumbria “He became in these years an outstanding figure in the secular as well as the ecclesiastical life of the North.”⁸⁰ Several of the leaders of nearby monasteries sought his protection and guidance and even made him heir to their religious communities upon their deaths. Through this acquisition of many estates, Wilfrid became increasingly more powerful as well as rich. He also became very popular with the royal families, since his monasteries often served as schools where the young nobles would attend, receiving a proper military education.⁸¹ Therefore, most of the male royal youth of the Northumbrian Kingdom would have been taught and influenced by Wilfrid and his doctrines. At the beginning of king Ecgfrith’s reign, Wilfrid was obviously in good favor with the king since he was given several estates where he could build ecclesiastical houses. Eddius, in Chapter 17, tells of one such building project at Ripon, where Wilfrid built a most impressive church and at the consecration he speaks of his great wealth:

Then St. Wilfrid the bishop stood in front of the altar, and, turning to the people, in the presence of the kings, read out clearly a list of the lands which the kings, for the good of their souls, had previously, and on that very day as well, presented to him, with the agreement and over the signatures of the bishops and all the chief men, and also a list of the consecrated places in various parts which the British clergy had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation. It was truly a gift well pleasing to God that the pious kings had assigned so many lands to our bishop for the service of God; these are the names of the regions: round Ribble and Yeadon and the region of Dent and Catlow and other places. Then, when the sermon was over, the kings started upon a great feast lasting for three days and three nights, rejoicing amid all their people, showing magnanimity towards their enemies and humility towards the

⁸⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 135.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

servants of God.⁸²

This passage not only tells of the vast wealth Wilfrid possessed but, it also gives evidence of Ecgrith's plunder of the Northumbrian neighbors the Britons. A.P. Smyth claims that Yeadon must have lain within the kingdom of Elmet, which fell to the English sometime during Edwin's reign. Ribble, Dent, and Catlow, the three other regions given to Wilfrid, were a part of the British kingdom of Rheged, of which Smyth says; "There is nothing to suggest that these British lands had lain deserted for generations: on the contrary, there is a certain immediacy in Eddius's text which shows us, incidentally, that Anglo-Saxon aggression was directed against British warriors and clergy alike."⁸³ The kingdom of Rheged, therefore, probably remained independent until sometime in the mid-seventh century, during Ecgrith's reign. This notion that Rheged fell under the authority of Ecgrith, Smyth claims, is backed by the fact that Oswiu, Ecgrith's father, married Riemmelth of Rheged. This marriage between the two kingdoms, therefore, "would presuppose that Rheged under Royth, grandson of Urien must have retained some semblance of British autonomy up to the middle of the seventh century."⁸⁴

Eddius mentions Ecgrith's second wife, Iurminburgh, who was "Wilfrid's bitter enemy, and excited her husband to jealousy of his wealth, the number of his monasteries, and the magnificence of his military following."⁸⁵ According to Eddius, Ecgrith's new queen had immense power over the king and persuaded him that something should be done about Wilfrid's colossal empire which he had accrued over the years:

⁸² Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 17.

⁸³ A.P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men A.D. 80-1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁸⁵ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 135.

Forthwith this sorceress shot poisoned arrows of speech from her quiver into the heart of the king, as the wicked Jezebel did when she slew the prophets of the Lord and persecuted Elijah. She eloquently described to him all the temporal glories of St. Wilfrid, his riches, the number of his monasteries, the greatness of his buildings, his countless army of followers arrayed in royal vestments and arms. With such shafts as these the king's heart was wounded. They both sought skillfully to humiliate the holy head of the Church to their own destruction and boldly to defraud him of the gifts which the kings had given him for God's sake.⁸⁶

After Ecgrith had been made aware of Wilfrid's riches and possessions, he called for Archbishop Theodore to come and review the situation. Ecgrith decided that Wilfrid's power and property had grown to in excess, so in turn he divided the single diocese into three, with the help of Theodore, in the year 678. Theodore, abiding by the king's wishes, then chose three new bishops who were not previously from Wilfrid's diocese to oversee the newly made dioceses. Bosa, a monk from the Whitby diocese, was made bishop of Deira, Eata, a prior at Lindisfarne, was made bishop of Bernicia, and the third diocese was established for the seat at Lindsey, which was extremely unstable throughout the seventh century.⁸⁷

Bishop Wilfrid was outraged with the decision of the king and the Archbishop and he sought help from the Apostolic See in Rome.⁸⁸ After a three-year-long journey, Wilfrid returned to Northumbria with the declaration made by a special synod held in Rome. The synod concluded that Wilfrid should have back his bishopric in its entirety exactly as it was before it was taken away from him.⁸⁹ When Wilfrid returned home in 680, he showed the decree by the Apostolic See to Ecgrith and the other people gathered there for his return. The onlookers claimed that the document was a fake and that Wilfrid

⁸⁶ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 24.

⁸⁷ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 135-136.

⁸⁸ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 24.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

had purchased the document while in Rome. King Ecgrith and his Council then had Wilfrid put in prison for nine months. Eddius says that when Ecgrith finally opened and read the document of the Apostolic See he had Wilfrid locked up in solitary confinement and did not allow him any visitors. Then, according to Eddius, Iurminburgh took Wilfrid's reliquary and wore it as her own decoration both at home and while traveling.⁹⁰

Bede's story of the expulsion of Wilfrid from his see by Ecgrith is a bit different from Eddius' account. Bede says that when Wilfrid returned to Britain after his travels to Rome and elsewhere, he was not welcome in his homeland of Northumbria, so he sought refuge in the kingdom of the South Saxons. At this time, Bede says, the South Saxons were still pagans, but it did not take long for Wilfrid to convert them to Christianity. In this story, Bede also interjects a miracle story, claiming that the land of the South Saxons had been without rain for three years prior to the arrival of Wilfrid. After the heathens accepted Christ and were baptized, rain immediately fell upon the land. After this good fortune, the South Saxons loved and revered Wilfrid and the king of the South Saxons, Aethelwealh, gave land to Wilfrid and his followers. This land was called Selsey and upon it Wilfrid and his followers built a monastery where they could administer the faith properly to the South Saxons.⁹¹ It is apparent from both Eddius and Bede that Wilfrid was a well-liked man throughout Britain, with the exception of king Ecgrith and his queen Iurminburgh.

When king Oswiu died in 670, Ecgrith, his son, took the throne and ruled over the kingdom of Northumbria for fifteen years. P.H. Sawyer claims that the relationship between the Northumbrians and the Picts probably began to deteriorate in 662, following

⁹⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.13.

the death of the Pictish king Talorcan, Eanfrith's son. The final collapse of relations between the two kingdoms occurred with the death of Oswiu, when "Ecgrith appears to have behaved in a very highhanded manner towards his father's friends."⁹² Upon his succession to the throne, Ecgrith immediately began his reign of domination over the northern neighbors of the Northumbrians, the Picts.⁹³ Sally Foster claims that Pictland was under the control of the Angles from 653-685, usually through the installment of puppet kings.⁹⁴ Eddius Stephanus, in the following passage, demonstrates just how fierce and powerful king Ecgrith was when he describes his attempt to put down a Pictish revolt:

For in his early years, while the kingdom was still weak, the bestial tribes of the Picts had a fierce contempt for subjection to the Saxon and threatened to throw off from themselves the yoke of slavery; they gathered together innumerable tribes from every nook and corner in the north, and as a swarm of ants in the summer sweeping from their hills heap up a mound to protect their tottering house. When king Ecgrith heard this, lowly as he was among his own people and magnanimous towards his enemies, he forthwith got together a troop of horsemen, for he was no lover of belated operations; and trusting in God like Judas Maccabaeus and assisted by the brave sub-king, Beornhaeth, he attacked with his little band of God's people an enemy host which was vast and moreover concealed. He slew an enormous number of the people, filling two rivers with corpses, so that, marvelous to relate, the slayers, passing over the rivers dry foot, pursued and slew the crowd of fugitives; the tribes were reduced to slavery and remained subject under the yoke of captivity until the time the king was slain.⁹⁵

After the battle, not only was an entire Pictish army destroyed but many of the Pictish aristocracy had also been killed.⁹⁶ This revolt by the Picts would not be the last incident Ecgrith would have to deal with from his northern neighbors. Although there is no

⁹² P.H. Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 33.

⁹³ Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 100, claims that this containment of the Pictish revolt took place around the year 672, in the region between the Avon and the Carron, which at that time would have been in the Manau of the Gododdin.

⁹⁴ Sally Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1996), 37.

⁹⁵ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 19.

⁹⁶ Sally Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, 37.

definite date given for this battle, it occurred, according to Eddius, early in Ecgrith's reign, probably around 672. From this passage, it is clear that Ecgrith's power had moved beyond the Firth of Forth because the Picts were his subjects. The Northumbrians probably forced the Picts into slavery sometime during king Oswiu's reign. Therefore, when Ecgrith became king, the Picts saw their chance to free themselves from the unwanted subjection of their people by the Northumbrians before the new king had time to establish himself. Kirby writes that the Pictish revolt may also be associated with the removal of the king of the Picts, Drest, in 672.⁹⁷ This proposition made by Kirby suggests that perhaps Drest was a puppet king to the Northumbrian kingdom, which would be a sensible reason for wanting him thrown out of office.

The Picts were not the only business Ecgrith had to immediately attend to when he first took the throne. Ecgrith was also left with the legacy of ill will from the Mercian kingdom, a position Oswiu had passed down to his son.⁹⁸ When Penda's son, Wulfhere, was proclaimed king of Mercia in 657, king Oswiu's "overlordship in southern England" was obliterated.⁹⁹ Stenton claims that by 665, Wulfhere's power had reached as far as the middle Thames and he held as his subjects the kings of Essex. Wulfhere, like his father, had a deep hatred for the Northumbrian kingdom, because they were both neighbors and warrior kingdoms, they fought perpetually for nearby land. Eddius records a battle between Ecgrith and Wulfhere, which occurred between the years 673-675:

⁹⁷ Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 100. Further attention will be given to the Pictish kings in the following chapter.

⁹⁸ Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 81, says "Mercia and Northumbria were in direct competition for permanent conquest of smaller kingdoms with which they had a common border, especially the kingdom of Lindsey." This tension between these two kingdoms caused trouble for many years, especially during the seventh century, when both kingdoms vied for ultimate control of southern Britain. In fact, battle against these two kingdoms was so frequent that Yorke says, "One of the commonest causes of death amongst early Northumbrian princes was battle against the Mercians" (Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 82).

⁹⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 84-85.

Now Wulfhere, king of the Mercians, proud of heart and insatiable in spirit, roused all the southern nations against our kingdom, intent not merely on fighting but on compelling them to pay tribute in a slavish spirit. But he was not guided by God. So Ecgfrith, King of Deira and Bernicia, unwavering in spirit and true hearted, on the advice of his counsellors trusted God, like Barak and Deborah, to guard his land and defend the churches of God even as the bishop taught him to do, and with a band of men no greater than theirs attacked a proud enemy, and by the help of God overthrew them with his tiny force. Countless numbers were slain, the king was put to flight and his kingdom laid under tribute, and afterwards, when Wulfhere died through some cause, Ecgfrith ruled in peace over a wider realm.¹⁰⁰

After the defeat of Wulfhere, the Mercian province of Lindsey, just south of Deira, fell to Ecgfrith and Northumbria.¹⁰¹ With Lindsey now a part of Northumbria, king Ecgfrith controlled the larger part of the east coast of Britain. Stenton says “It is possible that for a short time Ecgfrith, like each of his three predecessors, was recognized as overlord in Mercia itself. But his supremacy, if ever admitted, left no impression on Mercian history.”¹⁰² Eddius suggests that the Mercians were made to pay tribute to Ecgfrith and the Northumbrians after the defeat of Wulfhere, which was not an unusual practice.¹⁰³ Within a couple of years following his defeat, Wulfhere died, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the year 675: “In this year Wulfhere, the son of Penda, and Aescwine fought at Biedanheafde; and in the same year Wulfhere dies and Ethelred¹⁰⁴ succeeded to the kingdom.”¹⁰⁵ However, the death of Wulfhere did not mean the end to Ecgfrith’s troubles with Mercia.

It seems that Aethelred, Wulfhere’s successor to the kingdom of Mercia, was successful in regaining the kingdom of Lindsey, which they had lost to Ecgfrith around

¹⁰⁰ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 85.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Future reference to this king’s name will be spelled Aethelred.

¹⁰⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A.D. 675.

674. Bede briefly gives mention of the battle which occurred between Ecgfrith and Aethelred in 679: “In the ninth year of King Ecgfrith’s reign a great battle was fought between him and Aethelred, king of the Mercians, near the river Trent, and Aelfwine, brother of King Ecgfrith, was killed, a young man of about eighteen years of age and much beloved in both kingdoms.”¹⁰⁶ Bede also claims that after the battle, in which Ecgfrith was defeated, Archbishop Theodore restored the peace between the two kings and their kingdoms.¹⁰⁷ However, Frank Stenton tells the story a bit more realistically than Bede’s, he writes more candidly that, “The battle of the Trent proved to be one of the decisive incidents in early English history, for Ecgfrith never again attempted to conquer any part of southern England, and his successors were kept from adventures in the south by new dangers which threatened their northern border.”¹⁰⁸ This meant that now that the southern kingdoms were no longer an immediate issue, Ecgfrith could concentrate his animosity towards his other neighbors the Picts and the Scots.

The *Annals of Ulster* records a battle between the Saxons and the Irish in the year 684: “The Saxons lay waste Mag Breg, and many churches, in the month of June.”¹⁰⁹

Bede gives a grisly account of Ecgfrith’s conquest into Ireland to fight against the Scots:

In the Year of our Lord 684 Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria, sent an army to Ireland under his ealdormen Berht, who wretchedly devastated a harmless race that had always been most friendly to the English, and his hostile bands spared neither churches nor monasteries. The islanders resisted force by force so far as they were able, imploring the merciful aid of God and invoking His vengeance with unceasing imprecations.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.24. Colgrave and Mynors point out that Aelfwine is referred to as king in Eddius’ *Life of Wilfrid* in chapters 17 and 24. They say that Aelfwine was probably “under-king of Deira” (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pg. 400). Bede makes no reference to Ecgfrith’s brother, Aelfwine, being called ‘king’.

¹⁰⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.21.

¹⁰⁸ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 85.

¹⁰⁹ *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 684.

¹¹⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

This is one battle that Ecgfrith fought which it seems Bede does not give his approval. Colgrave and Mynors put forward the notion that Ecgfrith probably attacked the Scots in their homeland in an attempt to quell any possibility of them supporting their people living in Britain, since Ecgfrith was believed to have been the overlord of the Scots in Argyll.¹¹¹ Stenton also follows this line of reasoning: “It is possible that this expedition was intended to intimidate tribes which might have supported the Irish of northern Britain.”¹¹² Alfred Smyth claims that Ecgfrith’s hatred of the Irish was twofold:

The first was that they had given refuge to his estranged and exiled brother, Aldfrith (later king of Northumbria, 685-705), and the second that they had taken in the most dangerous element in the kingdom of Rheged¹¹³ – those dispossessed warriors who made up the elite of the house of Urien.¹¹⁴

Apparently, British war bands from northern Britain had been visiting the eastern coastline of Ireland between the years 682 to 709. Smyth claims that the fact that they were even in Ireland implies that there was “a major political upheaval in northern Britain” during this time, which suggests Ecgfrith’s upheaval of and control over Rheged.¹¹⁵ As for Aldfrith, Ecgfrith’s half brother, his mother was Fina,¹¹⁶ an Irish princess from the northern Ui Neill area. Aldfrith was called *Flann Fina* by the Irish,

¹¹¹ Ibid., iv.25-26, note 3. Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 86, says that Irish in Argyll were subjected for the most part of the seventh century to their northern neighbors. Therefore, their importance in history at this time remains unimportant, except for the fact that they possessed Iona. The importance of Iona, and therefore the Irish in Argyll, was the fact that “the whole of northern Britain was subject ecclesiastically to this great church.” Aside from being the starting point for Columba, who was the evangelical minister to the Picts in the north, its monastery offered Oswald a safe haven from his enemy Edwin. 86.

¹¹² Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 88.

¹¹³ H.M. Chadwick, *Early Scotland: The Picts the Scots and the Welsh of Southern Scotland* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1949), 144, says that Rheged is associated with Dun Ragit in Galloway, which is situated between Glenluce and Stranraer. He also claims that poems tell of Urien possessing other territories in Yorkshire and other places.

¹¹⁴ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ John Marsden, *Northanhymbre Saga: The History of the Anglo-Saxon Kings of Northumbria* (Felinfach: Llanerch, 1995), 191-92. Fina, the Irish princess and the mother of Aldfrith, was descended from the royal bloodlines of Niall the Nine Hostager. Colman Rimidh was her father’s name and he was from a northern clan of the Ui Neill known as the *Cenel Eogain*. Colman ruled as high-king in tandem with Aed Slaine, king of the southern Ui Neill.

which means ‘blood of the wine’. At the time Ecgrith invaded the Irish, Aldfrith was either living on Iona or somewhere within Ireland itself.¹¹⁷ Regardless of Ecgrith’s motives for attacking the Irish in Ireland, the fact remains that Aldfrith was, illegitimate or not, the rightful successor to the kingdom of Northumbria. Therefore, in the eyes of Ecgrith, Aldfrith stood as a threat to his kingdom.

It is, perhaps, Ecgrith’s paranoid tendencies that cause him to return to Pictland in an attempt to reassert his control over them. Although Peter Marren offers no factual reason for Ecgrith’s return to Pictland, he puts forth the notion that: “How and why he was provoked into making a second punitive expedition into the land of the Picts is uncertain. There had, presumably, been some form of rebellion against Northumbria on a scale which required the king’s personal intervention.”¹¹⁸ However, this time his desire for total domination would cost him his life. Bede believes that death was the punishment Ecgrith received for his unnecessary attack on the Irish:

Indeed the very next year the king rashly took an army to ravage the kingdom of the Picts, against the urgent advice of his friends and particularly of Cuthbert,¹¹⁹ of blessed memory, who had recently been made bishop. The enemy feigned flight and lured the king into some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains; there he was killed with the greater part of the forces he had taken with him, on 20 May, in the fortieth year of his age and the fifteenth of his reign. As I have said, his friends urged him not to undertake this campaign; but in the previous year he had refused to listen to the holy father Egbert, who had urged him not to attack the Irish who had done him no harm; and the punishment for his sin was that he would not now listen to those who sought to save him from his own destruction.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

¹¹⁸ Peter Marren, *Grampian Battlefields* (Scotland: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), 23.

¹¹⁹ Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 45. According to Blair, Cuthbert was born around the year 634, the exact place of his birth is not certain but he apparently spent some part of his youth in an English village near Leader Water. Later in his life he took work as a shepherd near the hills of Leader Water. Around the year 651 he joined a monastery at Melrose, which was operated at that time by an English abbot, where he was educated by Irish monks.

¹²⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

The prophecy of Ecgfrith's death is recorded in the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert* in Chapter 6. The story goes that Abbess Aelfflaed, Ecgfrith's sister, called for Cuthbert to come and meet with her at Coquet Island. After much pageantry, Aelfflaed finally asked Cuthbert to tell her how long her brother Ecgfrith was going to live. Cuthbert, after indirectly addressing the issue with several pithy philosophical statements, answered the abbess that the king would die within the year. When she had accepted this news, she implored Cuthbert to tell her who Ecgfrith's heir would be. Cuthbert then wearily responded that the heir to the Northumbrian throne would be his brother, who lived on an island at sea. Aelfflaed immediately knew that this meant Aldfrith would be Ecgfrith's successor, because he was living on Iona.¹²¹

The anonymous monk also tells a story about when Cuthbert went to Carlisle to visit the queen while the deadly battle against the Picts was taking place in the year 685:

At the time when King Ecgfrith was ravaging and laying waste the kingdom of the Picts, though finally in accordance with the predestined judgement of God he was to be overcome and slain, our holy bishop went to the city of Carlisle to visit the queen who was awaiting there the issue of events. On the Saturday, as the priests and deacons declare of whom many still survive, at the ninth hour they were looking at the city wall and the well formerly built in a wonderful manner by the Romans, as Waga the reeve of the city, who was conducting them, explained. The bishop meanwhile stood leaning on his supporting staff, with his head inclined towards the ground and then he lifted up his eyes heavenwards again with a sigh and said: "Oh! oh! oh! I think that the war is over and that the judgement has been given against our people in the battle."¹²²

Bede's description is almost verbatim to that of the *Anonymous* account of Cuthbert's disturbance at the exact moment of Ecgfrith's death. However, in Chapter 27 of Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, he tells that Cuthbert was "suddenly troubled in spirit" while he was viewing a Roman fountain. When Cuthbert announced solemnly that the battle was over,

¹²¹ *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, text, translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), ch. 8.

¹²² *Ibid.*

a nearby priest asked him how he knew for sure. Cuthbert then asked the priest if he did not notice the change in the weather. Cuthbert then went to speak with the queen and he urged her to go back to the royal city because the king may already be dead and her presence there would surely be required. Cuthbert told the queen that he would follow her home after he conducted some church business in a nearby town the next day.¹²³

For whatever reason Ecgfrith decided to attack the Picts again, it seems that he was determined to control the valuable real estate between the Forth and the Mounth. Whoever controlled this land had the capability to control all of what would later be known as Scotland. This land was also good for agricultural purposes, not to mention the possibility of slave labor for the Northumbrians. However, unfortunately for Ecgfrith he underestimated the dangers he faced in those mountains belonging to the Picts.¹²⁴ Peter Marren writes; “There is no evidence that he maintained garrisoned forts and lines of communication, and he seems to have relied mainly on terror to assert his overlordship.”¹²⁵ Although his father was an exile to Pictland in his youth, Ecgfrith probably had never traveled so far north before the battle. However, he probably had some notion about what to expect from the lay of the land and its rivers, as well as the remains of the Roman roads and forts set into the hills.¹²⁶ Marren even suggests that perhaps Ecgfrith intended to use the same strategy he had used in 672 to defeat the Picts the first time.

Regardless of Ecgfrith’s reason for reentering Pictland himself at the behest of his trusted friends, the fact remains that he died on the twentieth of May in the year 685.

¹²³ Bede, *Life of St. Cuthbert*, Text, Translation and notes by Bertram Colgrave (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), ch. 27.

¹²⁴ Marren, *Grampian Battlefields*, 23.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

This battle at Dunnichen Moss, commonly known as Nechtansmere, would prove to be a decisive battle in the future of Northumbria. Bede writes that; “From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ‘ebb and fall away’.”¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

CHAPTER 3

THE PICTISH ROYAL LINE IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY

One of the most interesting things about the history of the Pictish nation is their origin story. Bede writes of how the Picts came to be inhabitants of the British Isles, claiming that they came originally from Scythia. Setting out in their warships from this distant land, the Picts were steered on by a violent wind that guided them to the northernmost coast of Britain. After sailing around the island of Britain, the Picts landed on the northernmost coast of Ireland. Upon first meeting the Irish, the Picts requested permission to stay in Ireland where their ships had landed. Unfortunately, the Irish refused the request of the Picts claiming that their island was not large enough for both groups of people. However, they did offer the Picts an alternative; the Irish told of another island to the east of theirs, which was easily viewed on days when the weather permitted distant visibility. The Irish then offered to aide the Picts if anyone should resist their settlement of the nearby island. The Picts crossed the small distance of ocean separating the two islands and they came to occupy the northern half of the island, which is now known as Scotland. The Britons, Bede claims, already occupied the southern region of Britain. Therefore, with their new land secured, the Picts inquired of their Irish neighbors for women, because they had brought none with them on their journey. The Irish agreed and gave the Picts women so that they could make families and a future for their people in their new home. However, the Irish had one stipulation regarding the newcomers request for women, if the Picts should ever have trouble in deciding who should rule their kingdom then the ruler should be chosen from the female royal line,

instead of the male line.¹²⁸ Thus is the origin of how the Picts came to inhabit northern Britain according to Bede.

Although the origin story of how the Picts came to inhabit Britain is not the primary goal of this study, it does perhaps indicate that the Picts had some sort of friendly relationship with their Irish neighbors. The story told by Bede is also perhaps the reason for the belief that the Picts practiced matrilineal succession, which is widely accepted among some scholars and hotly debated among others. The succession debate is simply one argument in a complex history of a group of people whose history Frank Stenton claims is “utterly obscure.”¹²⁹ The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the Pictish royal house in the seventh century, culminating with the Pictish king, Bridei, and his defeat of the Northumbrians at Dunnichen Moss in 685. Before the discussion is undertaken, it must be pointed out that the history of the Picts is extremely fragmentary. The contemporary information written about the Picts relies exclusively upon the writings of people from outside the Pictish kingdom, because apparently the Picts kept no written records. Sally Foster says that there is only one source that can tentatively be described as Pictish, a king-list, which records the Pictish kings and the lengths of their reign.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, i.1. Bede says in the same chapter that it was not uncommon, even in his time, for the king to be chosen from the female side of the family instead of the male. A.P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland, A.D. 80-1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 60-61, Smyth says, “Bede clearly got his legend from an Irish source.” One major discrepancy between Bede’s version and the Irish sources, according to Smyth, is that Bede says the king should be chosen from the female line if there was a dispute about the rightful heir. The Irish sources simply say that matrilineal succession was the agreement between the Picts and the Irish and that there was no special circumstances necessary for choosing from the female line. Smyth further concludes that this story of the origin of the Picts is not an origin story at all but a propaganda story put out by the Irish in an attempt to secure their rights to Pictish settlement in Scotland and also to have claim to the Pictish throne. For another account of what Bede’s source is for this origin story see Alex Woolf, “Pictish Matriliney Reconsidered,” *Innes Review* 49 (1998), 147-67.

¹²⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 87.

¹³⁰ Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, 19-20. Foster describes the kings-list as such: “The list contains the names of more than sixty kings of whom about thirty may be regarded as historical, in the sense that they

Because contemporary sources are so scant, it is difficult to gain a full understanding of the Picts. However, it is possible to gain a glimpse of the political climate during the seventh century through English sources, like Bede and Eddius. Although, one must keep in mind that these are generally ecclesiastical and hagiographical, therefore their true purpose usually leans toward specific religious purposes rather than the recording of actual events for the purpose of history. Often, Bede and Eddius forgo any side of the story that does not benefit the English nation or the Church.

The exact political structure of Pictland will probably never be known. However, one must assume that their structure did not differ too much from their neighbors. Sally Foster says that; “The early historic period is characterized throughout the British Isles by the emergence of warlike, heroic kings who ruled over defined territories (even though we may not now recognize their precise boundaries).”¹³¹ As for specific kingdom boundaries, the most we can hope for comes from Bede, for he speaks of the kingdom of Pictland in terms of a northern and southern kingdom. When Bede gives the story of the coming of Columba to Britain he says that:

he came to Britain to preach the word of God to the kingdoms of the northern Picts which are separated from the southern part of their land by steep and rugged mountains. The southern Picts who live on this side of the mountains had, so it is said, long ago given up the errors of idolatry and received the true faith through the preaching of the Word by that reverend and holy man Bishop Ninian.¹³²

Foster believes that the transformation of Pictland from small individually controlled kingdoms to the “centralization of authority over far-flung territories” was a slow process

are known to us from other sources. The prehistoric part of the list covering the period between about the third and mid-sixth centuries is likely to have been added towards the end of the ninth century.”

¹³¹ Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, 33.

¹³² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.4.

that took place throughout the fifth to the ninth centuries.¹³³ However, by the close of the seventh century, “a Pictish political entity was recognized by neighboring countries.”¹³⁴

The Pictish political situation beginning in the mid-seventh century is an interesting one characterized by kings who may or may not have been strictly of Pictish descent. Talorcan, who is identified as the son of Eanfrith, son of Aethelfrith, once king of Bernicia, is the first king of the Picts who came from outside of the province of Pictland. While Eanfrith was living as an exile among the Picts, during the reign of Edwin, he apparently had a relationship with a Pictish princess, which produced Talorcan. M.O Anderson writes that a daughter was also born from this Pictish/Northumbrian marriage. Anderson states that the children were born sometime shortly after the year 616.¹³⁵ Apparently, Aethelfrith had arranged a royal marriage between the Pictish princess and his son Eanfrith, producing a formal, perhaps political, relationship between the Picts and their southern neighbors the Northumbrians.¹³⁶ The princess Eanfrith married was sister to the king of the Picts Gartnait, son of Uuid, who reigned from 637-641.¹³⁷ Anderson suggests that the princess had three brothers, all children of Uuid, who ruled one after the other from the year 631 until the year 653 when the last brother died. Therefore, Anderson points out that when the brothers were gone, their sister’s child Talorcan, son of Eanfrith, was chosen to rule the Pictish kingdom.¹³⁸

¹³³ Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, 33.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁵ M.O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 172.

¹³⁶ Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England*, 32.

¹³⁷ Marsden, *Northanhymbre Saga*, 61.

¹³⁸ Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, 172.

It is unclear whether or not Talorcan was chosen in 653 to rule the kingdom of the Picts through the lineage of his mother, therefore, lending evidence to the matrilineal succession practiced by the Picts, or if he was simply chosen because he was the nephew to the three previous kings. Another reason for the succession of Talorcan to the Pictish throne could have been that he was the only remaining male heir in the royal house of Uuid. Molly Miller suggests that Talorcan may have indeed been the rightful heir to the Pictish throne, succeeding Talorc IV.¹³⁹ Talorc IV was a son of Uuid and king of the Picts from 641-653.¹⁴⁰ Miller says that the name Talorcan is a diminutive of its proper form spelled Talorc. Therefore, claims Miller, Talorcan was “designated ‘young Talorc’ to distinguish him from Talorc IV during that king’s lifetime: so he may have been the recognized heir.”¹⁴¹ Alex Woolf agrees with Miller’s statement, but he adds that Talorcan probably grew up in Pictland and because his father was a foreigner, Talorcan would have been a “*glasfhine*.”¹⁴² According to Woolf, as *glasfhine* is an Irish term meaning literally “grey kin” and defined as a child born of a foreign parent to a native parent. With this type of relationship in mind, Woolf believes that Talorcan may “have been entitled to the rights of his mother’s partilineage.”¹⁴³

A.P. Smyth says of the reign of Talorcan that: “Unfortunately the circumstances surrounding the reign of this king are so special that his rule in Pictland cannot be used to prove the matrilinear thesis.”¹⁴⁴ He says that there is every reason to believe, based on the factual evidence that Talorcan was chosen to rule Pictland by his uncle Oswiu,

¹³⁹ Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” 51.

¹⁴⁰ Woolf, “Pictish Matriliney Reconsidered,” 159.

¹⁴¹ Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” 51.

¹⁴² Woolf, “Pictish Matriliney Reconsidered,” 159.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 61.

therefore, making him a Northumbrian puppet king. Therefore, Smyth concludes that, “Talorgen ruled, not by virtue of matrilinear claims as such, but by virtue of his standing as the son of Oswiu’s brother.”¹⁴⁵ Oswiu, king of the Northumbrians, evidently held some part of southern Pictland under his sway during his reign because according to Bede, in the year 669, Wilfrid was overseeing the Northumbrians as well as the Picts.¹⁴⁶ The fact that Oswiu was sending a bishop to administer to the Picts indicates that he had some claim to part of their province, otherwise he would have had no interest in the salvation of his neighbors. Oswiu would probably not have wasted the money on the Picts, having English clerics administer the faith to them, if he were not receiving some sort of profit from them, otherwise known as tribute. With this in mind, Smyth argues that it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Talorcan was simply a faction in Oswiu’s plan to expand the kingdom of Northumbria into southern Pictland.¹⁴⁷

The accession to the Pictish throne of Talorcan in 653, seems to have brought the Northumbrians and the southern Picts closer together than they had been before, which lends credence to Smyth’s theory that Talorcan was installed as a puppet king by Oswiu. With the Northumbrians southern threat, the Mercians, no longer an issue, Oswiu was free to “exert great influence on Talorcan’s ‘election’, and would be able to commission panegyrists and poets, jewelers, weavers, and armourers, to present Talorcan and his household (and himself as the head of Talorcan’s paternal kindred) in the most magnificent possible way.”¹⁴⁸ However, the good tidings that existed between the two kingdoms were short lived. Some scholars hypothesize that it is the death of Talorcan in

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.3.

¹⁴⁷ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 62.

¹⁴⁸ Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” 63.

657 that initiated the deterioration of the relationship between Northumbria and the Picts.¹⁴⁹ Both Smyth and Kirby agree that after the death of Talorcan, Oswiu may have launched an attack on the Picts and ruled the Pictish kingdom interregnum between the years 665-6.¹⁵⁰ During this time of possible interregnum, a successor to the Pictish throne emerged, whose name was Drest. Drest reigned over Pictland for a few years until the Picts threw him out of office.¹⁵¹ The *Annals of Ulster* records that the “expulsion of Drost from the kingship” of the Picts occurred in the year 672.¹⁵² The expulsion of Drest by his own people indicates that he was probably also a puppet king to Oswiu, since the Picts waited until Oswiu died to expel him. Molly Miller claims that a clue to the reason behind the expulsion of Drest from the kingdom of the Picts is found in the *Annals of Ulster* under the year 664.¹⁵³ The *Annals of Ulster* records that “the battle of Luith Feirn,” which is in Fortrenn, took place in 664.¹⁵⁴ Miller says that Luith Feirn has yet to be identified, “but Fortriu was one of the most important of the Pictish provinces (comprising the later areas of Strathearn and Menteith), bordering Dalriada on the west, Strathclyde on the south, and (by now) Northumbria on the south-east.”¹⁵⁵ Miller points out that the Picts themselves would have definitely comprised one-half of the faction fighting the battle, but whether or not other Picts represented the other faction or some neighboring group of people is unknown.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, the expulsion of Drest definitely

¹⁴⁹ Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 62. See also Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 99.

¹⁵¹ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 62.

¹⁵² *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 672. Peter Hunter Blair, “The Bernicians and Their Northern Frontier,” in *Studies in Early British History*, by H.M. Chadwick, Nora K. Chadwick, Kenneth Jackson, Rachel Bromwich, Peter Hunter Blair and Owen Chadwick (London: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 169, Blair gives a brief but interesting account of the expulsion of Drest from the kingdom of Pictland.

¹⁵³ Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” 58.

¹⁵⁴ *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 664.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, “Eanfrith’s Pictish Son,” 58.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

marks a further decline in the friendship between the Picts and the Northumbrians, but it may also represent some sort of internal division amongst the Picts themselves. Sawyer claims that the waning friendship was destroyed altogether after the death of Oswiu in 670, when his son Ecgfrith took the Northumbrian throne.¹⁵⁷

Any other information regarding the life and reign of Talorcan is fragmentary and is usually found in the Irish annals. For instance, we know from the *Annals of Tighernach* that he fought with the Scots of Dalriada in the year 654: “The battle of Strath Ethart by Talartach, the son of Anfrait, king of the Cruithne, in which Duncan, the son of Conan, and Congal, the son of Ronan, were slain.”¹⁵⁸ John Bannerman believes that Srath Ethairt had to be located somewhere within Scotland because Talorcan was the king of the Picts at that time.¹⁵⁹ If Bannerman’s assumption is correct and the battle was fought on Pictish soil, then perhaps it was the Scots who were the aggressors, however, the fact that Talorcan and the Picts defeated the Scots is all that will ever be known of the event. There is no information regarding the reason the battle occurred nor the implications the outcome of the battle had on either the Picts or the Scots. Because Talorcan only ruled for four years, it is possible that this battle against the Scots is the only major campaign he waged. The *Annals of Tighernach* records “The death of Tolarcan, son of Ainfrith, King of the Picts,” in the year 657.¹⁶⁰ The cause of the death of Talorcan is not recorded anywhere, therefore we will never know if it was an untimely departure or if it occurred from natural causes.

¹⁵⁷ Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England*, 32.

¹⁵⁸ Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts and the Scots*, 71. This quote from the Annals of Tigernach was taken from an excerpt of the Annals in Skene’s book previously mentioned.

¹⁵⁹ Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, 103.

¹⁶⁰ Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts and the Scots*, 71.

Talorcan's sister, whose name is lost, had a daughter with the lord of Dunnichen when she was about eighteen years of age.¹⁶¹ Anderson points out that this does not mean that he was the king of Circhenn, but he was definitely of high social status within the Pictish community.¹⁶² The daughter of Talorcan's sister, or rather his niece, married Bile when she came of age. Bile, also spelled Beli, later became king of the Strathclyde Britons, ruling at the place known as Dumbarton. Talorcan's niece and the king of Dumbarton had two children, a boy and a girl. The son was named Bridei, also spelled Brude, who later became king of the Picts. Upon the death of his great-uncle Talorgen in 657, Bridei would have presumably still have been very young; therefore, he would probably not have known anything of the political climate at that time. Anderson writes that at some point, Talorcan's sister remarried a man by the name of Donuel, who might have possibly been the "Lord of Dunnichen," but not likely.¹⁶³ Donuel, Anderson proposes, could have also been the king of the Irish of Dal Riata, known as Domnall Brecc. Talorcan's sister and Donuel had three children, two boys and a girl. Gartnait and Drest were the names of their male offspring and the two ruled as king over the Picts after the death of their uncle Talorcan, Gartnait being the first to take the throne in 657.¹⁶⁴ Kirby writes that if the father of Gartnait and Drest "could be securely identified as Domnall Brecc, formerly king of Dal Riata, Gartnait and Drest could perhaps be viewed as the beneficiaries of an alliance between the Scots and the northern Angles against the Picts; but Donuel's identification with Domnall Brecc is not certain."¹⁶⁵ There is, however, one thing that these three kings had in common writes Anderson, and that is

¹⁶¹ Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, 172.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 99.

that they “were apparently obliged to acknowledge the overlordship of their kinsman Oswiu, Eanfrith’s younger brother and king of Northumbria, to whom they probably paid tribute.”¹⁶⁶

Upon the expulsion of Drest from the throne in Pictland, Bridei mac Bile succeeded to the throne as king of the Picts. Bridei is the second Pictish king whose father appears to have been a foreigner.¹⁶⁷ Bridei, also called Brude, is called “king of Foirtriu,” upon his death recorded in *The Annals of Ulster* in the year 692.¹⁶⁸ M.O. Anderson writes that it is possible that the phrase ‘king of Fortrenn’ may be taken as the king of the Picts, meaning all of the Picts, but she says, “I think this very doubtful.”¹⁶⁹ A.P. Smyth claims that there is no evidence that Bridei had a Pictish mother.¹⁷⁰ Smyth says Bridei was a cousin to Ecgrith, king of the Northumbrians, probably through Talorcan’s mother, who is definitely Pictish.¹⁷¹ Smyth also claims that it is possible that Bridei and Ecgrith were related through Oswiu, who married a woman from the British dynasty of Rheged named Riemmelth, whose father was a chieftain named Royth. Another suggestion by Smyth is that Aethelfrith, Ecgrith’s grandfather, may have been married to a woman from the Strathclyde dynasty, therefore linking Ecgrith and Bridei.¹⁷² The marriage of Oswiu to the British chieftain’s daughter is recorded in Nennius’ *British History*, under the northern history section where he writes: “Oswy had two wives, one of whom was called Rieinmellt, daughter of Royth, son of Rhun.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, 172.

¹⁶⁷ Woolf, “Pictish Matriliney Reconsidered,” 159.

¹⁶⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 692.

¹⁶⁹ Anderson, *Kings and Kinship in Early Scotland*, 173.

¹⁷⁰ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 63.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, 57.

Recorded also in his genealogy of the Northumbrians, Nennius says that Ecgfrith and Bridei were cousins; however, he does not say how they are related.¹⁷⁴

Smyth says that since Bridei's authority lies "in the fact that he was the son of Bili Neithons's son, king of the Strathclyde Britons, and that his brother, Owen (Eugein), was that powerful Strathclyde king who slew Domnall Brecc, king of Scots Dal Riata, in the battle of Strathcarron about 642."¹⁷⁵ This battle was a critical factor in the decline of the power of the Scots whom in the time of the king Aedan mac Gabhrain, ruling the Scots in the late sixth century, were a powerful force to contend with. Stenton says; "The Irish of Argyll had never found another chief like Aedan. In the seventh century they were generally subject to one or other of the stronger northern peoples, and their importance in the history of the time rests on their possession of the sanctuary of Iona."¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Smyth says, after the battle of Strathcarron, the Scots were no longer primary competition for the Picts and the Northumbrians in the race to dominate northern Britain.¹⁷⁷ Owen's defeat of the Scots hampered Dal Riata's expansion for some time, but the outcome of the battle for the Strathclyde Britons was a positive one that helped them become, in the first half of the seventh century, "the premier kingdom in the north, since Pictland was falling more and more under the influence of Northumbria."¹⁷⁸ However, even the powerful Britons of Strathclyde could not defend themselves against the seemingly invincible Angles to the south. According to Stenton, the Britons shared a fate no different from that of the neighbors the Scots and the Picts, who at one time they could have possibly dominated: "There can be no doubt that Oswiu and Ecgfrith annexed much Pictish

¹⁷⁴ Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, 57.

¹⁷⁵ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 63. Smyth says that Owen took the throne around 645.

¹⁷⁶ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 86.

¹⁷⁷ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 63.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

territory to the Northumbrian kingdom, and that Ecgrith in his later years was recognized as overlord by the Irish of Argyll and the Britons of Strathclyde.”¹⁷⁹

Bridei’s rise to power coincides with two main events in Pictish history in the year 672: the expulsion of the Pictish king Drest and the defeat of the Picts by Ecgrith.¹⁸⁰ The battle waged on the Picts by king Ecgrith is recorded in Chapter 19 of Eddius Stephanus’ *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* and is talked about extensively in Chapter 2 of this paper.¹⁸¹ This defeat by Ecgrith, claims Smyth, surely left the Picts in a very dangerous situation, being without a leader or significant reinforcements.¹⁸² Therefore, the kingdom of the Picts was left vulnerable to the powerful Britons of Strathclyde and the more powerful Northumbrians until Bridei took the throne. Although the Pictish kingdom was in a weakened state when Bridei took the throne, it appears that he wasted no time asserting his control over southern Pictland. The *Annals of Ulster* for example record that in the year 682 “The Orkneys were destroyed by Bruide.”¹⁸³ M.O. Anderson implies that if Bridei was responsible for the takeover of Dunnottar in the year 680, which would have been an assertion of power over the area known as Circhenn.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps Bridei’s most awesome display of power came in the year 685 when he defeated the Northumbrians at the Battle of Nechtansmere.

King Bridei would be the man responsible for freeing his people from the shackles of the Angles, but he was also the man who freed his neighbors the Britons and the Scots. The decisive blow to the Angles was dealt on Pictish soil, by king Bridei and

¹⁷⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 87.

¹⁸⁰ Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 63.

¹⁸¹ Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 19.

¹⁸² Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 63.

¹⁸³ *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 682.

¹⁸⁴ Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, 174.

his people in the year 685. The defeat king Ecgfrith and the Northumbrians suffered at Dunnichen Moss was believed by Bede to have been “punishment for his sin,” that is repercussion for his attack on the Irish “who had done him no harm” the year before.¹⁸⁵ The death of Ecgfrith was liberating for all the people of the north and it was the underdog kingdom of the Picts who was responsible for the glorious victory. Bede records the outcome of the battle in a rather dramatic tone:

From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ‘ebb and fall away’. For the Picts recovered their own land which the English had formerly held, while the Irish who lived in Britain and some part of the British nation recovered their independence, which they have now enjoyed for about forty-six years. Many of the English were either slain by the sword or enslaved or escaped by flight from the Pictish territory...¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE OF DUNNICHEN

To the modern observer, the site of the Battle of Dunnichen, also called the Battle of Nechtansmere, and referred to, as “the best documented event in the history of the Picts,”¹⁸⁷ appears to be a working farmstead. Although the site of the battle remains uncertain, historians today commonly agree that it took place in the modern town of Dunnichen, which is just outside Forfar, near the A94. Dunnichen is a small village approximately ten miles from the east shores of Scotland. The only indication that anything significant in the history of Scotland ever happen there is simply written on a tall stone memorial that reads: “To commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the Battle of Nechtansmere 20 May 685 AD when the Picts, under king Brudei decisively defeated the Northumbrians under king Ecgfrith.”¹⁸⁸ The stone is placed outside the walls of the church at Dunnichen and overlooks the proposed site of the battle.

I actually drove past the monument at Dunnichen because it blended in perfectly to the scenery. I parked in the church parking lot where fortunately, church had just let out and there were people standing around talking. I approached one of the last members leaving the church and asked her where Dunnichen was and if she was familiar with the battle site. “You are here,” she said, this is the site, and over there is the monument. She asked what my interest was and when I told her she said she was just learning about the Picts herself, because she is a grade school teacher and was currently teaching the students about the early inhabitants of Scotland. I knew that the church of Aberlemno

¹⁸⁷ Isabel Henderson, *The Picts* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 56.

¹⁸⁸ The inscription was recorded from the stone at Dunnichen by the author.

was near Dunnichen so I asked her if she could point me in the right direction. There is a Pictish stone at Aberlemno that depicts a battle, possibly the Battle of Dunnichen.¹⁸⁹ The teacher then gave me directions to the church, a short-cut she called it. When I asked the teacher if she had seen the stone I was shocked that she said no. I thought that it was odd that someone who was required to teach about the Picts, and who lived so close to the battle site and the stone had never been there. Because she knew an alternative route to the church I figured that she surely must have been passed the church before.

After the Dunnichen church members had cleared the parking lot I walked over to the monument erected on behalf of the Battle of Dunnichen. As I stood outside in the rain, reading the inscription on the stone, I began to wonder, why is such an important event so humbly commemorated, both in stone and by its people? Then it occurred to me that perhaps people do not realize how important the Battle of Nechtansmere really was. It may be that if Bridei had not stopped the expansion of the Northumbrians, Scotland may have never existed. The history of the Picts would have become English history and the Pictish identity, that would later make Scotland, would be defunct. Why is king Bridei not a household name like Robert Burns, or any other Scottish celebrity? Could it be the fact that the Scottish countryside is dotted with these obscure Pictish stones and they are so familiar to its inhabitants that they are invisible? Or do more people than not share F.T. Wainwright's sentiment regarding the subject of the Battle of Dunnichen:

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of the battle. It is traditionally regarded as the turning-point in Northumbrian fortunes, as marking the transference of political supremacy in the north from the Northumbrian to the Pictish kings, and as scoring across History the decision that what is now Scotland should be essentially a Pictish not an English kingdom. To believe this is to ignore later

¹⁸⁹ For a complete discussion of the Aberlemno stone, as it is commonly referred to, see: Graeme Cruickshank, "The Battle of Dunnichen and the Aberlemno Battle-Scene," in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era*, ed. E.J. Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald (Great Britain: Tuckwell Press, 2000): 69-87.

history and to confuse cause with effect. To say that the north would have become an Anglian province if Ecgfrith had won the Battle of Nechtansmere is less accurate than to say that the north might have become part of the Northumbrian kingdom if Ecgfrith and the Northumbrians had had sufficient strength to win the Battle of Nechtansmere.¹⁹⁰

I think that the Battle of Nechtansmere is important because it marked the turning point in the history of the Picts and even if it did not mark the end of the kingdom of Northumbria, it definitely dealt a blow to their plan of total domination over their northern neighbors. Not only is this possibly the best documented event in the history of the Picts, but it also allowed them to overthrow the Northumbrian rule and the dark shadow it cast over all northern peoples, the Scots and Britons included.

Although the battle is mentioned in several sources, none give extensive details. However, almost all of the sources give the date of the battle, which is Saturday, the 20th of May 685. The Irish chronicle, *The Annals of Ulster*, records this about the battle in the year 685: “The battle of Dun Nechtain was fought on Saturday, May 20th, and Egfrid son of Oswy, king of the Saxons, who had completed the 15th year of his reign, was slain therein with a great body of his soldiers.”¹⁹¹ The *Annals of Tigernach* also record the battle between Bridei and Ecgfrith in the year 685: “The battle of Dunnichen took place on the twentieth day of the month of May, on Saturday; and there Ecgfrith, Oswiu’s son, king of the Saxons, was killed (after completing the fifteenth year of his reign), with a great company of his soldiers, by Brude, son of Bile, the king of Fortriu.”¹⁹² F.T.

Wainwright says that it is from these and other Irish chronicles that we get “the name that

¹⁹⁰ F.T. Wainwright, “Nechtansmere,” *Antiquity* 22 (1948), 97. It must be pointed out that F.T. Wainwright, after publishing the afore mentioned article, went on to be the editor of perhaps the most groundbreaking study of the Picts to ever be published regarding the Picts. F.T. Wainwright, ed., *The Problem of the Picts* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1956), remains, as possibly the most referred to study on the subject of the Picts.

¹⁹¹ *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 685.

¹⁹² A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History: A.D. 500-1286* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1922), 193.

means the most to a modern reader,” which is commonly known as the Battle of Dunnichen.¹⁹³ Wainwright suggests that the Irish chroniclers received their information about northern Britain via Iona. Bede records this about the island of Iona:

Columba came to Britain when Bridius the son of Malcolm, a most powerful king, had been ruling over the Picts for over eight years. Columba turned them to the faith of Christ by his words and example and so received the island of Iona from them in order to establish a monastery there. It is not a large island, being only about five hides in English reckoning. His successors hold it to this day and he himself was buried there at the age of seventy-seven, about thirty-two years after he came to Britain to preach.¹⁹⁴

Another statement made by Bede, pertaining to the monastery at Iona, gives a glimpse of the importance of the monastic center in regards to its relationship with the rest of Britain: “This island always has an abbot for its ruler who is a priest, to whose authority the whole kingdom, including even bishops, have to be subject.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, it is not as far-fetched as it may seem that such an important monastery would have had such a flourishing *scriptorium*. The information that passed through the *scriptorium* would have also probably been somewhat accurate, since the men who lived there would have probably traveled extensively throughout Britain and would have been up-to-date on the latest happenings, especially battles. Leslie Alcock, for instance, says that the Irish annalists were definitely recording the battle accurately since Adomnan would have learned of the battle himself first hand from Northumbrian sources. Perhaps Adomnan learned the events of the battle from his friend, the successor to Ecgrith, Aldfrith.¹⁹⁶ Adomnan himself records his visit to the kingdom of Northumbria while the plague was raging there: “when we visited our friend king Aldfrith, while the pestilence still

¹⁹³ Wainwright, “Nechtansmere,” 84.

¹⁹⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iii.4.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Leslie Alcock, “The Site of the Battle of Dunnichen,” *The Scottish Historical Review* 75 (1996): 131.

continued and devastated many villages on all sides. But both in our first visit, after the battle of Ecfrieth, and two years later, although we walked in the midst of this danger of plague, the Lord so delivered us that not even one of our companions died.”¹⁹⁷ With this in mind, Alcock says that the *Annals of Ulster* is “a record which had most probably been consigned to writing within two years of the event,” therefore marking its authenticity.¹⁹⁸

Leslie Alcock, in agreement with Wainwright, also believes that the Irish annalists received their information regarding the battle from the *scriptorium* located on Iona.¹⁹⁹ However, Wainwright adds, the Irish annalists would have been, and in most cases were, familiar with writers from Britain like Bede.²⁰⁰ Because Bede does not give the name of the battle, nor the place in which it was fought, the name must have come through some other source, like a script from the *scriptorium* at Iona perhaps.

Regardless, if Alcock’s assessment of Adomnan is correct, then the Irish *Annals of Ulster* precedes Bede. Perhaps, now one may assume that Bede received his information from the Irish annalists instead of the other way around. But it must be noted that Bede would have been a young boy growing up in Northumbria at the time of the battle, so he would have probably had some recollection of such a momentous occasion and with the history of the oral tradition in the early medieval period, he would have heard the story frequently. Whatever the source of the Irish annalists, the length of Ecgfrith’s reign and the date of the battle are consistent throughout all the records.

¹⁹⁷ Adomnan, *Life of Columba*, edited and translated by A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), ii.46.

¹⁹⁸ Alcock, “The Site of the Battle of Dunnichen,” 131.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Wainwright, “Nechtansmere,” 84-85.

The *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, written sometime between the years 699-705,²⁰¹ records an interesting account of the battle. In the passage regarding the battle, Cuthbert has gone to Carlisle to be with Ecgfrith's queen, Iurminburgh, while they awaited the outcome of the battle. While Cuthbert was touring the town and viewing some of the remains of a Roman wall, he suddenly had a vision of the outcome of the battle. When the other men touring with Cuthbert urged him to tell them what his vision had revealed and what the outcome of the battle was, the holy man "said evasively: "Oh, my sons, look at the sky, consider how wonderful it is, and think how inscrutable are the judgments of God" and so forth. And so after a few days they learned that it had been announced far and wide that a wretched and mournful battle had taken place at the very day and hour in which it had been revealed to him."²⁰² Although this record of the battle is more concerned with the vision of St. Cuthbert, the seriousness of the outcome of the Battle of Dunnichen is clearly conveyed.

Eddius Stephanus wrote his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* sometime before 720,²⁰³ and in it he gives a slightly more detailed account of the battle that occurred between the Picts and the Northumbrians: "At last the news came to them of a most woeful disaster in which Ecgfrith, king of the Northumbrians, had been slain and overthrown by the Picts, together with all the flower of his army."²⁰⁴ In this passage Eddius is telling the story of Bishop Wilfrid's return to Northumbria after the death of Ecgfrith. Until of the year 686, Wilfrid had been living as an exile, due to Ecgfrith's expulsion of him from the kingdom of Northumbria. This reinstatement of Bishop Wilfrid would have been most displeasing

²⁰¹ *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, 13.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰³ Eddius, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, x.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

to the fallen king Ecgrith, because he detested Wilfrid. However, Ecgrith's brother and successor, Aldfrith, obviously did not share his brother's contempt for the much loved bishop. From this passage in Eddius, it seems as though, not only the king lost his life, but a substantial number of his army. Therefore, we began to get a clearer picture of just how badly the Northumbrians were defeated by the Picts. The number of men that Ecgrith took with him into battle is not known, therefore, the casualties remain unknown as well.

Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert*, written around the year 721,²⁰⁵ is very similar to that of the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, written by a Lindisfarne monk in that it is centered around the vision St. Cuthbert had about the outcome of the battle. Bede writes: "Now when King Ecgrith, rashly daring, had taken an army against the Picts and was devastating their kingdoms with cruel and savage ferocity, Cuthbert the man of God knew that the time was at hand concerning which he had prophesied a year before to the king's sister, declaring when she asked him that he would not live more than another year."²⁰⁶ Interestingly, Bede, at the close of Chapter 27 of his *Life*, adds that on the Monday after the battle had taken place "one arrived who had fled from the fight and explained by his sad story the mysterious prophesies of the man of God. And it was proved that on the very day and at the very hour when it was revealed to the man of God, standing by the fountain, the king was laid low by the sword of the enemy and his bodyguard slain around him."²⁰⁷ Alcock suggests that it is apparent from Bede's writing,

²⁰⁵ Bede, *Prose Life*, texts, translations, and notes by Bertram Colgrave (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 16. This work by Bede is also called *Life of St. Cuthbert*.

²⁰⁶ Bede, *Prose Life*, 27.

²⁰⁷ Bede, *Prose Life*, 27. Alcock, "The Site of the Battle of Dunnichen," 133, says that the road leading from the site of the battle to Carlisle was about 160 mile long and with a strong steed and the enemy close at his heels, it is very possible that the lone rider made the journey in two days.

that king Ecgfrith was killed as a result of the death of his bodyguard, not the other way around, as he says, which resembles a supposed Germanic custom where the bodyguard follows their leader in death.²⁰⁸ In regard to the evidently large number of Northumbrians slain at the battle, Alcock says: “there was little that an army, more than fifty-miles (as a crow flies) from friendly territory, could do but stand, and fight, and die as honourably as possible. The Picts had a twelve-year old score to settle, and only a fool or a coward would have expected mercy.”²⁰⁹

It is from the English writer Symeon of Durham, in his *Libellus De Exordio*, written in the early twelfth century, that we get the name of the battle as the Northumbrians probably referred to it, which is *Nechtansmere*. Symeon records that:

In the very year that he had had Cuthbert ordained bishop and in fulfillment of this venerable father’s prophecy, King Ecgfrith was killed with most of the forces he was leading to lay waste the land of the Picts at a place called *Nechtansmere* (that is Nechtan’s water) on 20 May in the fifteenth year of his reign, and his body was buried on Iona, the island of Columba.²¹⁰

The name Nechtansmere is commonly used today when referring to the battle that took place between the Pictish king Bridei and the Northumbrian forces of king Ecgfrith.

The political and ecclesiastical implications of the battle are demonstrated most clearly in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in 731.²¹¹ Bede tells us that as a result of the battle the Picts, the Scots, living in northern Britain, and even some of the Britons were able to regain some of the territory, as well as their freedom, which they had formerly lost to the Northumbrians. We also learn from Bede

²⁰⁸ Alcock, “The Site of the Battle of Dunnichen,” 132.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

²¹⁰ Symeon of Durham, *Libellus De Exordio Atque Procursu Istius, Hoc Est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie*, edited and translated by David Rollason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), i.9.

²¹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, xvii. Alcock, “The Site of the Battle of Dunnichen,” 133-34.

that the Northumbrians were left in a deplorable state after the battle and that many of them were captured by the Picts and made to be slaves. As for the implications the battle had on the ecclesiastical affairs of the Northumbrians, it seems that the Picts expelled a Northumbrian Bishop by the name of Trumwine, who presided over the see at Abercorn. Bede says that Abercorn “was in English territory but close to the firth which divides the lands of the English from that of the Picts.”²¹² Graeme Cruickshank says that the see of Abercorn, also called Aebbercornig, “was situated some three miles west of the modern burgh of Queensferry.”²¹³ Cruickshank also points out that it is strange that Abercorn was located south of the Firth of the Forth, because the Northumbrians controlled territory further to the north. As a solution to this unusual circumstance, Cruickshank offers a reasonable assessment for the geographic placement of the monastery at Abercorn to the south of the Firth of Forth: “The solution may be that Trumwine had a two-fold mission: to cater for the spiritual needs of those south of the Forth in what Bede termed “the English region”, the northernmost part of Northumbria proper, and also to bring within his flock those to the north of the Forth for as far as it was practical to go.”²¹⁴ Therefore, it appears that the expulsion of Trumwine also meant that the Picts took back their territory as far as the south of the Firth of Forth, which had been previously lost to the Northumbrians. However, the northern-most of the Northumbrian peoples also, it would seem, lost their spiritual direction, which was offered at Abercorn, thus dealing an ecclesiastical blow to the Northumbrians.

From Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* also comes a piece of the Pictish military tactics that were used in the battle, of which he says, “The enemy feigned flight and lured

²¹² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

²¹³ Graeme Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen* (Angus: The Pinkfoot Press, 1991), 20.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the king into some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains.”²¹⁵ According to Cruickshank, Ecgfrith led his army up through Strathmore, after they probably stopped over at Din Eidyn, modern day Edinburgh, before making the final stretch of their ill fated journey. Strathmore lies between the mountains regions known as the Grampians and the Sidlaws.²¹⁶ Peter Marren’s outline of Ecgfrith’s route to the battle is in agreement with Cruickshank’s. Marren says of Ecgfrith: “Thus we can imagine the impatient king setting out with his war-band from Edinburgh of Abercorn as the return of spring beckoned in a new campaigning season.”²¹⁷ Marren then makes the point that Ecgfrith’s troops may have been smaller in number than usual because several members of his army would still probably have been occupied in Ireland, as a result of the king’s 684 campaign,²¹⁸ an oversight that probably cost Ecgfrith his life. Cruickshank then raises the question of why did Ecgfrith deviate from the path and go into Dunnichen?²¹⁹ This is perhaps where Bede’s remark about the Picts pretending to flee from the Northumbrians comes into use. Bridei, being the cunning and evidently patient man he was, lured Ecgfrith into territory that he was familiar with, but perhaps Ecgfrith was not. Cruickshank says that Pictland during the time of the battle was heavily forested, “which would have provided excellent cover for the sniping activities of Pictish archers.”²²⁰ When the Northumbrians entered through the mountain pass, probably from the north, chasing their enemy, they soon encountered a force of Picts, prepared for battle. Cruickshank then suggests that more of the Pictish soldiers surrounded the

²¹⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

²¹⁶ Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen*, 14.

²¹⁷ Marren, *Grampian Battlefields*, 23-4.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²¹⁹ Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen*, 14.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

Northumbrians from the north, closing the mountain pass they had come through.²²¹

Therefore, facing the Picts at the base of Dunnichen Hill and the Picts that had just closed in behind them, the Northumbrians had no choice but to stand and fight, because Nechtan's Mire stood as another barrier. A mire that Cruickshank claims "soon became a watery grave" for many of the Northumbrian forces.²²² Therefore, if the Northumbrian soldiers were not killed at the hand of a Pictish soldier, then they were probably drowned in the swampy marsh land that lay at the bottom of the mountain. When I visited the battle site of the Battle of Dunnichen in the winter of 2001, swans were floating peacefully on the small pond that remains of the giant mire that once drank the blood of so many Northumbrians.

²²¹ Ibid., 15-16.

²²² Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen*, 16.

CONCLUSION

After reading the ancient-medieval sources that write about the Battle of Dunnichen, it is clear that the battle is an important event in the history of the Picts, and therefore in the history of Scotland. The years prior to 685, had been difficult ones for the Picts, because at least part of their province had fallen under the control of the Northumbrian kings. The Battle of Dunnichen liberated the Picts from their Northumbrian neighbors forever, allowing them finally to live at their own dictate. In king Bridei, the Picts found a king that was willing to fight for them, not simply occupy the throne as a Northumbrian puppet king, as the three previous kings had done. It also appears that Bridei and the Picts defeated the Northumbrians alone, without the aid of the Scots or the Britons. However, the Battle of Dunnichen also proved to be an important event in their history as well, since they were also freed from the Northumbrian tyranny.

No mention is made from ancient-medieval sources of tribute being extracted from the Scots or the Britons from Bridei and the Picts, so he must have expected nothing from them in return for the defeat of the treacherous king Ecgfrith. I propose that if the battle was not a Pictish, Scots, and British coalition, then Bridei certainly had a guarantee of neutrality from the Scots and the Britons. However, because the Picts, Scots and the Britons had lived among each other for centuries a joint venture from the foreign invaders would not be surprising. The three groups had married and intermingled for such a long time that it would be understandable that they would align in a time of external crisis. This is not to say that they did not often squabble amongst each other on several occasions. All three groups had been oppressed and made to pay tribute to the

Northumbrians for years, which must have caused some sort of bond to occur between the three. They had all also faced the Northumbrians at different times and had all been defeated by them, so, perhaps they realized that they would have to act in concert if the enemy were ever going to be put down.

If the Battle of Dunnichen was a joint Pictish, Scots, British operation, then it seems that the Irish annalists would have made some mention of it. Surely the writer of the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, even though it is hagiographical, would have made some mention of the involvement of at least the Irish in the battle. Bede would have certainly recorded any involvement of the Scots or the Britons in the battle, since his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is a history. Instead of the death of king Ecgfrith being a consequence of the revenge of the Scots themselves, for their loss in 684, Bede writes that Ecgfrith suffered defeat “at the avenging hand of God.”²²³ Because the battle was a defeat for the Northumbrians it seems as if everyone would want recognition for their people, if it is deserved. It is difficult to imagine that if the Scots or the Britons aided the Picts, that they would have left the matter unrecorded. Therefore, I conclude that the Battle of Dunnichen was a Pictish battle that simply had positive consequences for all the peoples of the north.

The Battle of Dunnichen stands as a testimonial to the strength of the ancestors of the Highlanders. Without the leadership of king Bridei and his courageous followers, Scotland as we know it may not have existed. The Battle also helped to define the Scottish/English border that remains today, a border that could have been pushed further north by the Northumbrians if they had not been stopped.

²²³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, iv.26.

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