

THE ABBESS OF WHITBY



The  
**ABBESS**  
of Whitby



A NOVEL OF  
HILD OF  
NORTHUMBRIA

JILL DALLADAY



LION FICTION

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*For Roger*



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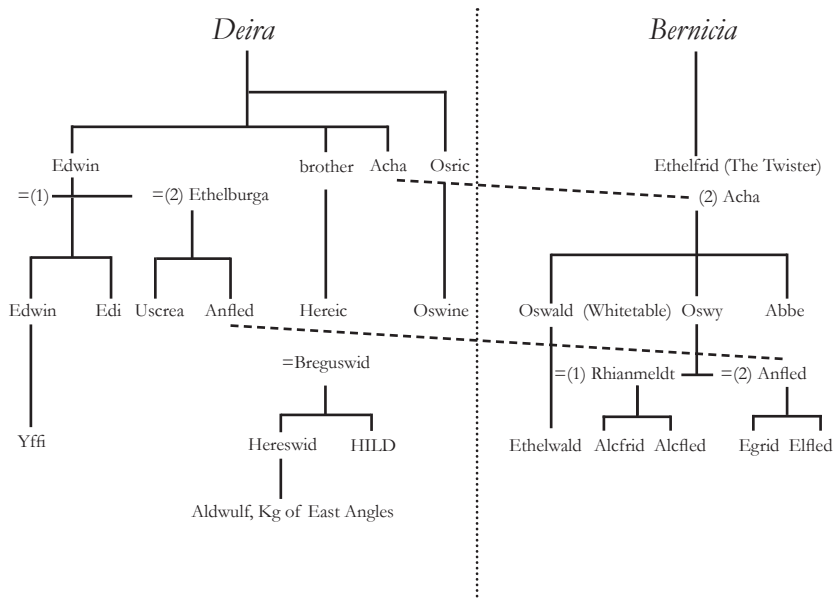
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# FAMILY TREE

## ROYAL FAMILIES OF NORTHUMBRIA









# CHARACTERS

*Characters in italics are invented*

## **Deirans**

Edwin, king of Northumbria

Ethelburga, his queen from Kent

Uscrea, their son

Anfled [Ani], their daughter

Osfrid and Edi, Edwin's sons by a former wife

Yffi, Osfrid's son

Breguswid, widow of Edwin's nephew, Hereric

Hereswid and Hild, her daughters

Coifi, Edwin's High Priest

Bass, Forthere, Lilla, and *Cutha*, Edwin's Companions, high-ranking thegns

"The Twister", Ethelfrid of Bernicia, Edwin's mortal enemy

Paulinus, the queen's chaplain from Canterbury

James, one of Paulinus's monks

Erpwald, son of King Redwald of East Anglia

Eomer, envoy from Cwichelm, king of the West Saxons

Begu, a slave girl

*Cerdic*, a Gododdin hostage

Caedmon, a British peasant

## **The Gododdin**

*Gnylget*, the chief

*Gerda*, his wife

*Roban*, Cerdic's steward

*Brigit*, his wife

*Young Roban*, their son

*Caitlin*, their daughter

*Wulfstan [Wulfi]*, Hild's son

Eata, Cerdic's spear bearer

Cuthbert, Cutha's son

## **Bernicians**

Oswald, king of Bernicia

Oswy, his brother

Abbe, their sister

Alcfrid, Oswy's son by a former wife

Alcflad, Oswy's daughter by a former wife

Anfled of Deira, Oswy's queen

Egfrid, son of Oswy and Anfled

Elfled [Elfi], daughter of Oswy and Anfled

Romanus, the queen's chaplain  
from Canterbury

Aidan, summoned by Oswald  
from Iona to be bishop

### **In Hild's Communities**

Frigyd, a high-ranking widow

Oftfor, her son

*Brother John*, a blind scholar

Aetla, priest in training

Wilfrid, aspiring priest

Heiu, nun who founded

Hartlepool

*Ulf*, steward of the royal estate  
at Hart

Sigebert, king of the East  
Saxons

Bosa, priest in training

Tatfrid, priest

Udric, steward at Whitby

Aldwulf, king of East Anglia,

Hild's nephew

### **Monks, Priests, Etc.**

*Monks lived in communities but, in the Iona tradition, made pilgrimage in wild places to be close to God and*

*serve the people. Priests started as monks but were ordained, first as deacons, then as priests, to administer the sacraments. Bishops lived in communities, under the rule of an abbot, but travelled widely with the king they served.*

Utta, Adda, Betti, Cedd, Chad,  
and Coelin, brothers trained by  
Aidan to become priests

Finan, bishop after Aidan

Colman, bishop after Finan

Augustine of Canterbury, sent  
by Pope Gregory to convert  
Britain

Theodore, a later Bishop of  
Canterbury

Agilbert, a French bishop  
invited to the West Saxons

Wine, an Englishman  
consecrated bishop in his place

### **Pagan Gods**

Woden, supreme god, wielded  
the spear, attended by ravens

Thor, thunder and lightning,  
wielded the hammer

Freyr, goddess of childbirth

Eostre, goddess of spring

Hreth, goddess of vengeance

si quid in his cartis te dignum reddere grates  
    invenias domino maxime nunc moneo;  
sin alias, vati veniam dignare canenti  
    iam tribuere pius: quod potuit cecinit.

**From *On Abbots*, a poem by  
Aethelwulf, ninth-century monk of  
Lindisfarne**

If you find anything in these pages worthy of you,  
    I urge you to give heartfelt praise to God;  
If not, graciously pardon the poet for his work; he  
    did his best.





*I*t couldn't be him. She trusted him. A man of years, family head, the people's lord, he communed with the gods, bringing peace, security, prosperity.

*It had to be him; the strength and cunning. Who else would defy Woden's taboos? Who else would murder a kinsman?*

*She'd known him kill without compunction, lash men, hang them, and never shed a tear.*

*"Men don't weep," her mother said, and believed it.*

*But they did. She'd seen their eyes spring in the Mead Hall when the scop's singing stirred their hearts. Or when a favourite horse crumpled. Or when they were banished from the king's hearth.*

*Never when they killed. Then, men would roar in triumph, gloat over booty, fawn on the warleader, clamour for more battle, more spoils. They wreaked havoc in the name of the gods: hammer-wielding Thor, or vengeful Hreth. Killing was their trade. Women wove the threads together and restored the fabric of peace.*

*It had to be him. His deeds ran through her memory, she saw his secret ways. But the risk, if she challenged him! To lose home, friends, livelihood, maybe life itself. Had she the daring?*

*It was for her father. No one else was left to act.*

*She stood up, squared her shoulders, and strode to confront the man she believed to be his murderer.*



# PART 1



## DEIRA

Shivering, Hild burrowed into her cloak. The hilltop was an awesome place, shunned by all but the priest, closer to the gods than she had ever been. Clutching her sprig of rowan, she pressed it to her heart. It kept her safe, the Runetree. Safe against elves and ghosts, wolf's cry and owl's wings, and beasts of the undergrowth. Safe against the monstrous creature standing over her head, black against the fitful moon, moving almost, its leafy skirts crackling in the breeze. Was it alive? Was that what the old priest meant?

"To the place of gods." He'd pointed them up the hill. "You will find all you need. Build a great Moormaid for the fire. A Moormaid to die and bring life to the land. Guard her through the dark and bring her safe down."

She remembered the High Priest's finger beckoning her into the group of girls, but it was Eostre herself, goddess of fertility and birth, who chose her as leader. In the low rays of the setting sun, she'd drawn the long straw. She was the chosen one, goddess Eostre's maid, called to lead at the spring festival and serve the year through.

Old Coifi was right. They'd found everything to hand: a gleaming ball of mistletoe for the head; an ash branch forked by Woden's thunderbolt as the body; blackthorn and ivy to weave into the stiff skirt which glimmered with dew; the arms, hacked from alders with their eating knives.

She scanned their handiwork in the creeping light. The Moormaid stood skeletal and translucent, a fitting sacrifice. Their scratched and bleeding arms would be a badge of pride, proclaiming them the Spring Dancers, six girls on the cusp of womanhood. Today, through their offering, the Spring Goddess would unfurl the leaves, grow the crops, ripen the harvest and make the cattle bear...

If nothing marred the day...

If she played her part well.

A cockerel crowed. Hugging her knees, Hild looked below. The mist was unfurling in the sun's warmth. Dayglow touched the tips of the trees and the antlers adorning the king's rooftree. From thatched homesteads rose the din of morning: goats bleating, children splashing buckets, men hollering for hounds. She saw the king's door open. His herald emerged. Purification Night was over. Eostre's Day had come.

Hild set her team in place and they raised the ungainly figure onto their shoulders. As she led them down the hill, they sang the age-old song learned from their mothers at cookpot and washing stones:

*At a springhead under a thorn  
Was in the past a saving charm.  
A maid stood there enthralled by love,  
With love she will save all from harm...*

"Seven nights the maid lay on the moor," sang Hild, taking the solo part, beating out the rhythm, leading where the ground was smoothest. "Fair was her food, what was her food?"

"The violet and the primrose good." The girls spluttered with effort.

Like a sprinter, the Moormaid leaned forward, driving them on. The girl at the back screamed and lost hold. The creature swayed wildly. Hild gasped. She would capsize... blight the crops... anger the goddess...

"What was her drink?" she sang, darting alongside to grip the prickly skirt.

“*Her drink was cool spring water...*” shrilled the girls. An echo rolled round the valley; women full of memories joined in as they converged on the place of sacrifice.

Down to the level, over the stream, past the swineherd’s hut and the steward’s lodging, beyond the slaughter pen and the king’s hall, the Moormaid wafted on a wash of excitement to the place where three valleys met. The slopes were black with people.

Setting her down, the girls danced round her with abandon. On and on the chorus drove them, in and out they wove, back and forth, arms flung wide, hair streaming, bending backwards, twirling round and round. Elated, relieved, Hild felt passion spill from her like wine from a spinning cup, rising, whirling, flying. She could not see, she could not hear, she was all motion, all spirit...

*Of every tree, of every tree, The hawthorn bloweth fairest...*

Erect at the front, King Edwin watched, chin jutting proudly, silver hair lifting in the breeze. His sword belt sparked with jewels, his gold armlets gleamed, and the chains round his neck dazzled like the sun’s rays. Ranged up the slope behind him were brawny fighting men, thegns of the royal service, each hedged by leathercaps from his own warband. Beside the king were his Companions, senior thegns who were his intimates, sporting richly coloured cloaks and pommels bright with gems. Closest was white-haired Lilla, the king’s childhood friend, lord of the lands around, whom Edwin was honouring with his presence for the spring festival. Hild saw the royal party as a blur of brightness each time she whirled past.

*My love she’ll be, my love she’ll be...*

Still as a rock inside the dancing girls, a white-robed priest stood by the Moormaid, knife raised above a bullock roped at his feet. Spellbound, the people, even the king, joined in the great climactic cry,

*With love she will save all from harm.*

The dancers collapsed, and a sigh of completion broke like a wave.

The priest's knife arced down to the bullock's throat. Blood spurted high, veering on the breeze, spattering the girls and drenching their leader.

"Eostre! Eostre!" Hild heard the roar. White-faced, she rose and stood, Eostre's maid. The priest handed her a golden bowl. Careful not to spill, she knelt to offer it to the king. He flourished it and drank deep of the blood, pouring the rest onto mother earth. Taking Hild's hand, he led her forward and they stood before the Moormaid in a waiting hush. Handing her a flaming torch, the priest intoned exultantly,

*Blossom and bullock, blood of the sacrifice,  
Earnest of fruitfulness, Earth Mother's pledge.*

He guided her hand and the Moormaid sprang into flame with a loud sucking blast. The offering was accepted.

"Eostre! Eostre!" chanted the crowd. The king beamed at Hild.

"What do they call you, Eostre's maid?"

"Hild, my lord." She sank to her knees.

"Fierce name for a girl. Hild means Battle. Hild, daughter of... who?"

"My father was Hereric, my lord," she gulped, looking up into cold, blue eyes.

"Hereric? My brother's son?" He gripped her hand and raised her. "Hild, Eostre chose you for your name. Battle is the business of kings. You have a royal destiny."

"Good heavens! What a mess!" Suddenly appearing at her elbow, Hild's mother pulled her out of the crowd. "Let's get you cleaned up. A lick and a promise for now. River dip in the morning." Hild groaned. No eager questions or compliments: that was Ma.

Inside the women's lodging, stripped to the skin, Hild gritted



her teeth while Lady Breguswid wielded a coarse rag on her head and neck. The water grew bloodier each time she wrung it out.

“Sit on the chest and do your legs! I’ll tackle your back and arms.”

Hild bit her lips. Proud of her wounds, she couldn’t help wincing as her mother scrubbed and lathered with ointment of thyme. Pain, it seemed, was the price of ecstasy.

“Lady Breguswid!” An elegant lady crashed in, rummaged in a box for a length of braid, dropped the lid and fled. “The queen’s left her lodging.”

“Let’s hope your sister’s there,” Ma muttered, pulling a fresh tunic over Hild’s head and standing back. “You’ll do.”

She dragged the girl past the sacred bullock, suspended over a firepit, past children leaping to catch lucky black curls of wood ash, past families swigging ale and bawling seasonal greetings, past the mob of hollow-eyed beggars at the hall doors. One look from Lady Breguswid and Forthere, the Door Thegn, bowed them in.

Edging along the royal side of the Mead Hall, Hild saw firelight reflecting on the wooden wall which had been rubbed smooth by generations of passing shoulders, and sparking on ancient weapons hooked higher up. With a longing glance at her dancers at the far end, she stood with her mother beside the royal dais.

Her eyes stung; smoke from the central fire spiralled to the rafters and turned blue, drifting out through the smokehole in the roof. A cauldron hung bubbling at the end of its long chain. Her guts ached from smells of broth and roasting beef.

At last King Edwin handed the guest cup to his wife. Spring had reopened the sea roads, bringing a prince from East Anglia, rumoured to be seeking a marriage alliance, a Kentish kinsman of the queen’s, a Briton from the far west, and a thegn from Wessex called Eomer. Edwin, it was well known, welcomed all comers to his table. With a slow dignity enhanced by her pregnancy, Queen Ethelburga proffered them the wine of hospitality. As each man drank, he bowed across the fire to Edwin, sealing a mutual pact as binding as kinship.

Immediately, hubbub broke out: men seized jugs to fill their drinking horns; carvers hacked chunks of meat from the bullock and carried them round on trays; servers scuttled from the kitchens with bread, leeks and parsnips; others ladled broth from the cauldron. Quiet fell. Hild tucked in.

When the belching started, the king summoned his minstrel. The song changed each time, for the old scop twined past and present into living history, singing in a rhapsodic monotone punctuated by thrumming on the harp.

The Twister, enemy king of Bernicia, he intoned, killed Edwin's father, snatched his sister, and drove young Edwin from Deira. Edwin wandered to Gwynedd where the king treated him like a son; then to Mercia where he won the princess as wife; then to East Anglia where King Redwald stood his friend. Twanging with excitement, the old man hymned the great victory Edwin won to regain his lands, wreak fair vengeance, and bring peace and justice to his people. More gently he lauded the new young queen and her boy child, ending with a prediction of long life and measureless gold for Edwin, king of kings, Bretwalda of all Britain.

The king sat unmoved. He'd lived more than two score years and ruled for ten. The song was a ritual. Other men called for the harp in the time-honoured way. Hild felt her eyelids droop.

"Lilla's up! A brainteaser!" The gruff cry woke her. Standing at the king's side, Lilla chanted:

*The wave, over the wave, a magical thing I saw,  
Cleverly crafted, amazing in its beauty.  
Wonder on the wave, wave become bone. What am I?*

Suggestions flew. "Sea horse? Mermaid?" Guffaws, slapdowns, jokes. All eyes were on Lilla. No one saw the Wessex thegn stir in the gloom, dark hair, dark cloak, dark eyes glittering. Fascinated, Hild watched him creep round the hearthstone.

"Ma!" She nudged her mother.

"Ssh!" Lady Breguswid hissed.

“Remember last winter?” Lilla prompted. “The stranded heifer?”

“Daft, you were,” growled someone, raising a laugh.

“Only a short crossing, and we saved the beast!” The memory of their winter dash to an offshore island raised a cheer. “When we landed, remember? Foam on the rocks, waves on the shore. Hard... brittle... solid...”

“Ice!” called a child, to satirical applause; Lilla had almost told them. Only then did Edwin notice the Wessex thegn.

“My lord, I am Eomer, envoy of Prince Cwichelm,” he said silkily. “I bring his gift.” Lifting a leather purse, he laid it on the table.

“Ah!” Edwin loosed the thong and held up a brooch the size of a man’s fist, with engraved creatures interlocked in a great circle. Hild gasped. Their eyes looked bloody with garnets, and their writhing limbs flashed with gold.

“Superb!” Edwin breathed, spinning the piece. “Southern craftsmanship.”

“And a message.” Eomer’s words sounded clipped. “In kingly form, as my lord bade: mind to mind, hidden in words.”

“You have the harp,” Edwin said absently.

A sneer flickered across Eomer’s face. Glancing at the men hedging him in, he breathed deeply, flung his cloak over his left shoulder, propped his left foot on the dais and the harp on his left knee, and caressed the strings with his right hand in a fluid ripple which ended low on the right where his cloak hung down.

*Crafted by hands of the fastest and truest,*

he sang,

*I steal slowly up, my sting lasts for ever;*

*Honour I bring to the honest and true. What am I?*

In a final flourish, he stroked down the strings. From under the hem of his cloak he drew a dagger the length of his forearm. Swinging it up, he leaped onto the dais and lunged at the king.