

KING HLO THERE

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ON the 15th day of February in the year 675 died King Oswin of Kent, whose short reign has been discussed in *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. L, p. 60. He had no near relatives who might have ascended the throne, but there were two claimants in the field, the brother and the son of his predecessor King Ecgbeorht I. It was the brother's claim that succeeded and he came to the throne as King Hlothere. This is a curious name composed of two elements. The first is "Hloth," which means either booty or a gang of men intent upon obtaining the same. The second element "here" has a somewhat similar meaning and is the usual word for an army. The dictionary gives the complete word "Hlothere" as meaning a robber or spoiler. It seems scarcely possible that his father and mother, King Eorconberht who first commanded that the idols throughout this whole kingdom should be destroyed, and Queen Seaxburh the saintly daughter of King Anna, and Abbess of Minster in Sheppey, can deliberately have given this name to their child, but it has to be recorded that there was a Bishop about this time with a somewhat similar name and also that our ancestors were particularly prone to call their children by such names as Wulfhere, Wulfhelm and so forth, although the wolf can scarcely have been an attractive creature. However that may be, Hlothere was not destined to come to the throne at once or without grave difficulty. Certain of the thanes of King Oswin seemed to have taken advantage of the absence of Hlothere from Kent (which we are bound to assume) and elected one of their own number to be King of Kent. This was Swaebheard of the royal line of Essex, and how he came to be a thane of King Oswin is an unsolved mystery. His usurpation has been dealt with in *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. L, p. 66. His seizure of the throne must have seemed to threaten a junction of Essex and Kent and this can hardly have been acceptable to the King of Mercia, Aethelraed by name, who, for this or for some other reason, gathered together his armies and, in the latter part of 676, descended upon Kent (ASC) and did grave damage to the future home of King Hlothere. According to Beda (i. v. 12) "he ravaged Kent with a cruel army, and polluted churches and monasteries, without regard to religion, or the fear of God, destroying the city of Rochester in the common ruin." Having done his worst he returned to Mercia, leaving Hlothere instead of Swaebheard as the lord of a much impoverished heritage. Thus did Hlothere come to an uneasy throne, and it could be wished that we knew

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something of what manner of man he was and where he had spent his early life, but Beda tells us nothing about this and William of Malmesbury, who has some libellous and exclusive information, wrote so many years after the event that we cannot take him seriously. What little information we have suggests that he was not so subservient to the church as was usual with the Kings of Kent and it is perhaps worth noting that his son (who was a great churchman) found it desirable to re-enact the laws against paganism.

Our earliest information about the opening years of Hlothere's reign comes from Beda, v. 12, and tells us in more detail what happened at Rochester. When the Mercian army arrived Bishop Putta was away from home. He was, as Beda says, "more industrious in spiritual than worldly affairs," and when he heard the news he decided to stay where he was, i.e., in the domains of that very king who had ravaged his see. He obtained the pastorship of a small church in Mercia and went about teaching church music, for which the clergy of Kent were very famous. In these circumstances Archbishop Theodore felt justified in consecrating a new Bishop to the see of Rochester. He chose Cwichelm, who would appear from his name to have come from Wessex, a kingdom which was at that time much disordered by disputes between the local chieftains. Cwichelm, however, preferred any place to the city of Rochester, for he found there "inopia rerum" (a lack of things), in other words, King Aethelraed had not left enough to support the household, church and dignity of a new Bishop. So "not long afterwards," he went away and we hear no more of him. Evidently West Kent was in a pretty bad way but the Archbishop managed to find a new candidate and consecrated Gebmund to the see, which he retained for some years at least.

We do not know whether East Kent suffered from the devastation of 676, but there is just a hint, in Hlothere's earliest charters, of a considerable dislocation of business. He had a first cousin named Domneva, who was abbess of Minster and who had been compensated with a large grant of land in Thanet for the murder of her brothers by Hlothere's brother King Eogbeorht. The usurper Swaebheard had confirmed these grants and had added somewhat to them and Domneva seems to have wished Hlothere to do the same. He was not unwilling but it would appear that he found some difficulty in obtaining the requisite clerical assistance for the best he could do was to take the charters of Swaebheard, rub out the name of the latter and insert his own. This left the date and the witnesses as they had been in Swaebheard's time and has been a fruitful source of difficulty to the students of that period, including the medieval monks of St. Augustines who, however, were bright enough to see what had happened. These charters are numbers 36 and 44 in Birch's *Cartularium Saxonicum*. The date of

their alteration is probably 678 and we really know nothing else of what Hlothere was doing in the first two years of his reign. We do know, however, that his actions must have appeared to his own people to have been highly displeasing to the various deities which they worshipped, for a comet was visible for no less than three months in the year 678 and, as Beda tells us in one of his less-known works (*D. Nat. Rerum*, c. 24) such a comet, lasting so long, was particularly sure to be followed by pestilence, war or tempests.

In this case the portent did not get to work at once, for the following year introduces a picture free from tragedy and we see Hlothere as the accepted King of a people recovering from devastation and comets alike. In the month of May of this year, 679, King Hlothere held his Court at Reculver and there he made a Royal Grant of land to Berceweald, Abbot of that place. The grant is expressed as having been made "with the consent of Archbishop Theodore and of Eadric, my brother's son, and of all my chief men." And no less than eleven chiefs are named as witnesses, quite a large number for so early a deed and for so small a kingdom as Kent. Their names were Gumbeorht, Gæbred, Osfrith, Eormenred, Aethelmaer, Hagan, Ealdred, Ealdhod, Guthheard, Beornheard, and Welhisc. Several of them had been at the court of the usurper and even of King Oswin, and they were doubtless the chief landowners of Kent at that time. It is noteworthy however that neither the Archbishop nor the abbot of St. Augustines are named as witnessing the deed. There is much of interest in the wording and history of this charter, but it has fortunately been examined and reported upon in considerable detail by Birch (*Utrecht Psalter*, p. 78) so that one need only note that the land named Westanae, which formed the major part of the grant, was the modern St. Nicholas-at-Wade, while the added grant "in Sturia" was very probably the modern parish of Hoath. Both of these places were ecclesiastically subordinate to the church of Reculver for hundreds of years after 679. It was in this same year that Kent lost one of its notabilities, no less a person than Hlothere's mother, Seaxburh of Sheppey, who went as abbess to Ely in succession to her sister Aethelthryth who had died there in June, 679.

Another incident of the same year reflects nothing but credit upon the character of Hlothere. It appears that his aunt Aethelthryth, the Abbess of Ely, had once in her service there a young man of high rank who had subsequently the misfortune to be captured in war. After various adventures he was sold to a certain Frisian merchant in London, not before his previous captors had discovered that there was something rather disconcerting about this particular slave. This something was the fact that about the third hour, when mass was being said, any fetters which had been put upon him fell off and left him free to go where he

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would. This little difficulty combined with the fact that the slave did not speak as a common man would do persuaded the Frisian that he would be wise to give him his freedom before worse should befall him ; but he saw no reason why the aristocratic slave should not pay for his freedom. But the slave had no money and nothing could be done until he remembered that King Hlothere was nephew to his former mistress and might be inclined to help. The Frisian allowed him to go off into Kent and the King seems to have found the money without making any difficulty about it.

In the following year, 680, Archbishop Theodore held a great church council at Haethfelda, which is generally agreed to be Hatfield. Beda (i. v. 17, the best authority for the council) says it was held in the 7th year of the reign of Hlothere. This dating is wrong, in as much as it disregards the two kings, Oswin and Swaebheard, whose reigns intervened between those of Hlothere and his brother Ecgbeorht. Beda is so good an authority that this error which is rather one of opinion than a true mistake has caused a certain amount of confusion. It is not likely that Hlothere was actually present at the council for it was assembled only to deal with certain matters of doctrine.

There must, however, somewhere about this time, have been a most important council in Kent, as a result of which several laws were issued in amplification of those already existing. They are best known from a copy in the *Textus Roffensis* and they have not lacked for textual criticism (e.g., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*. Attenborough. Cambridge Press, 1922), but their implications for the history of Kent have been too little examined. We have no Kentish Laws between those of Aethelbeorht I issued about the year 600 and those of Hlothere. They thus reflect the advance in civilization which had taken place in the meanwhile. Aethelbeorht's laws are 90 in number and deal with only three subjects : (a) theft and housebreaking, (b) personal violence, and (c) marriage and adultery. The laws of Hlothere number only sixteen and of these nine are devoted to theft and violence. The other seven break new ground. No doubt they have reference to arrangements which were already to some extent in operation, but they are nevertheless very noteworthy. Three of them have to do with the procedure which should characterize proceedings at " an medle oththe an thinge," i.e., at a meeting of some general court such as one may read about at length in the Islandic Sagas of a very much later date. This may well be the earliest reference to such meetings and neither of the words used to describe the assembly is met with again until the Scandinavian invasion reintroduced the name " thing " for a lawgiving. It would take up too much space if one should attempt to set out all these laws, but it is worth while listing the subjects of those which introduce new problems. Numbers 8 to 10 deal with the assemblies.

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Number 11 provides a penalty for slander. Number 12 is difficult because it provides a penalty against a man who is drinking with others and takes away the "steop" from one of them. We do not know what a "steop" may be. Number 15 deals with the problem of a man who bona fide entertains a stranger who turns out later to be violent or of ill-report. It is decided that if he has entertained him for three days in his own home he must either bring him to justice or make amends for any harm that he may do. Number 16 deals at length with the problem of a man of Kent (*Cantwara aenig*) who buys property in London and finds afterwards that the vendor has no right to it. Perhaps one of the most interesting of all is number six, which enacts that if a churl dies leaving a wife and child, the child shall stay with the mother while one of the father's relatives shall act as his guardian and take care of his property until he is ten years old. It is possible that the 10 years is an error, for in later days the Kentish man was not regarded as of full status until he reached the age of 16, but we have no certainty upon this point. In any case these laws of Hlothere show him as a competent ruler, intent upon the proper government of his people. There are two points about the laws which remain to be mentioned. The first is that they contain no mention of the church and the second that the King seems to have associated his nephew Eadric with their establishment. They are usually described, following the *Textus Roffensis*, as the laws of Hlothere and Eadric, Kings of Kent.

We must now turn to consider the position of this same nephew. It is about the year 685 and we can see through the mists of time that Eadric was unable to accept his position as son of a former king and yet no more than a courtier of his uncle. His association with law-giving and the specific mention of his approval in our only charter of importance did not suffice to satisfy his ambition. He seems to have got into touch with Ceadwalla of Wessex, whose star was rising in the Weald at this time, and it is likely that it was under his influence, and possibly as his agent, that he raised the men of Sussex against his uncle. It was once more a year of portents. If we may believe the "F" manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, milk and butter were turned to blood and rain from heaven was similarly affected. The men of Sussex came up against King Hlothere and defeated him in battle. He died while his wounds were being dressed, and his nephew seized the throne although, according to Henry of Huntington, "without the love or reverence of the people of Kent." It was perhaps in an attempt to secure respect that he describes Hlothere as "of holy memory" in his only charter that has come down to us. The dead King was buried with pomp in the oratory of Our Lady at Saint Augustines. What afterwards happened to his body is described in *Arch. Cant.*, XXXII, 1. Eadric had but little peace upon the throne for he either died soon after (Thorne,

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Edn. Davis, p. 23), or was actually deposed by the men of Kent before Ceadwalla's invasion (*Ann. Lindisfar. et Cantuar. Pertz.*, iv, 2). A third story says that he fled to the Continent where he died many years later, and this is repeated in Rapkin's *History*, which I have not been able to consult. The next king of the house of Hengest was Wihtred, son of Hlothere, but he, like his father, had first to wait until others had occupied the place of power, these others being Ceadwalla and Ine, kings of Wessex.