

King Anna of East Anglia

Anna was a mid-7th century King of East Anglia. He was the nephew of Raedwald of East Anglia, and probably the second of the sons of Eni, Raedwald's brother, to hold the kingdom, ruling (c. 636–

653/654).Contents

Family



Anna is always referred to by this name, though it may be an abbreviated or familiar form of a diathematic name. He married before becoming king, some time before 630. His wife, whose name may have been Saewara, brought to the marriage a daughter from a previous union named Saethryth. The S-alliteration of these names suggests a link with the East Saxon dynasty, a connection which had probably been established earlier through the association of Sigebert of East Anglia with the Wuffinga family.

Anna had four known daughters, all canonised as saints, a process in which the family took an active part: Seaxburh of Ely (the eldest), Aethelthryth (also called Etheldreda or Audrey), Aethelburga and Wihtburga, and a son whose name is preserved as Jurmin, possibly a modification of Eormen. Jurmin was of warrior age in 653. Anna himself and all of his daughters became renowned for their saintly Christian virtues.

Earlier life and faith

Etheldreda's birth, in 631, is located at Exning, Suffolk, by tradition preserved at Ely (*Liber Eliensis*). Exning was an important place strategically, as it stood just on the East Anglian side of the Devil's Dyke, a major earthwork stretching between the Fen edge and the headwaters of the river Stour, built at an earlier date to defend the East Anglian region from attack from the direction of Cambridge or via the Icknield Way. An

Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Exning reveals that it had distinguished occupants during the sixth century. Anna may therefore have been resident there in 631 in a defensive capacity, watching the border in case of assault from Mercia which was hostile to the newly-Christian rule of Sigeberht.

Anna was an extremely devout Christian. Liber Eliensis attributes the establishment of a church at Cratendune, Ely, to Saint Augustine of Canterbury (before 604). In 631 Saint Felix was just beginning his work in East Anglia, and he is associated with a foundation at Soham (Cambridgeshire), then a Fen Isle lying between Exning and Ely. Anna may therefore have experienced direct Christian teaching in this locality. M.R. James also mentions an oral legend that Etheldreda was baptised at Exning in a pool known as St Mindred's Well.

Emergence of Anna's rule

In 632-3 Edwin of Northumbria and his centre of Christian power in Northumbria was overthrown. Edwin was slain and Northumbria ravaged by Cadwallon ap Cadfan supported by the Mercian armies, and Edwin's family and bishop narrowly escaped to Kent. However King Oswald of Northumbria emerged to restore Northumbrian authority, and Saint Aidan was sent to Lindisfarne to bring the Irish mission to his court. This gave him independence both from the heathen cause of Mercia and the Roman ecclesiastical authority of Canterbury in Kent. At about the same time Saint Fursey came to East Anglia from Ireland.

The Mercians, led by Penda, then turned on East Anglia and slew Sigeberht and Ecgric, and routed the East Anglian army. Anna recovered East Anglian rule and must have relied upon the support of Oswald to sustain it. Felix remained his bishop at Dommoc until his death in c647. Anna arranged a very important diplomatic marriage between his daughter Seaxburh and King Eorcenberht of Kent (r. 640-664), cementing an alliance between the kingdoms. During the 640s Anna's daughter Aethelburga and stepdaughter Saethryth were sent to Faremoutiers Abbey in Gaul to live religious lives under abbess Fara. Probably in consequence of this a holy man named Botolph (Saint Botolph), reputedly a chaplain at Faremoutiers, was granted lands in c 647 for

monastic use in East Anglia, but his work was delayed by conflicts in the kingdom.

Patronage of Cenwalh of Wessex

In 641 Oswald was slain by Penda in battle (probably at Oswestry, Shropshire), and Oswine of Northumbria succeeded him as king. Soon afterwards King Cenwalh of Wessex, whose sister was Oswald's widow, but was himself married to the sister of Penda, renounced his wife. In c644 Penda drove Cenwalh out of Wessex, and he took refuge with King Anna for three years. During that time he was converted to Christianity. This was probably through the teaching of Saint Felix, who according to William of Malmesbury baptised him, presumably with King Anna as his sponsor. Then with Anna's help he returned to rule Wessex as a Christian king in 647.

Saint Hilda's visit to Anna's kingdom

Also in 647 Hild (Saint Hilda), a grand-niece of King Edwin's who was baptised with him in 626 and had been encouraged by Saint Aidan, came to the East Anglian court intending to join her sister Hereswith. Hereswith had married AEthilric, brother of Anna (possibly Ecgric of East Anglia), but now a widow she had already left for a religious life in Gaul. Hild remained in East Anglia for a year, until recalled by Aidan to Northumbria to run the monastery at Hartlepool.

Dynastic incorporation of Ely into East Anglia

Anna strengthened the western extent of his kingdom through the marriage of his daughter Etheldreda to Tondberht, Prince of Ely or the South Gyrwae in the southern Fen, possibly in 651 or perhaps slightly later. At Ely Etheldreda had a minister named Owini, who later accompanied her to Northumbria during her second marriage. Tondberht died, and after this, Ely was always considered part of East Anglia. Thomas, a fenman, became Anna's second bishop at Dommoc c. 647-652. His religious education, like Anna's, may have been rooted in early foundations of Augustine or Felix in the Ely area.

Mercian assault on Cnobheresburg

Anna endowed Fursey's monastery at Cnobheresburg (possibly Burgh Castle) with rich buildings and objects. In time St Fursey, growing weary of attacks on the kingdom, followed one of his brothers into a hermitage, leaving the monastery at Cnobheresburg to his brother Foillan, and a year later went into Gaul. In 651 Penda struck again, attacking Foillan's monastery. Anna arrived on the scene with his force in time to hold them off while the monks escaped to Nivelles in Gaul by ship, but was himself defeated and driven into exile.

King Anna's exile

Anna possibly took refuge in the area of western Shropshire, the kingdom of Merewalh of the Magonsaetan. His friendship with Merewalh's family may account for the attachment of land-revenues from sites in Shropshire to the foundation of Iken, which commenced in 654. It may also explain the early conversion of Merewalh to Christianity, at or before the time of the Northumbrian mission to Mercia. Anna returned to East Anglia in c 653. By then Bishop Thomas had died, and Berhtgisl Boniface came from Kent as his successor. Anna's daughter Wihthurga was probably born in his last years.

Battle of Bulcamp, c 653

In c.653 Penda had set his son Peada as ruler of the Middle Angles, the province lying between north Oxfordshire, the river Trent to the north-west, and the Fen. Peada became Christian through his marriage to Alhflaed, daughter of Oswiu of Northumbria, and a mission was sent to the Middle Angles. Penda himself did not convert, but permitted Christian teaching in his kingdom. Soon afterwards the assault of 651 was repeated: Penda with his armies met Anna at Bulcamp near Blythburgh in Suffolk, and in a set battle defeated the East Anglian army and slew many of them, including Anna and his son Jurmin.

Burial place

Blythburgh a mile from Bulcamp was afterwards believed to be the place

of that name where the tomb of Anna and Jurmin was pointed out and venerated. The identification is likely, because Blythburgh occupies a defensible position near the fordable headwaters of the Blyth estuary flowing towards the sea at Southwold, comparable to Rendlesham as a typical site for a royal dwelling of that period. Part of an 8th century whalebone diptych used for liturgical purposes has been found near the site.

Botolph began to build his monastery at Icanho (Iken, Suffolk) in the year that Anna was killed.

Sources

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