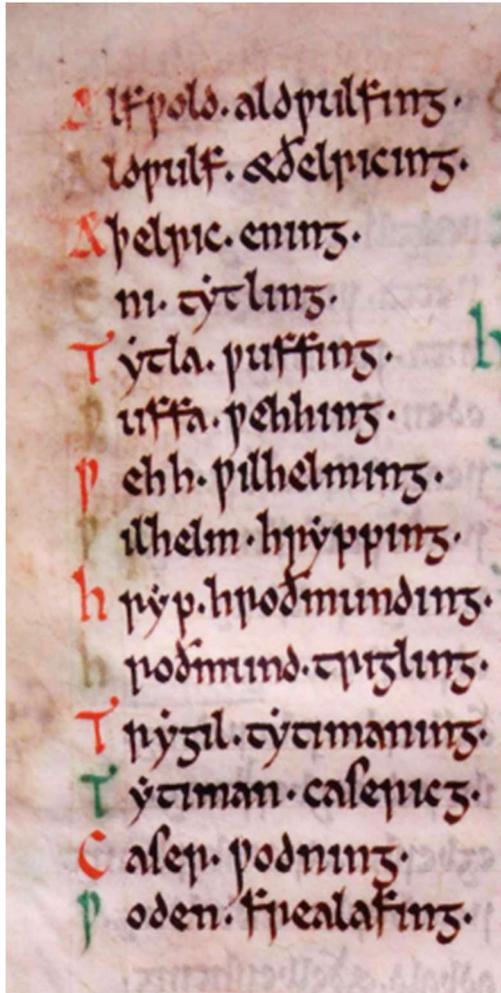


Woden and his Roles in Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogy

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Woden is a complex and elusive figure in Anglo-Saxon history. Like his Norse counterpart Oðinn, he has been thought to be the chief god of his pantheon, dominating most aspects of heathen worship within that culture. Scholars have debated the significance of these gods and their relationship to one another. Anthony Faulkes has addressed the genealogical role of Oðinn in twelfth and thirteenth century texts; Richard North has argued that the genealogical role of Oðinn in pre-Christian Scandinavia was the result of influence from Woden's role in Anglo-Saxon England. North has also argued that early Anglo-Saxon bishops played a significant role in establishing Woden as an

ancestor while Charlotte Behr argues that the popularity of the cult of Woden means that his role as a progenitor could have been employed before the conversion.[1] The popularity of his cult is supported by the distribution of English place names derived from the name Woden as well as analysis of archaeological sources but neither prove he was a progenitor of kings at an early stage. The essay will attempt to determine the origin of the cult of Woden and also to explore the functions, history and patterns of Woden's inclusion in royal genealogies. The earliest written documentation of Woden as an ancestral figure for royalty is in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (HE) and later in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

To understand the nature of Woden's role in royal genealogies, it is necessary to understand his roles as a deity. Most of what we know about Woden is in fact taken from thirteenth century Icelandic sources on the subject of his Norse counterpart Óðinn. These are far from ideal and in fact refer to a potentially very different god in a different country, many centuries after the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity. *Lacnunga*, an Anglo-Saxon collection of medicinal charms recorded in the tenth century, refers to Woden in a context with evident Odinic parallels:

+ Wyrme com snican, toslat
ðā genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
sloh ðā þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah.
þær geændade æppel and attor,
þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.
+ Fille and finule, felamihhtigu twa,
þa wyrte gesceop witig drihten,
halig on heofonum, þa he hongode;
sette and sænde on VII worulde,
earnum and eadigum eallum to bote.

+A snake came crawling, nought did he wound;
Then took Woden nine twigs of glory
Smote then that adder that in nine bits she flew apart.
There did apple and venom bring it about
That she never would turn into the house.
+ [Cher]vil and fennel, great and mighty two,
These herbs did the wise Lord create,
Holy in the heavens when he hung;

He established and sent them into the seven worlds,

For poor and for rich, for all a remedy.[2]

Though Christ-like in this description, the one who hangs in heaven is Odinic in that he creates herbs there.[3] This Woden can clearly be identified as Oðinn when he is described as halig on heofonum, þa he hongode (holy in the heavens when he hung), a reference to his self-sacrifice which is also detailed in Hávamál which was copied in the twelfth century but is most likely based on much older oral traditions:

I know that I hung on the windy tree,

Spear-wounded, nine full nights,

given to Oðinn, myself to myself,

on that tree that rose from roots

that no man ever knows.[4]

If Oðinn has some basic similarities to the Anglo-Saxon Woden then the most valuable information about the god that can be taken from the Eddic verses, in regards to royal genealogies, is that he was a king. As well as being the Lord of the gods, he is god of war, poetry, frenzy and is depicted as a father to gods and men, referred to as Alföðr (all-father).[5] Oðinn's most beloved son is Baldr, whose name is cognate with Old English bealdor but is not the same as Woden's son Bældæg, who also appears in the regnal lists of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, though their names are similar.[6]

The earliest manuscript showing Woden in a genealogy is contained in the Anglian collection, completed in 812. Bede's HE was completed in 731 and lists the genealogy of Æthelberht of Kent (560-616) who he says was descended from the semi-mythical English progenitor, Hengest, who in turn was descended from Woden. Bede also says that many other kings claim descent from Woden.[7] Eric John believes that the genealogy deriving from Woden was not written by Bede himself and was only included in HE because it had been sent to him by someone of such a position that it would have been unwise to leave it out.[8]

The fact that Woden was, for whatever reason, included in these genealogies shows that belief in him as a progenitor of royal dynasties was already popular by the 730's. In the case of the Northumbrian dynasty for example, common descent from Woden might have been used to, "express political relationships with other provincial royal houses in the seventh century." [9] The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, probably completed in the late ninth century, during the reign of Alfred the Great, provides genealogies for the royal houses of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, many of which also include Woden as an ancestor:

547. Here Ida, from whom originated the royal family of the Northumbrians, succeeded to the kingdom and ruled twelve years. And he built Bamburgh, which was first enclosed with a stockade and thereafter with a wall.' Ida was Eoppa's offspring, Eoppa was Esa's offspring, Esa Ingui's offspring, Ingui Angenwit's offspring, Angenwit Aloc's offspring, Aloc Benoc's offspring, Benoc Brand's offspring, Brand Bældæg's offspring, Bældæg Woden's offspring, Woden Frithowulf's offspring, Frithowulf Finn's offspring, Finn Godwulf's offspring, Godwulf Geat's offspring.[10]

The genealogies are ordered into alliterative patterns, this is most likely a means of facilitating an oral tradition that can easily be remembered. For this reason the genealogies are unlikely to be accurate and

serve merely to reinforce national myths which legitimise power. The patterns of the royal English genealogies are also numerical; the significance of this fact has been pointed out by Thomas D. Hill:

Woden is consistently placed at nine removes from the founder of a dynasty. There are six unrelated examples of this pattern in the various genealogies and William of Malmesbury refers to three other founders of dynasties as “tenth, as they say, from Woden,” which suggests that he recognised the motif as a traditional one.[11]

He goes on to point out that such numerical patterns are not specifically Germanic, since they can also be found in Welsh, Irish and biblical genealogies but that they do demonstrate the symbolic nature of the early stages of the genealogies. Nine was a significant number in regards to Oðinn and Norse mythology and it occurs in both *Lacnunga* and *Hávamál* so it is possible that there was a spiritual discipline associated with the construction of the genealogies themselves.

Bede’s foundation myth of the English serves a similarly symbolic purpose. Hengest and Horsa’s arrival in Britain is a simplification of a more complex story of invasion and settlement. Bede refers primarily to three main Germanic tribes and chooses to overlook others such as the possibility of a Merovingian Frankish descent of East Kentish peoples, rather than merely Jutish.[12] Behr argues that the archaeological evidence found in Kent supports Bede’s assertion that the Kentish originated in Jutland and probably brought the cult of Woden with them:

It is possible to interpret the archaeological evidence found at Finglesham, Eastry and Woodnesborough, the meaning of the place-names, the documentary evidence of a royal villa, and the exceptionally rich graves in the cemetery of Finglesham as well as the cremation grave, the objects linked to the cult of Woden (not only the bracteates but also the belt-buckle and the pendant) as pointing to an important political and religious centre in the sixth century.[13]

In addition to Woodnesborough, Behr cites the Kentish village of Wormshill as evidence that Woden was worshipped by Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century. The Finglesham buckle depicts a figure holding two spears and is thus interpreted as being potentially linked to a ritual of the cult of Woden based on the fact that Icelandic sources associate Oðinn with spears and spear-wounds.[14] Behr perhaps goes too far here as the spear was a common weapon in Europe at that time and the mere presence of the image of a spear on an artefact does not indicate any association to Woden or Oðinn. Chaney also lists numerous locations which testify to the prominence of the cult of Woden throughout Southern England from an early stage:

The ancient earthwork of Wansdyke (Wodnes dic or ‘Woden’s dyke’ in a charter of A.D. 903), above the Vale of Pewsey in Wiltshire and Somerset, was probably a cult-centre of the god, running as it does between Wodnes beorg (in a charter of A.D. 825 and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle sub annis 592 and 792), ‘Woden’s barrow’, and Wodnes dene, ‘Woden’s valley’. In central Mercia the present place-names of Wednesbury (Wadnesberie of Domesday Book, Woden’s fortress’) and Wednesfield (Wodensfeld of Domesday Book, ‘Woden’s open country’) attest to his worship, as do the village of Wensley (Wodnesleie, ‘Woden’s grove’) in Derbyshire, the half-hundred of the same name or Wenslow (Weneslai in Domesday, but Wodneslawe in A.D. 1169) in Bedfordshire, and the hundred of Wodenslawe (‘Woden’s mound’), also in Bedfordshire, all in Anglian lands. Another Wodnesfeld, perhaps to be identified with Wanswell in Gloucestershire, is mentioned by Florence of Worcester sub anno 911.[15]

Bede would undoubtedly have been aware of the religious significance of Woden and would not have approved, so chose to euhemerise him, thus preserving his genealogical function for the royal house of Kent.[16] This is a more acceptable role for Woden which does no damage to the inherited social hierarchy though it was heavily influenced by pagan beliefs. Bede uses the origin story and the alliterative genealogies as a means of fostering cultural unity between certain sections of the Germanic population of Britain. Royal blood was vital in order to legitimise kingship, this is why the genealogies of the late eighth century all lead to Woden, except that of Essex which leads to Seaxnēat, who is presumably an imported version of the old Saxon god Saxnōt, although very little is known about him.[17] The divinity of the kings was inherited from the fictional genealogies which linked them to both gods and ancient Germanic heroes such as Finn.[18] Whether from god or hero, the claim of descent serves to reinforce cultural pedigree:

The pedigree or pedigree-collection has, in fact, a wide variety of political applications...It can be expression of something wider than kingship: it can proclaim political alliances and overlordships; it can announce belief in the existence of racial grouping; it can seek to express an harmonious political order.[19]

The fact that the upper reaches of these genealogies are purely fictional means that the more recent sections could also be fictional and that a usurper could simply graft their family onto the royal bloodline that was already in place. Though his origin is hard to prove, Cenwulf of Mercia (d. 821) is unlikely to have had a real connection to the Mercian royal house and is therefore evidence that though royal lineage was important to the Anglo-Saxons, it was not a prerequisite for power since authority could be legitimised through successful military campaigns coupled with the necessary genealogical invention.[20] Marriages between households would necessitate re-structuring of the genealogy as in the case of Bernicia when united with Deira to form Northumbria. Acha, the sister of Edwin king of Deira was married to Æthelfrith king of Bernicia which could have led to some restructuring. The Chronicle of Æthelweard (975 -983) refers to the progenitor of all branches of the Bernician line, king Ida, as “cuius prosapia regni et nobilitatis a Vuothen exordium sumit, ‘whose line of descent takes the beginning of its royal authority and of its nobilitas from Woden.”[21] An earlier example of invented genealogy can be found in the case of Cerdic of Wessex (d. 534):

The West Saxon pedigree above Cerdic, the founder of the dynasty, is in whole or in part... a construction;...If an earlier pedigree for Cerdic was ever known, it has disappeared entirely from our sources; but we should not necessarily insist that there ever was one.[22]

Rather than rejecting the pagan aspects of royal inheritance, they were embraced and seemingly encouraged by Christians such as Alcuin of York. In a letter to the people of Kent dating 797, Alcuin laments the lack of pedigree in the royal stock:

The very peoples of the English, their kingdoms and their kings, fight among themselves. Scarcely anyone can now be found from the ancient stock of kings, and the more uncertain their origin, the more they lack valour.[23]

The gods could either legitimise rule through divinity or be demoted to the status of mere heroes and thus, by association with their grand deeds, still serve a function in the maintenance of power.[24] Euhemerisation was a means of legitimising the existing form of divine pagan inheritance in a new Christian context, to the extent that Woden was still being listed in royal genealogies as late as the

twelfth century when he was recorded as an ancestor of Ælfwald of East Anglia in the *Textus Roffensis*. Germanic heroes were equally as prominent in genealogies as euhemerised gods, so were presumably as useful for these purposes. The genealogies include the names of heroes such as Scaef, Scyld, Beaw, Heremod, Eormanric, Offa of Angle, Finn and Hwala; the first seven of whom appear in *Beowulf* and the last four in *Widsith*. [25] Wormald interprets the inclusion of these heroes of legend as evidence of an Anglo-Saxon determination to hold onto their pagan past in order to give distinction to the ancestry of their kings. This desire was not limited to the illiterate underclass nor were the heroes limited to those of Germanic antiquity, as is demonstrated by the inclusion of Caesar in East Anglian genealogies and the biblical figures of Noah and Adam in the *West Saxon*. [26] The inclusion of such figures is testament to the flexible nature of royal genealogies which facilitated their continuation into the Christian era:

Encapsulated in verse (particularly in praise poems), in heroic tales, and in the less literary genealogical records, royal or dynastic propaganda could be broadcast via the learned classes whose responsibility it was to maintain 'knowledge' of this type. Genealogy allowed the ruling dynasties to present the past (and, by implication, the future) in terms of their own history; such total exclusion of other lines was a powerful propaganda weapon. [27]

Even in pre-Christian times, the oral traditions of royal genealogies would have been maintained by a learned class, the myth of divine descent was an important principle of political life for Anglo-Saxons. This type of propaganda was too powerful and valuable to be discarded by the new literate Christian class and so maintained its political function even after heathenism was no longer relevant. [28] Moisl believes that the practice of tracing descent to a divine figure was in fact imported from Saxons on the continent via an oral tradition:

Given...on the one hand that the myth of divine descent was in England applied specifically to royal dynasties, and on the other that orally transmitted dynastic histories actually existed among the Anglo-Saxons, little doubt can remain that, in beginning their lists with Woden and Seaxnet, the ecclesiastical compilers of the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies were following pre-existing, orally transmitted dynastic origin legends comparable to those attested on the Continent, in which descent from heathen gods was featured. [29]

The nature of divine descent did not create a system that bestowed arbitrary power upon an inheritor. Far from being a living deity, the early Germanic king was not godlike or all powerful, his authority was dependent on his charismatic power which his tribe required for well-being. [30] He could be blamed for misfortune in war or harvest and be consequently replaced. This aspect of Germanic kingship can be traced back to the earliest source on the subject, Tacitus, "They choose their noble kings for their birth, their commanders for their valour. The power even of the king is not absolute or arbitrary." [31] Though Tacitus writes several centuries before the Anglo-Saxons settled England, and is not an entirely reliable source, depicting the Germans as being more primitive than they are likely to have been, there are many similarities between the religious customs he describes and those of Germanic pagans in later sources. Just as these kings of ancient Germany inherit non-absolute power, so too do the Germanic kings of early England who are dependent on public support in order to attain the throne and protect it from others who claim the right of inheritance, as Chaney explains:

The tribal election of the sacral ruler was...the right to assure itself of the mana-filled, god-sprung king, selected from the royal race for his obvious 'luck'. The election was thus the tribal right to choose the one who was the 'incarnation of the mystical powers of the whole community of the folk' [32]

The function of Germanic divine descent was to ensure that the ruler was entitled to his position through right of kinship. Evidence for the kin-centred basis of Anglo-Saxon kingship can be found in the etymology of the word *cyning* (king), which may mean 'son of the *cyn* or family', specifically in the context of the royal bloodline. *Cyning* is cognate with German *könig* and Old Norse *konungr*, so it is likely that this conception of kingship was widespread among Germanic peoples.[33]

The Anglo-Saxons regarded sacral inheritance and their traditions of kingship as a vital part of their tribal identities. It is because of this awareness of their Northern heritage that later English missionaries and their converts were determined not to be separated from the pagan and secular traditions that dictated the hierarchy of their society.[34] But the origin of this practice may be Roman, rather than Northern.

The god whom Tacitus interpreted, through *interpretatio romana*, as Mercury, bears most resemblance to Wotan, on account of his appeasement by human sacrifice.[35] Woden is not mentioned by Tacitus directly; indeed Freyr the fertility god was more popular with Scandinavian kings in the earlier sources than the demonic god of war and frenzy, Woden.[36] Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* portrays Freyr or Yngvi as a more common ancestral figure than Óðinn; he is the founder of the Ynglinga dynasty but Snorri robs him of his divinity through euhemerisation, though he does award him the status of mythological god in his *Edda*. [37] Woden as a war god inevitably became more popular with travelling war-bands who depended on his divine frenzy for victory.[38] These could include the Lombards and Goths who travelled south as well as the Anglo-Saxons that went west. The popularity of Woden could be a result of contact with Romans and their god of trade and wealth, Mercury, who would be essential to travelling peoples.[39] It may be that Mercury's role of a trade god evolved into that of an aristocratic war-band leader out of cultural necessity or that Woden's cult was brought southward with the migrants and emerged from a minor god to the primary one of their pantheon.[40] In any case, later Scandinavian sources such as *The Elder Edda*, feature Óðinn as the most prominent god in all respects, though this may be the result of Snorri Sturluson's restructuring of the pantheon. Óðinn's original popularity was probably the result of influence from the south as Richard North has argued:

Óðinn perhaps stands out because...this figure was imported northwards, as Mercury, across the upper Rhine in the first few centuries of this era, thence into Southern and Northern Germany and the low Countries, Southern England and Scandinavia.[41]

Anglo-Saxon sources also equate Woden with Mercury; Ælfric of Eynsham refers to Mercury in the context of mountain sacrifice in his *De falsis diis*, which Richard North has interpreted as a form of Odinic worship on the basis of a comparison with the Old Norse poem *Atlakviða*. [42] It must be noted, however, that Ælfric was eager to distinguish Woden from the god of the marauding pagan Vikings, Óðinn. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, Ælfric refers to Óðon, an anglicised form of Óðinn, rather than the English Woden.[43] Ælfric may have withheld the knowledge connecting the two gods, in an effort to disguise the fact that his patrons Æthelweard (d. 1000) and Æthelmær (d. 1017), and also king Æthelred (978-1016) could claim descent from the same pagan god that their Viking enemies worshipped.[44] It is also possible that this is, as Meaney asserts, simply an unveiled reference exclusively to the Scandinavian and not the English god.[45] His genealogical role would thus remain untainted by association with the Viking god. In either case it is clear that the genealogical attitude to Woden changed a great deal during the Anglo-Saxon period.

The early Anglo-Saxon family unit was derived as much from the *comitatus* as from the tribe itself. The model for hierarchy and leadership was derived from that of the *comitatus* on the move but had to

adapt when it settled in England. Thus Woden was promoted from the position of a war-god tasked with bringing fortune in battle, to an ancestral figure that could legitimise authority and elevate a specific family by “investing it with divine sanction”. [46] For the non-royal nobility, the status of *stirps regia*, achieved through genealogy, was also desirable as it was needed in order to maintain their own wealth and power and for their family to one day ascend to a higher social position. [47] Once this position was achieved, Woden had proved they were capable of ruling, but he could not protect them from rival claimants who also claimed this divine descent. The *stirps regia*, as a higher race tasked with mediating between gods and man, depended upon its charismatic quality which elevated them from the masses through divine descent. [48]

The eligibility for the throne changed over the centuries until eventually it was limited to perhaps a three-generation group. [49] Despite this, by as late as the eleventh century, just as in the sixth, the final decision regarding succession was made with the sword. [50] The value of the alleged lineage would have become increasingly suspect as Christianity became more popular and yet the claim of descent from Woden did not disappear. Bede’s motivation for including this shadowy and demonic figure in his HE may have been one of political necessity or it could have been less reluctant. If Wormald is right, then Bede, like Alcuin could overlook the shameful pagan history, perhaps because they saw the value of this custom as a means of maintaining a relatively stable system of monarchy:

For Alcuin, as for Bede, it was no embarrassment to have kings descended from pagan gods (who could anyway be written off as deified heroes), so long as this descent was illustrious. Even sophisticated churchmen sought political stability in the ancient, originally pagan, concept of hereditary royal charisma, and lamented its disappearance from England. [51]

Possible analogues for the integration of Woden’s genealogical role into Christian Anglo-Saxon England can be found on the continent. Among Germanic peoples in mainland Europe, conversion did not weaken belief or interest in descent from the gods, Wallace-Hadrill argued that it may even have strengthened it. Christianity was brought to the East Germanic peoples in the form of Arianism which was probably influenced by paganism. The missionaries appealed to the leaders who looked to deities for support and could have seen the benefit of the hierarchical nature of the Arian holy trinity. [52]

It is likely that a similar type of integration occurred among the Anglo-Saxon tribal leaders when confronted with Catholicism so that certain aspects of secular hierarchical structures were maintained because the conversion was applied in a top down process. Woden was thus preserved but in a less powerful form, the status of his genealogical role would have been greatly diminished through euhemerisation, though we cannot be certain this role existed at all in the pagan era. This would have left a vacant position available for a new divine ancestor so the genealogy was pushed back to Frealaf, then to Geat, then to Scaef and finally to Christ. [53] The lists did not function as mere antiquarianism but were required to reflect the history and power structure of the current social hierarchy. [54]

Woden’s power as an ancestral figure was declining throughout the Christian era; Woden’s endurance in England was a product, primarily, of eighth century traditions but towards the end of the century, in the time of Offa, names needed to be added above Woden’s, showing that by this time he had been euhemerised. [55] By this stage he would have had no more importance than the other heroic figures from Northern history and legend that feature in genealogies, such as Geat, Heremod, Scyld and Finn. [56] Genealogists in the service of rival royal houses were competing with one another to construct the most distinguished pedigrees, so not only the pedigree of Mercia but also those of Deira, Bernicia,

Kent and East Anglia were all extended beyond Woden to Frealaf, a hero whose name indicates a possible relation to the Scandinavian fertility god, Freyr.[57] This assertion is based on the fact that the fréa and freyr forms are morphological cognates, but the Old English fréa simply means “lord” and was a commonly used word, so the true identity of Frealaf is uncertain.

Through interpretation of The Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem, Chaney identifies the ‘Os-’ prefix, signifying ‘(heathen) god’ or ‘divine’, as being associated with Woden.[58] This could connect all rulers with the prefix ‘Os-’ (which includes 12 Northumbrian rulers) directly to the god. Davis goes further and suggests that the Kentish progenitor, Oisc and even his father Hengest could both actually have been Woden in his generic classification as os. The Kentish king-list could have been a collection of many names for the same ancestral war-god and over the ages they emerged as separate euhemerised heroes, preserved by Bede.[59]

The height of Woden’s power was in the pagan era while he was still revered as a god, for Oðinn it was much later, probably when Snorri promoted him to king of the Æsir. Woden’s genealogical role may have preserved his name in the memory of the Anglo-Saxons, as is the case for numerous heroic figures included in ancestral lists, but his cultural significance was depleted as Christianity became a more dominant ideology. Though not originally a progenitor and though eventually a mere euhemerised hero, the original significance and popularity of his cult is proven by his prominence in king-lists and the frequency of place names, king’s names and the names of heroes that are derived from or related to his own.

Notes

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55 Meaney, 'Woden in England', p. 110.

56 Tolkien, Finn and Hengest, p. 46.

57 Davis, 'Cultural assimilation in the AS royal genealogies', p28-9.

58 Chaney, The Cult of Kingship, p.23.

59 Davis, 'Cultural assimilation in the AS royal genealogies', p. 27.

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