



***The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and
Eadwig, 939-959***

**Edited by Mary Elizabeth
Blanchard and Christopher Riedel**

Woodbridge: Boydell, 2024.

Reviewed by: Matthew Firth



The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig, 939-959. Edited by Mary Elizabeth Blanchard and Christopher Riedel. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2024. ISBN 9781783277643. 236 pp. £80.00.

There are several tenth-century English kings who have risen to relative fame in historical consciousness, significant among them being Æthelstan (r. 924/5–939) and Edgar (r. 959–975). However, in the twenty years between these two reigns, three other kings ascended the throne, three kings who are less well known, but no less central to the story of English kingship. These are the focus of this volume: Edmund I (r. 939–946), Eadred (r. 946–955), and Eadwig (r. 955–959). When they are recalled, it is for the more salubrious stories that attach to their reigns: Edmund's murder at the hands of a thief in Pucklechurch; Eadred's ostensible illness that reduced him to sucking the juices from meat for his sustenance; Eadwig being caught *in flagrante delicto* with a mother and daughter during his coronation feast. These are all stories that feature in this volume, but the editors here seek to extend the study of their kingships beyond these (mostly fictional) controversies.

The book comprises nine chapters in addition to a brief introduction by its editors which lays the historical groundwork for the reigns of Edmund, Eadred, and Eadwig. The first chapter by Alison Hudson is somewhat unusually constructed and, to a degree, appears to be two different studies synthesised in a single chapter. The first half looks at the early historiography of the kings' reigns. It is in the nature of a summary and, while it is useful to have this information in a single place and it makes sense to begin the volume here, there is little new information to be found. It is in the second half that the chapter comes to life. Hudson offers valuable observations around erasures for this period found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* A text and Æthelweard's *Chronicle*, speculating as to their origins and offering intriguing suggestions as to what their contents would once have been.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn to the reign of Edmund, reflecting the broadly chronological structure the editors have brought to the volume. Chapter 2, by Nicole Marafioti, examines Edmund's legal codes, a subject to which she brings her usual rigour and attention to detail. In particular, she posits that Edmund's laws established a legal foundation for his successors to claim jurisdiction in ecclesiastical spheres, creating 'a balance between ecclesiastical autonomy and royal authority,' (57). In Chapter 3, Isabelle Beaudoin homes in on the oath of loyalty contained in the law code known as *III Edmund*, the earliest known such oath from England. This is an innovative chapter that locates Edmund in his political context and suggests that the inclusion of the oath, departing from previous legal norms,

provides insight into how Edmund understood both kingship and England's connections to West Francia.

In Chapter 4, Stuart Pracy examines noble will making and the provision of the *heriot*—a posthumous gift of military equipment to the monarch—throughout the reigns of the three kings. Andrew Rabin focuses on the influential Archbishop Wulfstan I of York (d.956) in Chapter 5, exploring how he navigated the shifting political landscape of mid-tenth-century Northumbria as it transitioned to English rule (albeit in fits and starts). Neil McGuigan's chapter picks up on this thread, examining the evidence for the northern expansion of West Saxon kingship, drawing into question the received tradition that Eadred's reign marked the final unification of England. McGuigan's chapter represents a high mark of source analysis, and he is to be commended for resisting the urge to try to find a singular narrative that explains the conflicting accounts of rulership in Northumbria during the reigns of Edmund and Eadred. It is, I think, important to highlight his suggestion that the Uí Ímair dynast and sometime ruler of Northumbria and Dublin, Óláfr Sigtryggsson, may have also been a descendent of the West Saxon dynasty, a son of the Edmund and Eadred's half-sister. It is an enticing suggestion, if speculative, and one I am unaware of being argued elsewhere.

Chapters 6 and 7, by Mary Blanchard and Kate Weikert respectively, are quite close to my own areas of research and I had the pleasure of reading their scholarship prior to the book's publication. I will resist the temptation to engage with them extensively here, but both authors are to be commended for their work. Blanchard's chapter focuses on the person of Eadgifu, the mother of Edmund and Eadred and grandmother of Eadwig. Eadgifu was a central political figure through several kingships but remains somewhat enigmatic. As such, Blanchard's analysis of her role at Eadred's court is a welcome addition to scholarship (though, I would suggest, her analysis of charter witness lists between 953 and 955 invited bolder conclusions). Weikert's chapter examines the famous story of Eadwig's coronation threesome. Found only in later saints' *vitae* and related texts, the story goes that the young king absconded from his own coronation feast to seek the embraces of two women, only for St Dunstan to interrupt them and propel Eadwig back to the festivities by main force. Weikert does an excellent job of unpacking the rhetoric of the tale to provide an understanding of the accusations levelled at Eadwig and how these undermined his legacy. It is though, unfortunately, the only chapter in the volume to focus on Eadwig.

The closing chapter by Gerald Dyson seems a slightly odd inclusion for this volume given that it neither deals with kingship nor, necessarily, with the kings at the centre of the

book. This is not a problem with Dyson's scholarship, though the occasional nods to the three kings are clumsy. The chapter entails a close examination of British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D XV and the scribal culture that may have produced it. Dyson postulates that the manuscript was composed in the 950s/960s as a priest's penitential book, and thus offers insight into religious practice during the tenth-century monastic reforms. Ultimately, I fear his research may be a little lost in a volume focusing on kingship, whatever small cues it takes from the overarching theme, and would have been better thematically suited to another venue.

While they do not detract from the overall quality of the scholarship on display, there are some drawbacks that need to be highlighted. In the first instance, the volume would have benefitted from a final round of copyediting with numerous spelling errors, including of scholars' names, slipping through in the footnotes. Notably, different chapters also cite different editions of primary texts. More problematic for this reader, though, is the lack of a bibliography (either comprehensive or per chapter). This makes cross-checking shortened references a clumsy affair, necessitating that the reader scour the prior footnotes in any given chapter to find the full citation. Perhaps this is a decision made at the series level.

As a thematic collection of essays, the volume is, ultimately, somewhat erratic. Nonetheless, there is some exemplary scholarship on display, with the chapters by McGuigan, Blanchard, and Weikert particular standouts for this reader. The book will primarily appeal to academic researchers and, while I unreservedly recommend the book for library acquisition, it is likely that most will engage with it at a chapter rather than volume level.

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