Ælfric Leofwinesson

Backstory

Species: Mousefolk Sex: 챃 - Transmasculine

Age: 24 or 25 Height: 3ft 11in Weight: 89lbs

Siblings: Hilda (sister, 2 years older), Ealhswib (Sister, 1 year

older) †, Borri (brother, 3 years younger) †, and Ingunn

(sister, 3 years younger †)

Misc: Has ADHD, undiagnosed due to a lack of awareness of the condition at the time.



Cultural Notes

Most of the folk in the area where Ælfriclives are mice, squirrels, rabbits, otters, wolves, foxes, deer, and bears. They do not have a predator/prey dynamic, although it is unusual to see rodents or rabbits in positions of power. While it is not unheard of, it is generally considered a strange upheaval of the social order. Physical size is one of the big factors in this. A hangover of the now-obsolete predator/prey dynamic also has an influence.

Gender Identity and Transitioning In This Era

Transitioning via magic is not doable in this world, as magic exists but is rare, and practised only by gods, land spirits, and similar beings.

However, gender identity is somewhat more fluid in this culture than it is in ours. Transphobia is certainly not unheard of, but any given individual may indeed choose to present as feminine or masculine, regardless of the gender assigned at birth.

Ælfric is an original character who occurs in a range of short stories based on the cultures of pre-Christian Germanic Europe and Viking Age Scandinavia. He began life in humble circumstances with a loving family, but had all of that taken away from him in one cruel day. His vengeance, and the benevolence with which he treated others afterwards, is a testament to his character.

Trust & Confidence

(newborn)

Ælfric was born on a farm, and was the third of his parents' children. Given the nature of their home and working space both parents were able to be present for his birth, and both parents were also well-practised in caring for babies by this point.

However, Ælfric's mother, Æbbe, had a mild bias towards routine and returning to her farm duties that didn't quite work for Ælfric. The physical care she provided was perfectly fine, but Ælfric picked up on the sense that Æbbe didn't believe there was anything special about their bond. At this tender time of his life he had no concept of 'routine', but that was how he felt: like caring for him was something his mother did out of routine, and that while she loved him, that love came secondary to the need to attend to other things.

Much of the time when she nursed him, she wanted to be somewhere else. Æbbe was a naturally active woman and acutely aware of the work to be done on the farm and her role in keeping up with it. Her sense of impatience left Ælfric with two feelings: of his own unimportance, and of the need to hurry so that his mother didn't have to spend too much time on him.

It should be stated here that none of the feeing of unimportance and of being hurried was extreme, but it was enough to set a trend for Ælfric's feelings towards himself and others.

To briefly include context about his father, Leofwine, he had previously been a bodyguard to the high king prior to 'retiring' after an injury, to this farm to raise his family. The farmland was awarded to him on a tax-free basis for as long as he personally worked on it.

Freedom & Self-Determination

(toddlerhood)

Æbbe's trend of busyness, and the sense that he was not captivating enough for her, remained with him into toddlerhood. As he became more active and began to crawl and explore the house, he began to actively respond to these two feelings. He clung to his mother to try to keep her attention. She responded by prising him off of her, laughing him off, or trying anything else that she believed would work. To combat his feeling of

not being interesting he tried to be useful. After all, if the work she did was more interesting than him then perhaps he could spend more time with her by being involved with it.

This was no easy task for a toddler. While there is plenty to do on any farm, almost none of it is age-appropriate for such a small child. All he noticed was that his mother (and his father too; he began to recognise that there were more people around than just him and his mum) were always busy, and he wanted to be busy with them.

One day he saw Æbbe sorting root vegetables into boxes. He approached her, picked one of the vegetables up, and put it into one of the boxes, since that seemed to be the task of the moment. She took it out again – it was the wrong size for that box – but saw what he was trying to do and briefly told him what she wanted him to do: put approximately the same weight of carrots, turnips, and potatoes into each box.

Ælfric tried to understand this instruction but found it confusing. He watched her to see what she was doing, but she worked fast and had a much better eye – and better coordination – for what she was doing than he did. He couldn't make sense of it all, became frustrated, and cried.

Æbbe tried to explain again but Ælfric felt his brain seizing up as he tried to make sense of it, and failed to understand what he was supposed to do. This sense of brain-lag became something he experienced on a fairly regular basis, and often, when it did, he became anxious. This was the beginning of Ælfric's experience of ADHD.

Æbbe wasn't the only person in the house who made demands of him. He also had a sister, Hilda. Hilda was three or four years old by this time and was excited to have a little sibling to play with. She hurriedly explained the games she had in mind and tried to start playing them with him.

Once again this was too much for Ælfric, who didn't as yet possess the cognitive function to understand the role-play, rules, or make-believe that Hilda was trying to describe. He became frustrated, and because he couldn't solve the problem, he once again became anxious. Hilda became impatient, and this further fuelled his anxiety.

Perhaps Ælfric would have found all of this even more frustrating if not for his father, Leofwine. Leofwine recognised the sense of haste around the house and correctly interpreted Ælfric's body language as feelings of inadequacy. Whenever he could he diffused the situation, whether that meant helping his wife, distracting Hilda, or picking

Ælfric up and walking to a quieter room with him. This helped Ælfric very much, and he developed a close bond with his father.

Overall,Ælfric's toddlerhood experiences meant that he did not meet his psychological needs as a toddler particularly well. Rather than leaving this life stage feeling sure of himself and able to carve his own destiny, he felt overly controlled and prone to shame for being unable to perform as well as everyone else seemed to expect. He managed these feelings by becoming quiet and reserved, and trying not to draw the attention of the other members of the household too much.

Ealhswiþ was around four years old by this time, and Ælfric began to develop more of a relationship with her. She was far quieter than Hilda so as such, Ælfric had tended to overlook her whenever Hilda was around, but as he began to grow a little bit older, Ælfric came to recognise the presence of his other older sister and value her for her quiet disposition, which he felt was far less intrusive. They played together sometimes, and sometimes they left each other alone. When one felt like playing and the other didn't, they respected one another enough not to push them. This allowed them to develop a relationship of mutual respect.

Ambition

(young childhood)

As Ælfric turned 3, his mother gave birth to twins, who were named Borri, and Ingunn.

Ælfric felt somewhat mixed about the two. On the one hand, the general mood of the house was one of happiness at having two new arrivals. However, when Ælfric was quite honest about it he couldn't quite muster himself to feel pleased. Being babies, they demanded care by crying, and of course, they weren't reserved about doing that, even at night. Ælfric felt as if the twins signified that his time of being the baby of the family was over and that they were taking over a position that was rightfully his. He felt mixed about the twins but his feelings were biased towards resentment.

As Ælfric grew a little bigger and stronger and his coordination and cognitive function improved, some of the tasks around the farm began to look achievable. There were still many tasks that looked too difficult, strange or dangerous, but he regained his desire to try and help.

Aside from looking at the farm's practical tasks with fresh eyes, he also developed a few new habits. He began to feel his mother's tension to get tasks done within the allotted

time, and developed a gentle tone of voice and demeanour in an attempt to soothe her. He also began to notice Æbbe's – and Hilda's, and his father's – behavioural patterns and tried to anticipate what would happen next. If he could, he would offer help.

His family noticed these things and described these behaviours as 'kind'.

Out of everyone in the house, it was his dad who ran with this. He saw what Ælfric was trying to do and showed him things that he could do around the farm. He was able to help his dad bring water from the well and feed the goats, and even if he couldn't do these things single-handedly he could at least accompany his dad, who seldom seemed to be in a rush.

This was well-intentioned and Ælfric tended to feel mostly better when Leofwine helped him out like this. However, Ælfric's anxiety to help was already well set in and he found himself disproportionately noticing how much of these tasks he couldn't do. It seemed to him that there was more he couldn't do than could.

Ælfric's communication problems with Hilda continued. She was still eager to play with him, but often communicated too quickly or without due clarity the games she wanted them to play together. In his own way, Ælfric unwittingly contributed to the communication barrier between them due to his ADHD. At times he would speak too loudly, interrupt her, or talk excessively. Hilda would become frustrated with this, and her frustration drove Ælfric back into himself – at least whenever he was around her. She got particularly frustrated with his excessive talking, which led him to become unwilling to start talking in case he failed to make his point concisely.

Despite all of this shyness and anxiety, Ælfric was an energetic child. This in itself contributed to his difficulties in helping around the farm as he didn't like to sit still for too long. It wasn't so much about physical activity for him; he had such an active mind that he wanted to see and explore everything, so he did. He began to berate himself even for this. It took him a while to recognise that his parents didn't make as big of a deal about his short attention span as he did, but he found it difficult to give himself an easy time about it.

Overall, Ælfric only partially met the tasks of this life-stage. He was keen to cooperate with the others but only managed to do with his father, who was the only person with the qualities Ælfric needed to be able to perform well. In addition to this, living on a farm meant that he didn't feel particularly inspired to develop dreams of doing anything else

with his life. As far as he knew – or indeed, as far as he thought about it – farm life was it.

Occasionally during his childhood, a particular visitor would visit the farm. Ælfric quickly learned that this was a friend of his father's, named Brynnjar, but aside from this Ælfric thought little about the whole thing. Brynnjar was confident and friendly, and his dealings with Ælfric were cordial.

Productivity

(older childhood)

Despite their rocky start, Hilda still liked the idea of playing with her sibling, and approached Ælfric occasionally to suggest a game or to invite him to some scene that she was acting out with her toys. Ælfric would join in as best he could, but often found himself on the back foot in such games. This became a trend throughout the siblings' earlier childhoods, where Hilda would be a little more developmentally advanced than him on account of her extra two years, but not understand that Ælfric needed things explained a little more carefully. However, child development is a gradual thing, and occasionally she had the presence of mind to explain things more slowly, which helped Ælfric.

Indeed, the older they both got, the smaller the developmental gap between them got. Hilda came to realise that she had been too eager and moderated herself in conversations with him. Ælfric himself began to relax more when they talked, with the recognition that she was doing her best. This was something of a slow process that took a few years as both children, even Hilda, were still developmentally quite young and prone to relapses in behaviour, but she at least recognised the problem and began to hone her skills in reducing her contribution to it. One of her later adjustments was to rein in her frustration whenever Ælfric talked for longer than she would like.

Play and communication with his sister wasn't the only area where Ælfric often felt inadequate. Most of the farm's labour needs were above what was age-appropriate for him at this time, so his parents demonstrated a bias towards trying to get him to do work that was more appropriate for children a little older than he was. This was not a deliberate act of cruelty on their part but it did mean that Ælfric usually felt unready for whatever task was given to him.

As far as Borri and Ingunn went, Ælfric gradually began to feel more charitable towards them. He had picked up on a new nuance of his father's care for him: that it was selfless and generously given. These were qualities he liked, and as he grew older he began to aspire to them himself.

Meanwhile, Ealhswip continued keeping to herself and generally only took a 'background' position in everyone's lives. Perhaps because of this, she got along better with Ælfric than she did with Hilda. Like him, Ealhswip had been able to close the gap between herself and Hilda, but the pair still did not click.

As an older child he began to think about this in a new way: perhaps, rather than being inadequate, they were trying to get him to do things he couldn't, yet. And yet, Ælfric's desire to please his family and be a helpful, productive member of the team almost always won out, which predictably ended up with him feeling inadequate.

Once again, his father remained mindful of Ælfric's predicament and tried to keep the most age-appropriate tasks clear for Ælfric to do. That wasn't always easy as his wife and Hilda were likely to do these tasks if they saw that they needed doing, but he did his best, and Ælfric noticed.

Ælfric still presented as feminine at the time so most of the tasks he did were assigned to him by his mother. Usually she had him patching clothes, picking and planting vegetables, and other similar tasks. He was capable of doing these things well by this time in his childhood, but they required more mental stamina than he generally had so he found them exhausting.

He learned to navigate his ADHD by requesting any information he believed he'd missed. However this only worked if he realised he'd missed any information, and he also began to feel embarrassed at his need to do this. This put him off asking how to do completely new tasks on the farm, which in itself stymied his productivity and ability to be a flexible team-mate.

At around this time Ælfric got into several fights with the boys in the village. He had developed a reputation around the village for being incompetent and slow to learn, and while this was due to his ADHD-related difficulties, the village had no vocabulary for such things, so he was simply referred to as slow. The boys had learned that this problem was bad enough that if Ælfric was distracted or heard a distracting noise during a conversation it would derail his train of thought entirely, so the boys started

teasing him by deliberately derailing him while he was talking. It became an effective way for them to silence him, and they often did it for fun or for other, arbitrary reasons.

Not content with tormenting Ælfric thus far, the boys took their games even further. It wasn't unusual for them to bang pots and pans next to his ear when he was distracted with something else. A mouse's hearing is sensitive, so this was uncomfortable as well as frustrating.

Ælfric tolerated all of this as best he could for as much of the time as he could, but this, on top of his own frustration with himself at being unable to help his family more than he currently did, pushed him to fight.

It was no wonder that he lashed out from time to time to make the bullying stop. Usually these scuffles were broken up by one or more of their parents before anyone got too badly hurt.

All of this in itself left Ælfric feeling empathy for anybody else who got bullied, so once he started lashing out and learned how to fight, he felt emboldened to come to the aid of anybody else who the bullies targeted.

Ælfric also began to feel his masculine identity emerge at around this time, and developed dysphoria as his secondary sexual characteristics developed. The feeling was not severe however, and all Ælfric experienced at this point in his life was a subtle, nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right, but that he couldn't identify well enough to fix or escape. This dysphoria gradually became more pronounced as he got older.

For the time being, however, he still presented as feminine and his family considered him female, and that meant that in time, Ælfric could anticipate that his parents would marry him off to a boy from another mousefolk family. Without clarity on what was happening to him or how it was likely to feel in a few years' time, he accepted that this was how his future would be.

Child to Adult Transition

(adolescence)

Adolescence had a big impact on Ælfric, and not just due to his emergent masculine identity. Ælfric confided in Ealhswib one day about his feelings of gender dysphoria, and

how he felt as if he believed that he would feel more comfortable if he had been born a boy. He trusted her to keep this a secret between them, and she lived up to the trust he had placed in her.

However, their alliance would be cut short. Ealhswip began to show the symptoms of some kind of illness. None of the family were sure what it was, but it didn't go away. Indeed, it worsened over time, and eventually she succumbed and died. The whole family was devastated, but for Ælfric specifically, he had lost his confidente.

Several weeks later the farm was raided, and his parents and all of his siblings – except for Hilda, who happened to be away from the farm running an errand at this time – were killed by the militia of the area's eorl, Eorl Agnarr of Hwæltun.

The new eorl was either unaware of Leofwine's arrangement with the previous eorl or knew of it and had deliberately decided against honouring it. Either way, the raid was performed to reclaim the farm and any saleable goods on it.

They mistakenly believed Ælfric to be Leofwine's eldest child. He was tied up and put to one side, and had to watch as his mother and siblings were hacked to pieces by swords, and as his father was blood-eagled. Understandably, Ælfric never forgot that day. Ælfric himself was taken by the militia as a slave.

He had never paid much attention to the warning signs of this attack on the farm as he hadn't recognised their seriousness; his parents had received the occasional letter when he was younger, starting from the age of 2 or 3, and in later years the eorl had sent his men to the farm to talk with Leofwine. The final straw had been when the men had made an ultimatum: pay his taxes with immediate effect or surrender his eldest child.

Leofwine had protected his home and family with uncharacteristic ferocity in the hope that the threat had been a bluff. It had not.

All of this put Leofwine into a completely new light as far as Ælfric was concerned. All his life he'd had an impression of his father as mild-mannered, and had assumed that his gentle responses to the bossiness of the rest of the household had been a sign of weakness, for want of a better word. After the raid, Ælfric realised that Leofwine had been harbouring a hidden ferocity which he had held in check, ready for when he would need it to protect his family. He may have ultimately failed to keep his family safe from Agnarr's men, but Ælfric never forgot the sheer strength with which he had fought.

After all of this, Ælfric decided that the military visits should have got more attention, and that if only he had understood what they'd meant he could have warned his family. This sense of foreboding over similar visits became a sensitive point for him.

The raid happened when Ælfric was 12 or 13 years old.

Ælfric became a thrall, a slave of sorts under Agnarr. Over the coming few years he had little in the way of free time. When he did however, he remembered his family and home by honing skills that his father had taught him. He also engaged in wood-carving and focused on his spirituality. On sacred days he would make offerings to the household gods his family had worshipped: Freo, Ing, Tiw, and Woden.

His spiritual devotion helped him to get on well with some of the gothis (the temple stewards) of the Witenagemot (the ruling class). However his relationship with Agnarr did not improve one bit.

Ælfric presented as female at this time. Under some other eorls, this might have meant that he would be subjected to sexual abuse. However, Agnarr was not interested in using his slaves this way and forbade it among his men. For this reason Ælfric was spared this particular indignity.

However, that isn't to say that Agnarr favoured Ælfric. Rather, he tended to single Ælfric out for poor treatment, perhaps due to his history with Ælfric's father. This contributed to Ælfric becoming careful about who he accepted as friends. He did not want to be betrayed again.

However, during his adolescence he made friends with a kind-hearted squirrel named Badulf. Badulf was the son of Otto, Agnarr's court scop (essentially, his bard). Otto's family, Badulf included, lived on the premises of Agnarr's palace as a member of the household. As a thrall, Ælfric's duties meant that he spent time all over the palace so crossed paths with Badulf quite regularly, and this was how he and Badulf met and became familiar with one another.

Ælfric's situation was undoubtedly unpleasant at this time. Being a thrall as opposed to a farm boy was a severe culture shock and not without its dangers. Badulf became Ælfric's rock, his biggest support. Badulf did more for Ælfric than simply lift his spirits: as Ælfric's masculine identity became harder for Ælfric to ignore, the squirrel helped him come to terms with it.

The two grew close over a course of two or three years, and when Badulf was 16 and Ælfric 15, they began a relationship.

With Badulf's support, Ælfric began to take some significant steps to transition to a masculine identity.

In practical terms, Ælfric began his transition by requesting that he be called by the name Ælfric, and that he be referred to exclusively by masculine pronouns. He had enough skill in sewing to be able to adjust a couple of his spare dresses into more masculine garments, although he only wore these on the few occasions that he had leisure hours and was able to spend those off the premises with Badulf. Aside from this, Badulf helped him with his voice, although Ælfric remained uncomfortable about it for several more years.

All of this was not quite as difficult as it might have been: for all of Agnarr's many faults, and despite his somewhat transphobic opinions, he was at least ambivalent enough about Ælfric's transition that he let it be beyond the occasional bit of taunting and sneering.

Closeness in Relationships

(young adulthood)

By the time Ælfric was around 18 or 19 years old he had met most of the Witenagemot at least once, and at least in passing. They found him memorable due to his transition, although his dealings with them were usually so brief that most didn't get the chance to develop anything approximating a friendship.

He was presenting almost exclusively as masculine. However, Agnarr continued to mock him about this with comments about how he was "just pretending to be a man" or similar. This angered Ælfric, and one day, after Agnarr's verbal abuse had been particularly bad, he took matters into his own hands and decided to make a gesture that would make his dedication abundantly clear.

He asked Badulf for his support, which the squirrel provided - with reservations. He did his best at first to talk Ælfric out of it. However, Ælfric's heart was set on doing this, and he demonstrated that he understood the potential consequences. Ultimately Badulf supported him on the basis that it was better for somebody to accompany Ælfric than let him do it alone. The two went out in the middle of the night, deep into the woods.

Before they went Ælfric found a sharp, clean knife to take with him. Once they were out of hearing range where Ælfric's screams would not be heard, he performed a double mastectomy on himself.

Ælfric survived this self-surgery, although his recovery was tough. He continued with his servitude as best he could throughout.

A year or so later, when Ælfric was 20 years old, a series of events led to a significant change in Ælfric's fortunes. Agnarr held a grand blót (a type of religious feast), and among the guests was the High King Brynnjar.

The reasons behind the arrangement of this feast were political. Agnarr had previously angered Brynnjar some years previously, when he had sent his militia after one of the High King's retired huscarls. The huscarl, named Leofwine, had been a particularly loyal to Brynnjar and had consequently been one of his favourites. Leofwine had displeased Agnarr and so the Eorl had had him killed, which had put Agnarr out of favour with the High King. The blót was an attempt to regain that favour.

Indeed, Brynnjar had been saddened by the news and had assumed that Leofwine's whole family had been slaughtered. Because of this, he did not wish to show up to Agnarr's feast, but royal courtesy demanded it, so he went.

Ælfric was appointed to serve the attendants their meals during this feast, and when he served Brynnjar, the High King noticed him. He remarked to the thrall about how much he reminded him of a deceased friend. Ælfric asked what the name of this friend was, to which Brynnjar answered, "Leofwine". As soon as Brynnjar mentioned Leofwine's name, Ælfric recognised him as the guest who had occasionally visited them in the farmhouse. Ælfric leaned in and whispered in the king's ear: "Ic eom Leofwines sunu" or "I am the son of Leofwine."

They had no more time to discuss this as Ælfric was called away to serve someone else, but he had said all he needed to. Brynnjar arranged to meet Ælfric in the mouse's quarters the following day, and asked him a series of questions about Leofwine to verify his claim.

Ælfric, of course, had no difficulty answering these questions, and proved himself truthful.

The law of the land did not allow for Brynnjar to free Ælfric on the spot, though his sense of justice made him want to. However, he was able to purchase Ælfric's thralldom from Agnarr. Agnarr sold Ælfric without giving the situation much thought, and once Brynnjar had gained possession of Ælfric, he granted him full freedom, with no strings or obligations attached.

This granted Ælfric the rights of a free mouse, which included the ability to assert the right to redress of grievance. Freeing Ælfric up to be able to exercise this right – if he so desired – had been Brynnjar's intention.

Finally on his feet again, Ælfric parted ways with Brunnjar and found work on a local farm. He felt encouraged by the fact that farm work came much easier to him now than it had when he was a child, mainly because he had learned how to manage his ADHD symptoms.

Ælfric's first and greatest wish as a free mouse was to take revenge against Agnarr for everything he had taken from him, so he prepared the traditional mousefolk sign of a challenge to a holmgang (duel). He took the bleached skull of a goat, lashed it to a 10-foot tall pole, and carved "DEATH" into the shaft.

When he was ready to formally issue his challenge, he took his pole with him to the next meeting of the Witenagemot and planted it in the middle of the council hall as they all gathered. Then he listed the grievances for which he sought redress.

Several members of the Witenagemot appealed to Agnarr to meet this challenge, lest his reputation be stained by "being intimidated by a mere rodent". Agnarr accepted Ælfric's challenge, and they agreed to meet on an island off the shore of the town a week later.

Ælfric enlisted Badulf's father as his second, and Agnarr enlisted a trusted associate named Wulfsige as his own.

Agnarr had more experience with fighting, but he had nothing but disdain for Ælfric and believed he would win without trying – so he didn't. Ælfric, fuelled by rage, spite, and the courage to overcome any reticence he may otherwise have felt, took the advantage that Agnarr's complacency gave him, and won when he cut Agnarr's head clean off his shoulders.

Ælfric was satisfied that he had avenged his family, but he had more to do yet before he could walk away. Hwæltun's tradition stated that when the Eorl was slain in a justified duel and had no heir, then the victorious party would assume his office, with no exceptions. Agnarr had no heir, so the Eorldom fell to Ælfric. He only learned of his new status as Eorl however, when he returned to the Witenagemot with Agnarr's head, an action he had to complete as proof that he had indeed slayed the Eorl, to ensure that he would not be suspected of lying and banished as an outlaw. It was then that he was informed that he would be Agnarr's successor.

Ælfric was angry about that at first. His plans for after his battle with Agnarr were to run away with Badulf to the neighbouring Eorl's hold, or the hold along from that. He had wanted to live a quiet life there, where nobody would know them. This law changed all that and obliged him to stay.

Perhaps he might have refused the role if not for the "no exceptions" clause. Not only did it grant the successor the Earldom regardless of species or gender, but also of whether they wanted the job or not. In short, whether Ælfric liked it or not, he was the next Eorl.

Brynnjar had had to return home soon after his identification of Ælfric, so while he expected that Ælfric would probably seek retribution against Agnarr, he hadn't had the time to talk with him about the legal ramifications if he won. When he heard of Ælfric's victory, he extended an offer of help.

Ælfric had never been prepared for such a role so was glad of this support. Of course, being the High King, there was only so much time Brynnjar could dedicate to this, but Badulf's father, Otto, was more than happy to fill in the gaps. His position as Agnarr's court bard had made him privy to many of Hwæltun's legal and courtly traditions, and he became an invaluable source of help for Ælfric.

While Brynnjar and Otto provided Ælfric with practical support, Badulf provided emotional support. The role of Eorl was like nothing Ælfric had ever done before, nor had ever expected to do, so Badulf's steadying hand helped him out more times than he could remember.

Their relationship was not accepted gracefully by everybody, and some members of the council made accusations of Ælfric being "earg" (unmanly) and of performing seiðr (witchcraft), especially when the subject of Ælfric's transitioning came up. The flames of this particular accusation were fanned thanks to Ælfric's worship of Woden and Freo,

two gods strongly associated with magic, sorcery, and other things that the gossipers found suspicious. However, Ælfric had a good relationship with a couple of gothis so were able to put a stop to the gossiping.

Regardless of all this, Ælfric's position was legal and could not formally be challenged

That isn't to say that the stress of the new role and the gossip didn't get to Ælfric. He did not enjoy the work of Eorl and only did as much as he had to. Ultimately he found it a burden, especially the politicking and balancing the desires of the gothis, thegns, and ealdormen. Indeed, he had at least one nervous breakdown during the first 18 months of his reign.

Whatever his misgivings about the role, Ælfric was legally unable to give up the role due to that "no exceptions" law. However, the legal mandate to keep the job was not the only influencing factor for his decision to stay: while recovering from his nervous breakdown he fell into something of a sunken cost fallacy. This helped him to commit to putting his all into the role. He also found a certain amount of peace in the idea that the gods had chosen him for this role, and that regardless of how ill-suited he felt to the role, he would stand by the role given to him and fulfil it to the best of his ability.

Ælfric became blunt and forthright. This earned him many friends who found his direct approach refreshing, although others found it grating. He continued with his devotion to his gods, and this too irritated some of the thegns.

The demands of Eorldom often played to Ælfric's weaknesses as an ADHD sufferer, so he found ways around his weak points. He hired a scribe and a steward to help him organise the colossal amount of information he was expected to keep up with. He only arranged this after his breakdown, and at Badulf's insistence. After his breakdown he came to recognise the need to prevent himself from burning out – after all, the role of Eorl required him to remain in the public eye and engage in politicking, so being seen as exhausted was a bad idea and would only make his job much harder. This understanding, plus Badulf's insistence, helped him to cement his decision to accept help.

In addition to his new support-staff, he also made sure to hold regular meetings with the other council members, both as a whole assembly and in private settings wherever he felt they were needed. This earned him a reputation for communicating well, which in itself improved his profile and how others in the council regarded him.

Badulf and Ælfric married when Ælfric was 25. This became a point of contention in itself, and even most of the gothis that he was on good terms with refused to preside over the ceremony. The ceremony itself went ahead anyway and was small, but the two were happy to have sanctified their relationship.

Ælfric was surprised and delighted one day when he was 30 years old, when he was unexpectedly reunited with his sister, Hilda. This happened by pure chance: he was riding through a village on his way to mediate a dispute between two neighbouring Eorls, and saw a mouse who looked very much like Hilda tending to a garden. He feigned ignorance of the layout of the local area so that he could approach her to ask her for directions, and have a closer look. At that point her husband called her by name for help with something. That confirmed her identity to him, and he bear-hugged her before awkwardly introducing himself. Hilda was as surprised as he was – perhaps more so, for not only was Ælfric in far better circumstances than she would have imagined, but this was the first time she had seen him present as male.

She was indeed alive and well. They had a long discussion in which they caught up with one another. She told him that she had returned to the farm after the raid was over, seen the grisly scene in the farmhouse, and run to a neighbouring hold for want of any better plan. Three or four years after that she had settled down with another mouse, named Björn, and they had married and had five children. She called for them all and introduced Ælfric to them all.

Passing on Responsibilities

(older adulthood)

By the time Ælfric reached his 40s he had become as comfortable as possible with his role. He hated making displays of wealth and adhering to formalities, and took comfort in the side of his job that allowed for humble service and straight-talk.

Ælfric developed and maintained a support network. It couldn't always be a close one on account of his high-profile position, but he certainly had both allies and friends. Aside from this, he never forgot his father, Leofwine, and his wisdom, generosity, open-mindedness, courage, and easy-going nature. Ælfric never felt as if he matched up to Leofwine, but he also never stopped striving to do so as such, Ælfric spent the rest of his career battling imposter syndrome, and this helped to make him an exceptional Eorl.

Ælfric made many improvements for the lives of the peasants who fell under his care during his reign. Most notably, he granted thralls more legal rights than they had had under his predecessors. He would have abolished thralldom entirely if he had been able, but most of the council found this too drastic a change, and despite his best efforts, he was unable to sway enough of them to push it through. During the first 10-20 years of his reign he also developed trade relations between Hwæltun and other towns and cities, until it became a centre for trade. He did this by cultivating connections with neighbouring rulers in foreign lands during his annual and bi-annual summer expeditions abroad. He also reformed property and harvest taxes to be fairer to smaller farmers.

Ælfric's leadership brought the town peace, widespread prosperity, and he took a gentle approach to crime. As a result he was beloved of his people. He still had his naysayers, but he had proved his ability to lead, and none dared to challenge him. When he retired in his sixties, the Witenagemot were sad to see him go.

Indeed, 'sad' would be an understatement. They felt that Ælfric's long reign and unquestionable authority made him irreplaceable. However, Ælfric was just as prone to ageing as anybody else, so eventually had to abdicate. Before he did, he made sure to appoint a capable successor.

He prepared thoroughly for this, and started watching out for a suitable successor to prepare for the role in his mid-fifties – ten years before he abdicated. The Witenagemot's ideas were somewhat different from his about what type of person would make an ideal successor, so he worked on the assumption that he would have to foster great confidence in his choice.

On that note, the Witenagemot itself changed significantly under Ælfric's reign. By the time he abdicated it was still a very traditionalist institution, and most of the titles that signified membership were hereditary, handed down from one generation of a noble clan to the next, but by the time he retired there was at last a feeling of acceptability of 'non-traditional' folk as members.

As Ælfric began to look for suitable candidates, he looked for three specific qualities that a potential successor must demonstrate:

- a lack of interest in political ambition or power for power's own sake
- gentleness, kindness, and compassion

• the possession of the vision to create a legacy of their own (i.e., to do something new, not simply live in Ælfric's shadow and emulate his work)

Ultimately Ælfric chose a young otter in their early twenties, recently inducted into Ælfric's council. After a decade of tutelage and mentoring, Ælfric handed the reins over and retired in his mid-sixties.

On the subject of his personal life, Ælfric and Badulf never had children. However, he considered Hilda's children to be the nearest that he and Badulf would ever get, and the two cherished their nieces and nephews as though they were their own children. Ælfric particularly loved taking on the role of uncle as a way to take a break from being an Eorl and to enjoy being part of a family.

End of Life

(old age)

In Ælfric's old age he purchased an unassuming cottage that had been built on the land that his family's farm had occupied, and retired there with Badulf. When he considered the life he had led, he wished that things had turned out differently and that he had taken a different path in life, but that he had used his position well and accomplished all the business he needed to in this life. He felt content that he could pass on from his life and enjoy peace in the afterlife.

Credits

Based on theory by:

Erikson, E., (1951) 'Childhood and Society', W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. chapter 7.

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