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## Edward the Confessor: the Man and the Legend

*Richard Mortimer*

IT IS BOTH Edward the Confessor's posthumous fortune and misfortune that his reign led into the Norman Conquest. The rights and wrongs of 1066 and the associated propaganda have cast their shadow over everything written about him since, making it a difficult and delicate matter to disinter the historical Edward, and leading to contrasting views among modern historians of the period. The process of turning Edward into England's premier royal saint and Westminster Abbey's principal relic, on the other hand, responded to the needs of the Anglo-Norman world in which that process developed. Edward the man will be especially hard to know: given that it is difficult enough to feel we know our contemporaries, how can we hope to catch even a glimpse of an eleventh-century king? The biographical approach which is our best hope will have its own distortions – kings are not necessarily the prime movers, nor is a society simply the sum of the individuals in it. Sanctity will add a further layer of mystery: his sanctity can only be in the minds of beholders whose views have come down to us.<sup>1</sup> Edward lived in a period not well endowed with writers interested in contemporary affairs, so that original sources are meagre or lacking. Only contemporary sources can be used to shed light on Edward's life, and we shall have to treat them with caution as they will have their own purposes. We shall begin with an examination of contemporary sources, and use them to reflect on how to assess Edward as man and king, and see what historians have made of him. We shall then look at the development of the cult, especially how it arises out of contemporary or near-contemporary views of the king. After his canonisation in 1161 the cult continued to develop. Edward is myth and legend as well as historical figure, and it may not prove easy to separate them.

### *Edward, the man and the king*

THE EARLIEST of the contemporary sources for Edward's life is the work known as *Encomium Emmae*.<sup>2</sup> It was written at the behest of Queen Emma,

<sup>1</sup> On the problems of biography in general, see *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250*, ed. D. Bates, J. Crick and S. Hamilton (Woodbridge, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Encomium*, Alistair Campbell's edition of 1949 reprinted with a supplementary introduction by Simon Keynes in 1998; references are to the continuous pagination. See Keynes, below, 56–7; P. Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), 28–40.

Edward's mother, in the brief period between Edward's return to England in 1041 and the death of Harthacnut, Emma's son, in 1042, and deals with the Danish invasions, Cnut's marriage to Emma, reign and death, and then with the events that brought first Harold Harefoot and then Harthacnut to the throne, ending with the return to England of Edward. Throughout it is even more remarkable for what it does not say than for what it does, for its meaningful silences and audacious misrepresentations. It has survived in one mid-eleventh-century manuscript, prefaced by a full-page painting showing Emma enthroned and receiving the work from a kneeling monk, presumably the author, watched by two smaller bearded figures, presumably Harthacnut and Edward. Apart from the images on the coinage, this is the only representation of Edward dating from his lifetime.<sup>3</sup> A later transcription of the *Encomium* has also survived, from about 1500, incorporating a few changes to the text and ending with a sentence in praise of Edward.<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that this represents a revision of the original text made very soon after the first version was completed.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore of interest, as it transmits 'the one character sketch that has some claim to have been written in the king's lifetime.'<sup>6</sup>

The most telling silence in the work concerns King Æthelred: there is no hint in it that Emma had been married to him and had children by him. After the marriage to Cnut and the birth of Harthacnut 'the two parents', says the *Encomium*, 'sent their other legitimate sons to Normandy to be brought up', meaning Edward and Alfred, a statement which might lead an unwary reader to suppose that Edward and his brother were sons of Cnut.<sup>7</sup> But as far as Edward's life is concerned the *Encomium*'s most significant passage related to his brother Alfred's journey to England in 1036 and subsequent capture, blinding and death. To judge from the prominence and rhetorical artifice given to this episode, it must have been a very live and painful issue when the *Encomium* came to be written five or six years later, and the story told can be assumed to be one that suited Emma. Echoes of the events it relates recur throughout Edward's life, and beyond it. The account begins with Harold Harefoot's scheme to kill Emma's children by forging a letter from her to Edward and Alfred, urging 'one of you' to come speedily to England and receive her advice on how to combat the usurper Harold. Alfred, the younger brother, crossed to England 'taking only a few men of Boulogne'. Coming ashore, he tried to reach Emma. He and his companions were intercepted by Earl Godwine, who 'took

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced without colour on cover of *Encomium*, and in C. Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004), fig. 21; see below, 22–3.

<sup>4</sup> Discussed by Campbell in *Encomium*, xcvi–xcix, and Keynes, *ibid.*, xlix–li.

<sup>5</sup> *Encomium*, cxxii, xlix.

<sup>6</sup> Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (New Haven, 1997), 128.

<sup>7</sup> *Encomium*, 34–5. Campbell's translation of *alios vero liberales filios* slightly alters the ambiguity of the original, which contains no equivalent of 'their'.

him under his protection and forthwith became his soldier by averment under oath.<sup>8</sup> Godwine split the party up for the night, leaving only a few with Alfred. When Alfred's companions were asleep Harold's men appeared and captured them. In the morning some were killed and others enslaved. Alfred himself was mocked, taken to Ely, subjected to a trial, blinded and then murdered.<sup>9</sup> Alfred is described as 'a most blessed youth', and his death as a martyrdom,<sup>10</sup> which makes it likely that a cult of the innocent murdered prince, of a kind known in Anglo-Saxon England, had begun to form within five years of his death.<sup>11</sup> Edward is conspicuous by his absence from this account: he seems to be letting his younger brother take the risks, with fatal results.

On the next occasion when Edward appears in the *Encomium* he is equally averse to action. Emma had left England for Flanders and summoned Edward from Normandy. When they met 'the son declared that he pitied his mother's misfortunes, but that he was in no way able to help, since the English nobles had sworn no oath to him, a circumstance indicating that help should be sought from his brother.'<sup>12</sup> The 'brother', Harthacnut, 'the rightful heir', eventually arrived, Harold Harefoot died just in time, and Emma and Harthacnut returned to England in triumph.<sup>13</sup> Once the new king was safely installed, 'gripped by brotherly love', he asked Edward 'to come and hold the kingdom together with himself.'<sup>14</sup> The *Encomium* closes in the oldest manuscript with the verbal image of mother and sons enjoying the kingdom in harmony, perhaps the situation that the visual image which opens the work is intended to imply. Shortly afterwards, however, Harthacnut also died. The later manuscript mentioned above describes his burial by a sorrowing mother and brother, and then adds this:

After Harthacnut's death Edward, the legitimate heir, succeeded to the kingdom, a man conspicuous for the eminence of his strength, possessed of vigour of mind and judgment and also of force of character and, to conclude briefly, marked out by everything desirable.<sup>15</sup>

The style of the additions is very like the rest of the text, and they could easily

<sup>8</sup> *Encomium*, 42–3: *eum in sua suscepit fide, eiusque fit mox miles cum sacramenti affirmatione.*

<sup>9</sup> *Encomium*, 44–7.

<sup>10</sup> *Encomium*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> On types of cult see C. Cubitt, 'Sites and sanctity: revisiting the cult of murdered and martyred Anglo-Saxon royal saints', *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), 53–83.

<sup>12</sup> *Encomium*, 48–9.

<sup>13</sup> *Encomium*, 48–51: *iusto heredi* at 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Encomium*, 52–3: *rogans ut ueniens secum optineret regnum.*

<sup>15</sup> *Encomium*, 52 note b, translation based on Keynes, *ibid.*, xlix. Barlow summarises in *Edward the Confessor*, 128–9.

have been made by the original author at the beginning of Edward's reign when it would certainly be expedient to praise the new king.

The principal contemporary Norman source is the chronicle of William of Jumièges, a monk of the monastery of that name in the Seine valley. William took up an earlier biography of the Norman dukes, the *History of the Normans* by Dudo of Saint-Quentin, and revised, updated and extended it down to the time he began writing in the late 1050s.<sup>16</sup> Among William's sources of information about English affairs may have been Robert, abbot of Jumièges from 1037, who went to England with Edward in 1042, became bishop of London in 1044 and archbishop of Canterbury in 1051, before fleeing back to Jumièges the following year. He died in 1055, so may have been dead by the time William started writing, but it would be surprising if William had had no contact with him.<sup>17</sup> To this initial work he later added an account of the Norman conquest of England, probably finishing early in 1070.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that while he was extending his work, he could and did revise and add to what he had already written, which makes it difficult or impossible to be sure that any detail of what he says about Edward was not written with hindsight after the beginning of the Norman Conquest, particularly as the earliest surviving manuscript of his work dates from the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century.<sup>19</sup>

William of Jumièges has few but significant things to say concerning Edward. He and Alfred were brought up in the ducal hall of their uncle Richard of Normandy, treated honourably and loved like brothers.<sup>20</sup> Alfred was wickedly betrayed to his death by Earl Godwine, who handed him over to Harold Harefoot, but it was Harold who actually had him killed, so Godwine's crime is presented as treachery, not murder.<sup>21</sup> Edward made a parallel expedition to England, sailing to Southampton with forty ships, but meeting a multitude of Englishmen ready to do battle with him, realised he needed greater forces to obtain the kingdom and returned to Normandy.<sup>22</sup> After Harold's death Harthacnut called Edward from Normandy and had him live with him.<sup>23</sup> But perhaps the most interesting of his comments comes at the point where Duke Robert has gathered a fleet to invade England and restore Edward to his kingdom. A storm drove the ships to Jersey, where, hampered by contrary winds, the

<sup>16</sup> GND, I, xx; on Dudo and his work, see *History of the Normans*, trans. E. Christiansen (Woodbridge, 1998), ix–xxxvi.

<sup>17</sup> H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'Robert of Jumièges', *ODNB*. Summary of his career in GND, I, xxv.

<sup>18</sup> GND, I, xxxiii–xxxiv; see Keynes, below, 58–9.

<sup>19</sup> GND, I, c–ci.

<sup>20</sup> GND, II, 76–7.

<sup>21</sup> GND, I, 130–1; II, 106–7.

<sup>22</sup> GND, II, 106–7. Barlow reluctantly accepts its veracity: *Edward the Confessor*, 44–5.

<sup>23</sup> GND, II, 106–7.

force is used to attack Brittany instead. Whether or not these events took place as William describes them, or even at all, what matters for us is William's view that this happened as an act of God, who had disposed that Edward should reign in the future without spilling blood.<sup>24</sup> If this comment dates from the late 1050s, it is precious evidence of a contemporary view that Edward was a king for whom God had plans, and plans for a virtuous life as a king of peace. If the comment was added between 1066 and 1070, it is still very interesting evidence of what was believed about Edward in Normandy not long after his death.

There exists another brief, contemporary account of Edward in Normandy and of his return to England, in the *Discovery and Miracles of St Vulfran*, written in the Norman monastery of Saint-Wandrille in the mid-1050s and surviving in what is probably the autograph manuscript.<sup>25</sup> This preserves in one paragraph a summary of the history of the English monarchy from Æthelred to Edward as seen from a Norman monastery some ten years after Edward's accession. It sites Edward in the genealogy of the Norman ruling family, and states that he was consecrated king while of tender years on his father's orders and with the agreement of the people. The children fled from the violence of Cnut's invasion to their uncle, Richard, by whom they were generously received and educated like his children, and they dwelt honourably among the Normans for as long as Richard lived. After the reigns of Cnut's sons, Harold and Harthacnut, Edward returned to his paternal kingdom with Norman help. He married the daughter of Godwine, a great lord of that land who had cruelly and treacherously murdered Alfred, Edward's brother. Edward took with him Normans lay and clerical, whom he enriched and elevated with great honours.

The nearest thing to a continuous narrative of Edward's reign is provided by the set of related annals in Old English known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Edward's reign is covered by three separate versions, each surviving in one manuscript, known as C, D and E.<sup>26</sup> They are interrelated in very complex ways which have given rise to a great deal of discussion, which is not over yet.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes C and D say the same thing in identical or similar words, sometimes D and E overlap likewise; sometimes they are divergent. Often their differences are pronounced enough for historians to have detected bias, but all

<sup>24</sup> GND, II, 78–9; see I, xlvi n. 131.

<sup>25</sup> E. M. C. van Houts, 'Historiography and hagiography at Saint-Wandrille: the *Inventio et Miracula Sancti Vulfranni*', *ANS* 12 (1989), 233–51, the relevant Latin text printed as an appendix, p. 251; datable 1053–4, but with some signs of continued work between 1055 and 1057. Translation in E. van Houts (ed.), *The Normans in Europe* (Manchester, 2000), 112–13. See Keynes, below, 58; Van Houts, below, 64, 68–9, 71.

<sup>26</sup> The A version ends in 1001 apart from some very brief later additions, B in 977, F is a bilingual copy drawn from A and E in c. 1100, and G is a copy of A. All are now available in the same collaborative series as C–E (Cambridge, 1986–2004).

<sup>27</sup> For their interrelationships, with citation of previous literature and divergent conclusions, see ASC C, lxiv–lxxiv; ASC D, xxxix–lv; ASC E, lxiv–lxxiv.

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