

**CENWULF, KING OF THE MERCIANS:** *BEASE* pp 111–13; *ODNB* 10.815–17.

Cenwulf or Coenwulf (796–821) succeeded Offa (757–96) and his son Ecgfrith, who reigned for only a few weeks. Though less enterprising than Offa, Cenwulf nevertheless demonstrated his influence through a series of events described in the **ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE** for the years 798 and 807. Among these are the suppression of a Kentish revolt in 776 at Otford, the subsequent dethronement of the Kentish King Eadberht Præn, and the installment of his own brother Cuthred on the Kentish throne. Cenwulf’s treatment of Kent is likely linked in part to **POPE LEO III**’s denial of his request to move the bishopric from Canterbury to London (see below). After Cuthred’s death in 807, Cenwulf took over control of Kent, and so came into conflict with Wulfred, archbishop of Canterbury (802–32). As a result, he faced censure over his control of religious foundations including Minster-in-Thanet, where his daughter Cwoenthryth (Cwenthryth) was abbess.

**Letter to Pope Leo III** [CENWVLF.Ep.]: *EHD* 204.

ed.: Mynors, Thomson, and Winterbottom 1998–99 1.124–28.

*MSS – Refs* none.

Cenwulf’s letter of 798, which survives only as a quotation embedded in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum* I.88, delivers a request to Pope Leo to move the southern archiepiscopal see from Canterbury to London. Though Cenwulf defers to Augustine, in whose honor the Canterbury archbishopric was founded, he presses the pope not to allow Hadrian’s establishment of two archiepiscopal sees in Canterbury and Lichfield to cause further rift in the seamless “coat of Christ.” In his appeal, Cenwulf sets himself apart from his predecessor King Offa of Mercia, whose claim for Lichfield was apparently motivated by distrust of Archbishop Jænberht of Canterbury and the people of Kent (see further nos. 203, 206, 209, and 210 in *EHD*). Filled with religious and poetic imagery, biblical quotation and allusion, the letter uses these various devices to press his petition. Cenwulf makes reference to a now-lost letter of Æthelheard, archbishop of Canterbury, which apparently presented a case sympathetic to his own. Most striking, however, is the king’s appeal to the pope to adopt him as a son, and in this capacity to instruct him, to protect him against the attacks of foreigners, and to help him expand the kingdom that God entrusted to him. At the end of the letter he offers a monetary “token of love” for his “father’s” blessing. Though this is the only surviving letter by Cenwulf, his mention of an embassy sent to Rome the previous year in the same cause suggests that further correspondence on this issue likely existed.

Pope Leo’s plain response to Cenwulf (*EHD* 205) is quoted in *Gesta regum Anglorum* I.89 and survives independently in London, BL Cotton Vespasian A.xiv (HG 383; NRK 204). It acknowledges both Cenwulf’s argument and Æthelheard’s earlier letter, but denies consent to move the authority of the supreme pontificate to London. The pope makes reference to the earlier synod held in response to the question of archiepiscopal authority, and explains Hadrian’s movement of the see to Mercia in accordance with Offa’s wishes. Leo ends the letter by praising the memory of Offa as a powerful ruler, and by reminding Cenwulf that he must now honor Offa’s vow to pay 365 mancusses to the church per year in perpetuity. Given the overall tone of the letter, this last detail seems intended to remind Cenwulf that his power pales in comparison to that of his predecessor.

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#### Works Cited

Mynors, R. A. B., R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, eds. and trans. 1998–99. *William of Malmesbury, Gesta regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*. 2 vols. Oxford.