

## THE USURPATION OF KING SWAEBHEARD

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IN the year 673 died King Egberht of Kent. He was of the old Kentish line derived from Hengest but on his demise the succession was temporarily broken by a certain King Oswyn, whose history and charters are dealt with on pages 60-65. The true heir or, at least, the next in direct line to ascend the throne, was Lothair but he does not claim to have been king *de jure* during Oswyn's time although he makes the claim clearly enough for the years during which the usurper Swaebheard ruled.

One of the chief men at the court of King Oswyn was Swaebheard. His name is hardly twice spelt in the same manner but this spelling is formally correct and has been used accordingly. The originals of Oswyn's charters have been lost and we have to depend on not very good copies. Thomas of Elmham, a monk of St. Augustines in the fifteenth century, when the lost charters were still available, is careful to note in his History that the copies in the Registers were not always identical with the originals. But the copies of Oswyn's charters are apparently good enough for our purposes.

The first is dated in the month of July in the second indiction. This might mean 689 (as Birch suggests) or 674 which seems the obvious date since it agrees with that of other charters in which the same witnesses appear. The second of nine witnesses is Sabertus or, in another copy, Gabertus (i.e. Swaebheard). The next charter of Oswyn bears no date. It was given apparently at Minster in Thanet for the grant is to the Abbess of that house and the King placed a sod on the altar with his own hands as a token of the grant. Only two witnesses are named in the copy, the first is called Suebhardus and the second is that Acce or Ecca who was first witness in the former charter. These charters are in Birch Cart. Sax. numbers 73 and 40. All

that one needs to deduce at the moment is that King Oswyn had two most prominent supporters of whom one was named Swaebheard, and the other Ecca. These same chiefs appear in the third charter of Oswyn, dated 17 January 675 (Birch 35). Here again Swaebheard is first followed by the Abbot of St. Augustines and then by Ecca. When we come to the charters of King Swaebheard we find that Ecca is a constant witness but there is no Swaebheard present other than the king himself. I deduce that the chief of Oswyn's charters and King Swaebheard were one and the same person. This is also the view of Thomas of Elmham (Rolls Edtn. 231) who says that Swaebheard "se regem Cantiae nominavit"—elected himself king of Kent. The fact that he was already well known and powerful in Kent no doubt provided an opportunity for which he may have been able to prepare beforehand.

In one of his charters this King Swaebheard states that he is a son of King Sebbe of Essex (B.42) and that he makes his grant with paternal approval. He cites also the approval of a much greater man, King Aethelred of Mercia who had quite recently succeeded to that kingdom. It is evident that Swaebheard did not feel strong enough to stand by himself and had accepted the overlordship of the Mercian kingdom.

His position in Kent seems to have been reasonably assured. It certainly cannot be said that he lacked the support of the church. Of his three surviving charters, two purport to be attested by Abbot Adrian of St. Augustines and one of these has also Archbishop Theodore as witness. Adrian and Theodore were both outstanding examples of independent and powerful ecclesiastics. The third charter has only two witnesses, Ecce and Gumberet, and this makes it likely that the scribe did not think it worth while to copy the whole list. This provoking habit is continued by modern scribes, e.g. in the official publication of Ancient Deeds.

It is sometimes suggested that Swaebheard and others were kings of only a portion of Kent but this was certainly not the case with Swaebheard. He granted land at Hoo (B.89) which is most certainly in West Kent and other land in Thanet, Sturrey (B.42), and Bodsham in Elmstead (B.41),

which are at the other end of the county. It is evident therefore that he regarded both east and west Kent as within his domain. One of the charters is dated from Canterbury and is given "cum consilio venerabilis archiepiscopi Theodori atque consensu primorum meorum"—with the advice of the venerable Archbishop Theodore and the assent of my council. There are fifteen witnesses who were presumably the members of the council and the chief men of Kent. This charter suggests settled conditions. It includes the usual clause expressing the condemnation of all who may infringe the grant, specifying particularly the king's successors. It is easy to suggest that such charters are fraudulent, especially as there is an error in the dating clause of King Aethelred's confirmation, and the order of the witnesses is unusual, but it is more difficult to imagine that this picture of Swaebheard's court, agreeing as it does with what else we know of the men of that time, could possibly have been invented. Kemble did an ill service to scholarship when he decried the historical value of Saxon charters existing only in the form of copies.

I think we may deduce from the evidence available that on March 1st, 676, King Swaebheard was ruling from Canterbury the whole of Kent, with the approval and support of King Aethelred of Mercia and of the church and people of his kingdom. The charters show him confirming or adding to the possessions of the church in the various places named, nor is there any doubt that the church did actually own the lands in question. Such grants were highly characteristic of kingship at this period.

Of the length of King Swaebheard's reign we lack full information. On March 1st, 676, he claimed to be in his second year so that he must have succeeded before March 675. As Oswyn only died in February, on the 15th (Thomas of Elmham), we must assume that Swaebheard seized the kingship immediately after his decease. The only difficulty in the way of accepting this view will be mentioned later.

As to the end of his reign we have also no direct knowledge. King Aethelred's charter confirming that of Swaebheard dated March 1st, 676, is dated some months earlier,

namely, on January 8th of the same year. It would appear that this date must be erroneous and we are made further aware of this by the fact that the charter proclaims that it was issued on a Sunday, whereas January 8th was a Tuesday. Now, June 8th was a Sunday and it is easy to mistake a much abbreviated Junii (Jun') for a Januarii similarly shortened (Jan'). Such mistakes are made by copying clerks to this day. Accepting, then, June as the date of Aethelred's confirmation we must suppose that Swaebheard was reigning at that date. This gives us a time limit for his reign of February 15th, 675, to June 8th, 676, with the possibility that it lasted somewhat longer. But in this very year 676, the Chronicle tells us that Aethelred of Mercia overran the county of Kent. Perhaps Swaebheard had rebelled against his overlord, or someone—presumably Lothair—had overturned Swaebheard and so incurred the wrath of Aethelred. We do not know what happened but we hear no more of Swaebheard and it seems almost certain that his brief rule must have ended before the autumn of 676, for winter campaigns were not fashionable. He may have been a usurper but we really know of nothing else against him, for it is not likely that he really had any option about becoming subject to Mercia.

But this essay ought not to close without some remarks as to what the legitimate heir, Lothair, was doing all this time. We have a charter of his in 678 (B.44) in which he claims to be in his fourth year, so that it is obvious that he did not recognize Swaebheard as a legitimate king. We have also a charter dated “*anno regni nostri primo, indictione tertia, sub die kalendarum Aprilis*” which means April 1st, 675. It thus appears as if dated from Canterbury one month after Swaebheard had dated one from the same place and with the attestation of the same eminent churchmen. Even the faithful Ecca is among the witnesses. How shall we explain this charter? It is attested by Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Adrian, both men of exemplary ability and straightforwardness. It is not possible that they consented to recognize Lothair and Swaebheard at the same time. Nevertheless, this early grant of Lothair is actually mentioned

and confirmed, although no date is assigned to it, by a later King of Kent (B.67). Only one explanation seems possible. The charter was originally a genuine charter of Swaebheard but was altered on his death. Only two words were altered. It was only necessary to substitute the name of Lothair for that of Swaebheard in two places. It is an interesting and pertinent fact that Lothair did repeat Swaebheard's charters in the same words (see, for example, Birch 42 and 44). Thomas of Elmham was struck by this fact and called attention to it (p. 249). The mere fact that this charter of Lothair purports to be witnessed by Ecca supports the view put forward above. One cannot credit that this faithful follower of Oswyn and Swebheard so easily transferred his affections to Lothair, or was likely to have been accepted by him.

I conclude that Lothair was not king *de facto* in 675 although he may have been *de jure*; nor do I believe that he gave any charter at Canterbury or elsewhere during that year or before the end of Swaebheard's reign. What little we know of Swaebheard, from the charter evidence mostly, may be set out as follows :—

- 674 Attests Oswyn's grant of eighteen manentes in Thanet to Abbess Aebba (B.40).
- 674 (July) Attests Oswyn's grant of one aratrum at Liminge to St. Augustine's (B.73).
- 675 (January 17th) Attests Oswyn's grant of ten manentes at Sturry to Abbess Aebba (B.35).
- 675 (February 15th) Seized the throne on the death of Oswyn and was accepted by church and people.
- 675 (April 1st) Granted Stodmarsh to St. Augustine's inferred from terms of Lothair's grant (B.36).
- 675-6 (undated) Confirmed to Peterborough Abbey its lands in Hoo and added twenty manentes more, adjacent to the other (B.89). (See also Stenton, in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, concerning this complex narrative charter.)
- 676 (March 1st) Granted to Abbess Aebba lands in Sudanie and in Sturry (B.42).

- 676 (dated by Thomas of Elmham as shortly after last) Granted more lands in Sturrey and Bodsham to Abbess Aebba (B.41).
- 676 (June 8th) His grant In Sudanie confirmed by King Aethelred.
- 676 (after June) Probably lost the throne, and his life.

Some of the difficulties in the way of accepting this series of events have been discussed above. They are not of great moment. More serious, at first sight, is the evidence of all historians from Bede onwards to the effect that Swaebheard did not reign until fourteen years later. These are all based upon a single sentence added at some time unknown to both Bede's history and to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In the latter, but only in manuscripts E and F, we read under the year 692 "Tha waeron ii ciningas on Cent. Nihtred & Waebheard." MSS. E reads Wihtred for Nihtred. This is the correct spelling. Bede gives the date as 690 and the kings' names as Uictred and Suaebhard. He, too, says that they reigned together. Plummer in his edition of Bede points out that this statement does not harmonize with what is otherwise known of Wihtred, but he does not attempt to reconcile the differences. I know of no means of connecting Swaebheard and Wihtred for the reigns of Lothair and Edric intervened between them, and the charters of the two kings do not overlap or permit one to assume that they lived at the same time.

It seems that Bede or some later editor of Bede must have been gravely misinformed, and that the Anglo-Saxon chronicle writers of MSS. E and F followed in his footsteps. The charters have been so little used for historical purposes that the error has stood without examination or correction. But in Kent at least we may well desire to have the evidence sifted and some at least of the problems solved.

We may be reasonably sure that the events of Swaebheard's reign, so far as we know them, are correctly represented by the charters and not by the chronicles.