

ANGLO-SAXON ARISTOCRACY: TRACING LINEAGES

by T S M Mōmmaerts-Browne¹

ABSTRACT

This piece was inspired by an earlier work by David Kelley, *The House of Aethelred*, in which he called for further research of Anglo-Saxon notables. The article traces the origins and peregrinations of fate of several Anglo-Saxon noble lineages. The author aims to show that some families were other branches of the *Gewissæ*, (the royal house of Wessex); while others were continuations of other royal families, sovereign, prior to the unification of Egbert, Æthelwulf, and sons. Thus, it is a study in the comparative vicissitudes of the various dynasties of the so-called 'heptarchy'.

The results can be used to explore social and political evolution of these houses. One of the theses of this work is that it links more lines to the earlier dynasties, some of which hitherto lacked descents beyond their losses of sovereignty.

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In the last century there has been much research into the relationships of Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles, with a consequent increase in our knowledge, not only of the genealogies involved, but also of the socio-political economic structures of pre-Norman England.

Loyn (1963), Hart (1973) and Stenton (1971), have all accepted that the nobles were descended from royalty or collaterals of reigning lines. Jones (1989) discusses the uses of collaterals as sub-kings, and mentions both the occasional use of the word '*satrap*' for ealdorman, and the possibility of using descendants of conquered dynasties as local governors, without mentioning that the word '*satrap*' derives from the Persians, who used conquered dynasts in exactly this way. The Romans adopted this programme, or policy, with what is known as the 'client kingship' system - dynasts eventually becoming consuls and senators. Aylmer (1924/5) tells us, '*During the tenth and part off the eleventh centuries the Anglo-Saxon kings used generally to appoint as ealdorman, over the different provinces, their own kinsmen, or the descendants of the kings who had ruled in the separate states before the Wessex branch of the house of Cerdic became prominent.*'

Similarly, Hart states, '*Most of the ninth- and tenth-century ealdorman were scions of cadet branches of the royal house.*' Dorothy Whitelock (1986) found that: '*Sometimes they, [the ealdormen], were related to the royal house: ...and the descendants of Ælfred's elder brother, [Ædælred], are sometimes ealdormen of the Western Provinces in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Sometimes in the eighth century ealdormen belong to the family that had ruled the province as kings before its absorption into a larger kingdom.*'

None of the above scholars goes into detail to elaborate the linkages on which their theses are based. Some of the work was completed before them by scholars such as Anscombe (1913), Aylmer (1924/5), and Barlow (1957). Hart proclaims, in his

¹ Ford Mōmmaerts-Browne is the author of several pieces dealing with the transition from antiquity to the high middle ages. He is the list-administrator for RootsWeb's Gen-Ancient list, and facilitator of Anglo-Saxon_genealogy@yahoo.com and <http://groups.msn.com/ByzantineGenealogy>

Contact details: FordMommaerts@Cox.net

opening paragraph, '*The whole topic, [i.e. 'Anglo-Saxon genealogy' and 'reconstructing the pedigrees...of the noble houses'], bristles with difficulties, yet its importance is fundamental; for this as for other periods, detailed examination of family ties and estates supplies essential background information for anyone seeking to uncover the interests and pressures which helped to formulate national policy.'*

Yet he ignores the work of other scholars published in genealogical works - pieces that would have answered some of the questions which he raises; that correctly solved those problems at which he incorrectly guessed; that better explain phenomena than Hart's erroneous inferences.

Much research was done by Searle (1897, 1899) who used charter references and onomastics. The study of charters was followed by later scholars who were able to trace property inheritance through these allusions. Anscombe (1913) showed that Earl Godwin, father of Harold II, last Saxon king of England, notwithstanding Norman assertions of his ignoble origin, was descended from Æðelred I, elder brother of Ælfred the Great. Anscombe could not supply all of the names in his pedigree, but did demonstrate the royal origins of many Anglo-Saxon nobles.

Aylmer was able to expand the family circle of nobles, but could not fill in Anscombe's gap; nor did he include Earl Godwin, nor the last's father. He did, however, uncover Mercian origins for this line - although his version had later to be corrected.

The correct linkage between Mercian royalty and nobility was presented by Barlow (1957). This was the descent from Mercian kings as had always been traceable, being through the brother of Ælfred's queen, Eahlswið, (their father being a Mercian noble; and their mother a Mercian princess), in as much as Eahlswið's niece married Ælfred's nephew, Æðelhelm, son of Æðelred. This is the line that leads to Earl Godwin. Barlow was able also to fill in the names that Anscombe and Aylmer could not. There are many lines throughout Europe and the Americas that descend from Godwin through his sons, King Harold and Earl Tostig.

Hart's research added names to the pedigree; but misplaced the origins of the branch that he discussed. Schleicher (1986) discussed the works of Anscombe and Barlow, but added nothing new other than to emphasize consanguineous marriages. Turton (1928), though having access to the works of Anscombe and Aylmer, did not include their findings in his *magnum opus*.

Kelley (1989) has substantially furthered this area of study. Most importantly, he has demonstrated the Mercian derivation of Earl Leofric's family from the descendants of Æðelred I. Another of Kelley's theses is the semi-heritability of high office, both temporal and spiritual. Among these semi-heritable offices was the archbishopric of Canterbury and primacy of all England. Kelley also re-establishes the place of Eadric Streona in the pedigree, removed on invalid chronological reasoning by Anscombe (1913) more than two generations earlier.

Hart (1973) theorizes that the paternal grandfather of Æðelstan 'Half-King' was a certain Æðelwulf; and goes on to speculate on the royal origins of his descendants. The works of Aylmer (1924/25) had already attempted an answer to this query, although it was incorrect in detail; and Barlow (1957) had resolved these issues.

Kelley's penultimate paragraph calls for further research to place additional individuals, such as Eadnoð of Ramsey, and Wulfric Spot, (and, therefore, his niece, Ælfifu, the first wife of St. Canute).

Searle (1899)² shows a Beorhtric *princeps*, son of Ælfgar, son of Haylwardus Snew. According to Freeman (1876) this Beorhtric rejected as wife Mathilda, daughter of Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, the queen of the Conqueror. While this story probably is apocryphal, it demonstrates an almost royal status for 'Prince' Beorhtric. Freeman also informs us that Haylwardus, (*ie* Æðelweard), was descended from Eadward I, the Elder.

Chronologically, Snew would be the grandson or great-grandson of Eadward. Of Eadward's children, only two left descendants in England. These were King Eadmund I, and Æðelhild, the wife of Ælfsige. Since the royal line is rather too well known to have overlooked these men, we must look to the descendants of Æðelhild. Of her children, Æðelflæd seems most likely as Snew's mother, since her husband, Beorhtsige, would explain the name of Snew's grandson, Beorhtric, otherwise atypical for this line. This 'Prince' Beorhtric was likely the father of Beorhtsige, *princeps* in 1062.

Also of this family would be Alphegus, (*ie* Æfheah), whom Florence of Worcester calls '*Domnaniensis satrapa*', (*ie* Ealdorman of Devon), and his son, Beorhtric, (k.1017), Ælfheah being most probably a son of Æðelflæd and Beorhtsige.

Searle (1899)³ shows Ælfgar, *comes* (949), and minister to the crown (952-962), and his brother, Beorhtfrið, a royal minister from 949 to 973. In a charter of 958 Ælfgar is called '*propinquus*' (*ie* near relation) of the king (Eadwig, 955-9); and again in the 'A' redaction of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for annal 962 he is called '*mæg*' (kinsman, or relative) of the same king. If Ælfgar and Beorhtfrið were sons of Beorhtnoð, Ealdorman of Essex, by Ælfflæd, his wife; they would be first cousins of King Eadwig, through his stepmother, Æðelflæd, the sister of Ælfflæd. Ælfgar would have inherited his name from his maternal grandfather; while Beorhtfrið would have inherited the initial particle of his name from his father, and paternal grandfather. This writer believes that Beorhtsige, the father of Æðelgar, Archbishop of Canterbury, was brother to Ælfgar and Beorhtfrið. This would explain the claim of Ælfwin, Beorhtsige's son, to be of the family of Beorhtnoð.

In 956, a Bishop Beorhthelm, too, is described as relative to King Eadwig. He is also described as Bishop-elect. A Beorhthelm, Bishop of Winchester from 960 to 963, is described as formerly Bishop of Wells, and a relative of King Eadgar (Eadwig's brother). Clearly these two are to be identified, 956 being the year when the Bishop of Wells was elected Bishop of Winchester (the chief see of Wessex). Two sees sharing a bishop was not unknown (*eg* St. Dunstan himself) and Beorhthelm doubtless owed his prominent position to his propinquity to the crown. He can further be identified as the Beorhthelm who became subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury, and died in 973. If Beorhthelm were son of Beorhtnoð, ealdorman of Essex, and of Ælfflæd, he would have been first cousin to Kings Eadwig and Eadgar, his '*propinquus*', through their stepmother, Æðelflæd, and have been named for his grandfather.

Bishop Beorhthelm's father, Beorhtnoð, was accorded the rank of '*princeps*'. While this title is not a direct correlation of 'prince', as used today, it did indicate royal connections or origins. We have touched repeatedly on the theme of onomastic similarity and its relationship to genealogical connections. For a fuller discussion of this relevance see Kelley (1989). Among persons of Beorhthelms' and Beorhtnoð's

² Table 77, p.459.

³ Table 22, p.398.

rank, with names that are indicative of this line is a Beorhtsige, (k.905), who would be two generations earlier than the elder Beorhthelm. His royal origin is indicated by his father, Beorhtnoð *æðling*. Now, '*æðling*' (lit. 'nobly-descended', or 'nobly-born') is a title that is usually translated as heir-apparent, but can also mean a senior royal prince, and would indicate a royal origin, very recent rather than vaguely remote.

In the middle to late ninth century there were only four remaining royal houses from which Beorhtnoð could have derived his recent royal descent. There is no place for him among the Gewisi (the descendants of Cerdic, the royal house of Wessex), nor does his name fit the naming patterns of that dynasty. Neither does it fit the naming patterns, nor the geography, of the royal house of Northumbria. The locations of Beorhtnoð *æðling* and Beorhtsige do fit for Mercia, and their names do resemble those of many of the last princes and kings of that house. The names and geography are most definitely not East Saxon.

Although some would believe Eadburga, the wife of Æðelræd Mucil, the daughter or granddaughter of Ceonwulf, it must be remembered that Ceonwulf's descendants were eliminated - thus facilitating other lines gaining the throne. Still unplaced in these groupings is Wigod, father-in-law of Robert d'Oily, and of Miles Crispin, *mæg* of the Confessor.

The end of the Mercian dynasty may be reconstructed as shown in figure 1:

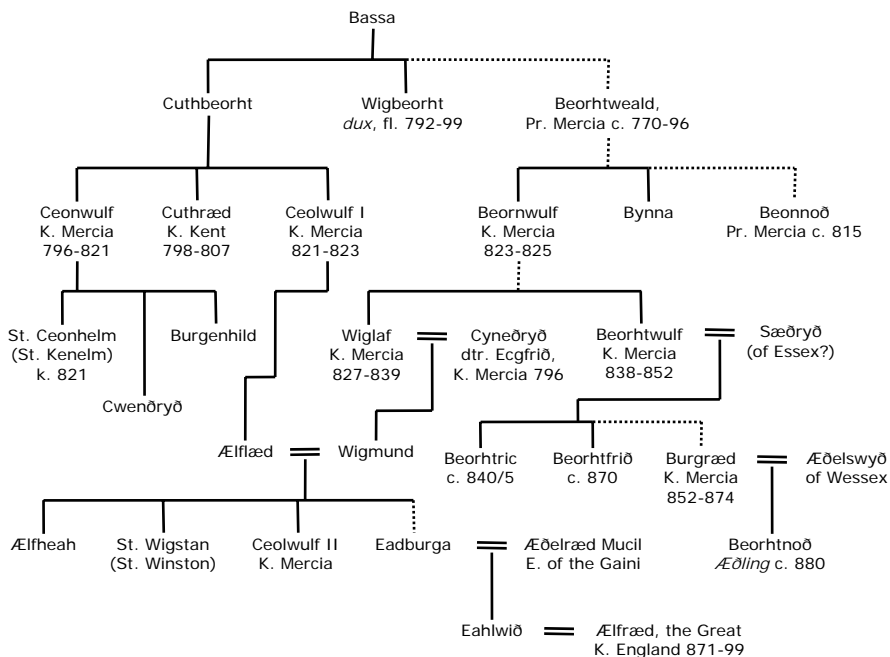


Fig 1. The End of the Iclingas of Mercia

Let us turn, now, to the family of Queen Eadgifu. Her father was Sigehelm, and his brother was Sigewulf, father of Sigebeorht. Both father and uncle were ealdormen of Kent. Now the names of Queen Eadgifu's relatives are very much East Saxon royal names! But why, one may ask, would East Saxons be found governing Kent? In the late seventh century Essex conquered Kent, and at least four East Saxon dynasts were kings or co-kings of Kent, one as sub-king under his father. As Essex was annexing Kent, however, Mercia incorporated, wholly or partially, both Essex and Kent; but this did not alter the close association between the two smaller kingdoms. The East Saxon dynasty maintained its place at home, and in Kent through faithful service to the Mercian dynasty - serving in the capacity of satraps, as described above. *'From the point at which they eventually passed under Æthelred's control there is no clear evidence that the East Saxon kings were other than wholly loyal dependants of the Mercian rulers. For that very reason, perhaps, their native kingship was the longest to survive...of any of those peoples who remained part of the Midland hegemony.'* (Dumville, 1989, p.135).

Under Ceonwulf, King of Mercia, Sigeræd, King of Essex, was also Ealdorman of Kent. Among the St. Paul extracts is a lease by Ceolbeorht, Bishop of London (the lessor) to Sigeric (the lessee) 'minister' of King Wiglaf of Mercia. Among those witnessing the lease is Sigeric, King of Essex. The witness and the lessee are undoubtedly the same. Regardless, this document shows the continuation of the East Saxon dynasty after the annexation by Wessex. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the submission of the peoples of Essex, Kent, Surrey (once a part of Essex) and Sussex, to the West Saxons, as though a single entity.

Sigeræd, King of Essex, was also King of Kent under the Mercians. Two generations later another Sigeræd signs Mercian charters as '*princeps*', indicating a royal origin. It is therefore entirely expected to find East Saxon princes in Kent.

Beorhtsige Dyring was '*propinquus*' and agent of Eadgifu, queen of Eadweard I 'the Elder'. The conjectures discussed here could present a relationship as shown in figure 2. This seems a bit distant for the term '*propinquus*'; yet we have seen how other ealdormen, just as distantly related to the royal house have claimed to be '*propinquus*' of the king (eg Ælfheah and Ælfhere, *vis-à-vis* Kings Eadwig and Eadgar. Ælfheah and Ælfhere were, however, related to Eadwig and Eadgar at least three times over - perhaps quantity making up for quality), which leaves us with very few clues as to the placement of Beorhtweald, '*propinquus*' of Æðelræd II the 'ill-advised'. A likely placement would be among the descendants of Æðelweald, nephew of Beorhtnoð and grandson of Beorhthelm, with Æðelfryð, Æðelræd's mother; but '*propinquus*' is generally (though not exclusively) too wide a term to be used for 'uterine brother' or for 'nephew'. These conclusions are supported by Beorhtweald, *dux* of Essex, c.867. '*Dux*' is a common latinisation of 'ealdorman'.

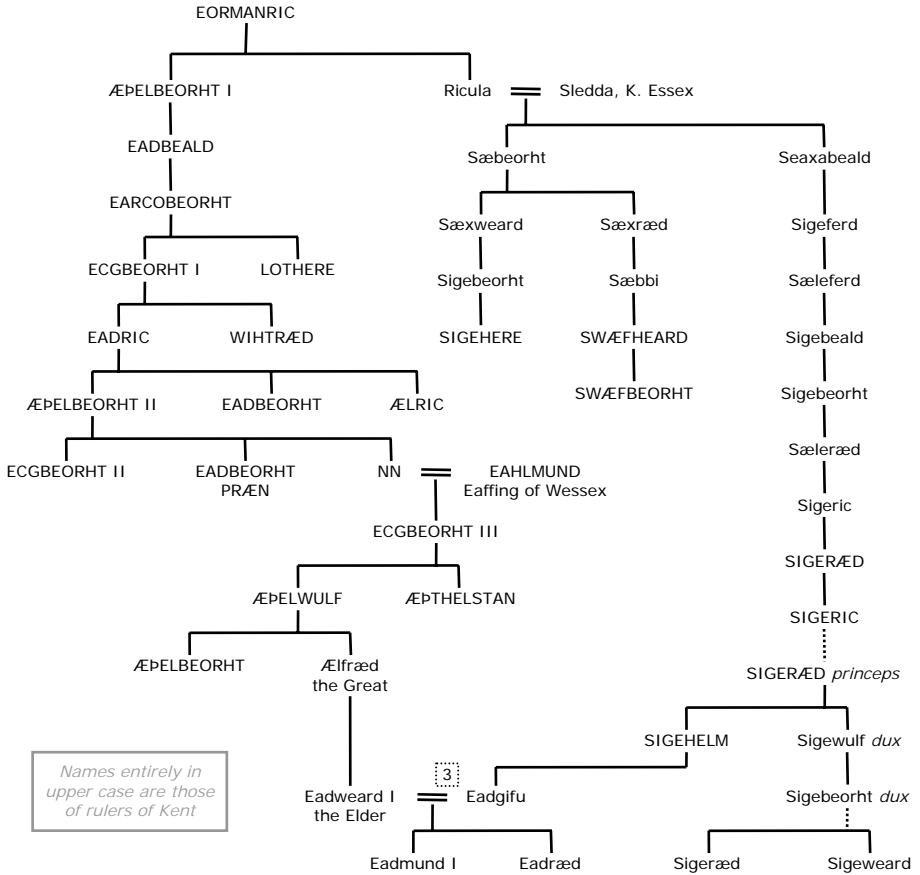


Fig 2. Rulers of Kent

We have examined the survival of the Mercian and East Saxon (-Kentish) royal lines as 'satrapal' ealdorman, and the use of West Saxon collaterals in a similar vice-regal capacity. Kelley (1989) has argued for a continuation of the Kentish royal line via Wessex as shown in figure 2, although I suggest that it came about a couple of generations earlier: a daughter of Wihtræd marrying Eahlmund's grandfather, Eoppa Ingilding, thus bringing in the connection with Kent of Sigebeorht, King of Wessex (756-757), apparently brother of Sigeræd, King of Kent (759-763).

The name of Beorhtweald's posited grandmother, 'Sædryð', is typical of East Saxon royalty. It is possible that Beorhtweald could be identical with Beorhtweald, *dux* of Kent under the West Saxons a year earlier. If this identification is correct it would underscore the association, almost merger, of Essex with Kent (figure 3).

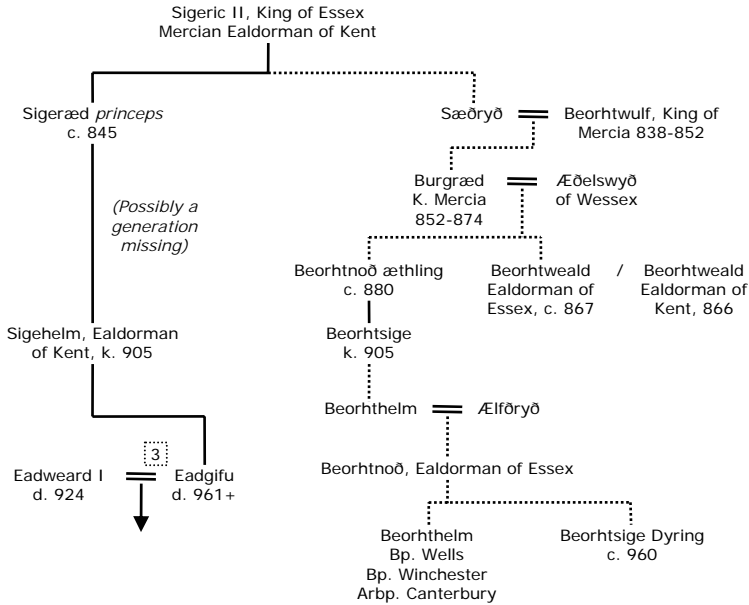


Fig 3. Kent and Essex

The Northumbrian dynasties continued in the earls of Northumberland. Unfortunately no source has preserved for us the exact details. We do know that the earls of Northumberland perpetuated the names of the Bernician royal house; and we have already discussed how similarity of names is indicative of a high degree of familial relationship - name particles being virtually hereditary in some instances. There was also continuity of habitation. Whitelock (1959) tells us '*the lands north of the Tyne had always had an earl from the local family of Bamburgh*'. Bamburgh had been the seat of the Bernician royal house from the beginning. The earliest traceable Earl of Northumberland was styled '*princeps*' - which title we have discussed above - and was murdered in 912 by Eadræd, the son of Rixinc/Ricsig, (which last had been King of Northumbria 873-876). This murder was part of a feud dating back two centuries. Consideration of this strife enables a partial reconstruction of the Northumbrian dynasty.

Bernicia and Deira were united into the kingdom of Northumbria in the mid-seventh century. Shortly after the turn of the eighth century the feud began. The throne alternated between two lines of the dynasty, which I shall call 'A' and 'B'. A geneographically expanded regnal list illustrates this volley (see figure 4 which shows the line represented by each reign).

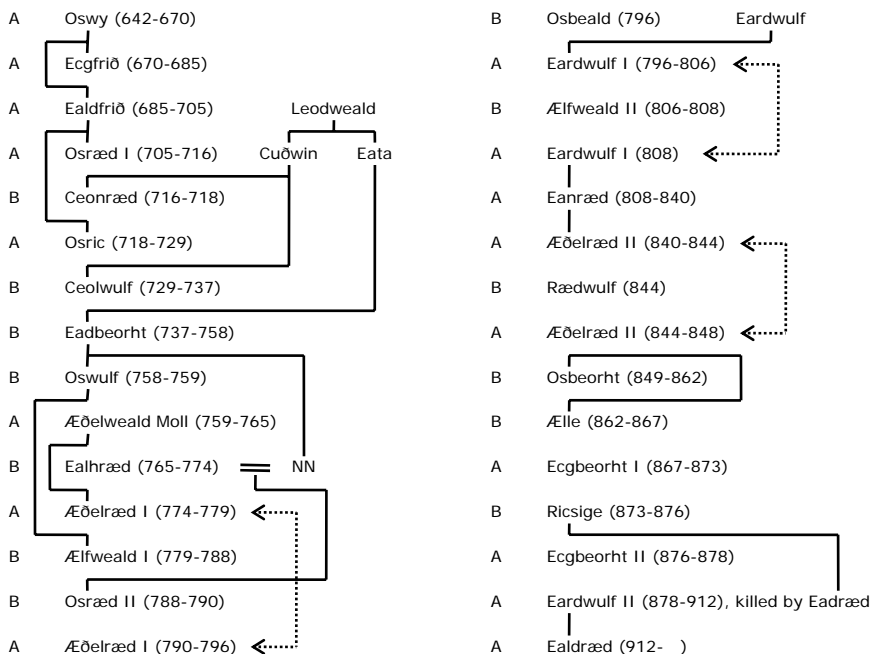


Fig 4. The Northumbrian Family Feud

Hunter Blair (1976) goes to great length to describe this continuous warfare and almost ritualised regicide. *'the normal expectation of a Northumbrian king...was to be killed in battle.... He was the man whom the spear must slay, whom war must kill.'* The records describe *'a scene in which treachery, violence, murder were the normal face of political life. They point to the many kings who reigned, to the few that escaped violent death, and indeed it is easy to bring out the record of conspiracy and rebellion.'*

Moncreiffe (1982) wrote many pieces, building upon Sir James Fraser's *Golden Bough*, that discuss a king's semi-ritualised slaying of his predecessor among the Irish, the Scots and the pre-Columbian Meso-Americans. In the case of Northumbria it seems however to be a simple matter of greed, megalomania and fatal ambition. Hunter Blair tells us *'there does seem to be ground for thinking that dynastic feuds became an increasing source of weakness in Northumbrian kingship.'*

Probably Eadwulf II was grandson of Æðelræd II. One of the Kings Ecgbeorht was probably his father (most likely the first (867-873), with the second (876-878) as his brother). Eardwulf I was supposedly the son of another Eardwulf; but this may be an error as the Anglo-Saxons did not normally name children after their parents. He was likely a nephew of Æðelræd I, for whom his grandson was named. Since Eardwulf first acceded to the throne in 796, and Æðelræd I married Ælfflæd in 792, Eardwulf cannot have been the grandson of Offa, King of Mercia.

Florence of Worcester tells us that Æðelræd I was brother to Ælfweald. This may have been an error for Ælfweald I, who succeeded him. However, Æðelræd was expelled by Ælfweald, and the father of each is known. Nennius gives us a line of some five

generations down to the time of Æðelræd I, Ælfweald I and Osræd II. This line never acceded to the throne. Therefore it seems likely that Æðelweald Moll was grandson of Osræd I or, more likely, of Osric.

Osric's parentage is problematic. Searle shows Osric as son of Ealhfrīð, but represents contrary evidence and pronounces his descent 'uncertain'. Tapsell (1983) shows Osric as son of Ealhfrīð, but with a question mark. Morby (1989) and Ross (1978) present him as son of Ealdfrīð. Florence makes Osric son of Ealfrið; while Symeon of Dunhelm⁴ calls each his father in different places. The Venerable Bede does not give an answer. Collen (1833), an uneven scholar but capable of finding information overlooked by others, considers Ealhfrīð and Ealdfrīð identical. As unlikely as this may at first seem, Nennius bears him out. Turner (1852) calls Ealdfrīð 'Alfred', which is a form of Ealhfrīð. If conventional wisdom applies, then it would seem that Ealdfrīð was the father of Osric. If these sons of Oswig were identical, it is probably unrecoverable which wife was the mother of Osræd, Osric and Offa.

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⁴ *Opera*, i 37, i 39, ii 390 (Twysden, 1652).

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⁵ A scanned copy of this source is available to registered users on the FMG website.