

# Edgar the Ætheling

**Edgar (the) Ætheling** (also spelt **Æþeling**, **Aetheling**, **Atheling** or **Etheling**)<sup>[1]</sup> or **Edgar II** (c. 1051 – c. 1126) was the last male member of the royal house of **Cerdic of Wessex** (see **House of Wessex family tree**). He was proclaimed, but never crowned, **King of England** in 1066.

## 1 Family and early life

Edgar was born in Hungary, where his father **Edward the Exile**, son of **King Edmund II Ironside**, had spent most of his life, having been sent into exile after Edmund's death and the conquest of England by the Danish king **Cnut the Great** in 1016. His mother was **Agatha**, who was described as a relative of the **German Emperor**, but whose exact identity is unknown. He was his parents' only son but had two sisters, **Margaret** and **Cristina**.

In 1057 the childless king of England, **Edmund Ironside's** half-brother **Edward the Confessor**, who had only recently become aware that his nephew was still alive, summoned Edward back to England with his family to take up his place at court as heir to the throne. The returning exile died in uncertain circumstances shortly after his arrival in England.<sup>[2]</sup> Edgar, at only six years old, was left as the only surviving male member of the royal dynasty apart from the king. However, the latter made no recorded effort to entrench his grand-nephew's position as heir to a throne which was being eyed by a range of powerful potential contenders including England's leading aristocrat **Harold Godwinson**, **Earl of Wessex** and the foreign rulers **William**, **Duke of Normandy**, **Sweyn II Estrithson**, **King of Denmark** and **Harald Hardrada**, **King of Norway**.

## 2 The succession struggle

When King Edward died in January 1066, Edgar was still in his early teens, too young to be an effective military leader. This had not previously been an insurmountable obstacle: the earlier kings of England **Eadwig**, **Edgar the Peaceful** and **Edward the Martyr** had all come to the throne at a similar age, while **Æthelred the Unready** had been significantly younger at his accession. However, the avaricious ambitions which had been aroused across north-western Europe by **Edward the Confessor's** lack of an heir prior to 1057, and by the king's failure thereafter to prepare the way for Edgar to succeed him, removed any prospect of a peaceful hereditary succession. War was

clearly inevitable and Edgar was in no position to fight it, while he was without powerful adult relatives to champion his cause. Accordingly, the **Witenagemot** elected **Harold Godwinson**, the man best-placed to defend the country against the competing foreign claimants, to succeed Edward.

Following Harold's death at the **Battle of Hastings** against the invading **Normans** in October, the **Witenagemot** assembled in London and elected Edgar king. The new regime thus established was dominated by the most powerful surviving members of the English ruling class, **Stigand**, **Archbishop of Canterbury**, **Ealdred**, **Archbishop of York**, and the brothers **Edwin**, **Earl of Mercia**, and **Morcar**, **Earl of Northumbria**. The commitment of these men to Edgar's cause, men who had so recently passed over his claim to the throne without apparent demur, must have been doubtful from the start. The strength of their resolve to continue the struggle against **William of Normandy** was questionable and the military response they organised to the continuing Norman advance was ineffectual. When **William** crossed the **Thames** at **Wallingford** he was met by **Stigand**, who now abandoned Edgar and submitted to the invader. As the Normans closed in on London, Edgar's key supporters in the city began negotiating with **William**. In early December the remaining members of the **Witan** in London met and resolved to take the young uncrowned king out to meet **William** to submit to him at **Berkhamsted**, quietly setting aside Edgar's election.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 3 Exile and war against the Normans

**William** kept Edgar in his custody and took him, along with other English leaders, to his court in **Normandy** in 1067, before returning with them to England. Edgar may have been involved in the abortive rebellion of the Earls **Edwin** and **Morcar** in 1068; in any case, in that year he fled with his mother and sisters to the court of **King Malcolm III Canmore** of **Scotland**. **Malcolm** married Edgar's sister **Margaret** and agreed to support Edgar in his attempt to reclaim the English throne.<sup>[4]</sup> When a major rebellion broke out in **Northumbria** at the beginning of 1069, Edgar returned to England with other rebels who had fled to **Scotland**, to become the leader, or at least the figurehead, of the revolt. However, after early successes the rebels were defeated by **William** at **York** and Edgar again sought refuge with **Malcolm**.<sup>[5]</sup> In late summer that year

the arrival of a fleet sent by King Sweyn of Denmark triggered a fresh wave of English uprisings in various parts of the country. Edgar and the other exiles sailed to the **Humber**, where they linked up with Northumbrian rebels and the Danes. Their combined forces overwhelmed the Normans at York and took control of Northumbria, but a small seaborne raid which Edgar led into the **Kingdom of Lindsey** ended in disaster and he escaped with only a handful of followers to rejoin the main army. Late in the year William fought his way into Northumbria and occupied York, buying off the Danes and devastating the surrounding country.<sup>[6]</sup> Early in 1070 he moved against Edgar and other English leaders who had taken refuge with their remaining followers in a marshy region, perhaps **Holderness**, and put them to flight. Edgar returned to Scotland.

He remained there until 1072, when William invaded Scotland and forced King Malcolm to submit to his overlordship. The terms of the agreement between them probably included the expulsion of Edgar.<sup>[7]</sup> He therefore took up residence in **Flanders**, whose count, **Robert the Frisian**, was hostile to the Normans. However, in 1074 he was able to return to Scotland. Shortly after his arrival there he received an offer from **Philip I, King of France**, who was also at odds with William, of a castle and lands near the borders of Normandy from which he would be able to raid his enemies' homeland. He embarked with his followers for France, but a storm wrecked their ships on the English coast. Many of Edgar's men were hunted down by the Normans, but he managed to escape with the remainder to Scotland by land. Following this disaster, he was persuaded by Malcolm to make peace with William and return to England as his subject, abandoning any ambition of regaining his ancestral throne.<sup>[8]</sup>

## 4 The Italian venture

Disappointed in the level of recompense and respect he received from William, in 1085 Edgar secured the king's permission to emigrate with a retinue of two hundred knights, to seek his fortune in the expanding Norman colony in southern Italy and Sicily.<sup>[9]</sup> He set out in 1086. The *Domesday Book*, compiled that year, records only two estates in Hertfordshire with a total value of £10 p.a. as belonging to Edgar, both of them held from him by a tenant named Godwin. This is an extremely small allocation of property for a man of Edgar's standing and much less than was held by his sister Cristina, the income from whose estates was valued at £58.<sup>[10]</sup> This is probably because Edgar had given up his English properties when he left for Italy, not meaning to return. In that case the recording of the Hertfordshire estates under his name is likely to be an anomaly, reflecting a situation which had recently ceased to apply.<sup>[11]</sup> The venture in the Mediterranean was evidently not a success, since within a few years Edgar had in fact returned to England.

## 5 Norman and Scottish dynastic strife

After King William's death in 1087 Edgar supported William's eldest son **Robert Curthose**, who succeeded him as Duke of Normandy, against his second son, **William Rufus**, who received the throne of England as William II. According to the historian **Orderic Vitalis**, Edgar was one of Robert's three principal advisors at this time.<sup>[12]</sup> The war waged by Robert and his allies to overthrow William ended in defeat in 1091. As part of the resulting settlement between the brothers, Edgar was deprived of lands which he had been granted by Robert. These were presumably former possessions of William and his supporters in Normandy, confiscated by Robert and distributed to his own followers, including Edgar, but restored to their previous owners by the terms of the peace agreement. The disgruntled Edgar travelled once again to Scotland, where Malcolm was preparing for war with William. When William marched north and the two armies confronted one another the kings opted to talk rather than fight. The negotiations were conducted by Edgar on behalf of Malcolm and the newly reconciled Robert Curthose on behalf of William. The resulting agreement included a reconciliation between William and Edgar. However, within months Robert left England, unhappy with William's failure to fulfil the pact between them, and Edgar went with him to Normandy.<sup>[13]</sup>

Having returned to England, in 1093 Edgar went to Scotland again on a diplomatic mission for William to negotiate with Malcolm, who was dissatisfied with the Norman failure to implement in full the terms of the 1091 treaty. This dispute led to war and within the year Malcolm had invaded England and been killed along with his designated heir Edward, eldest of his sons by Margaret, in the **Battle of Alnwick**. Malcolm's successor, his brother **Donald Bán**, drove out the English and French retainers who had risen high in Malcolm's service and had thus aroused the jealousy of the existing Scottish aristocracy. This purge brought him into conflict with the Anglo-Norman monarchy, whose influence in Scotland it had diminished. William helped Malcolm's eldest son Duncan, who had spent many years as a hostage at William I's court and remained there when set at liberty by William II, to overthrow his uncle, but Donald soon regained the throne and Duncan was killed.<sup>[14]</sup> In 1097 another effort to restore the Anglo-Norman interest through sponsorship of Malcolm's sons was launched and Edgar made yet another journey to Scotland, this time in command of an invading army. Donald was ousted and Edgar installed his nephew and namesake, Malcolm and Margaret's son Edgar, on the Scottish throne.<sup>[15]</sup>

## 6 The First Crusade

Orderic tells us that Edgar was the commander of an English fleet which operated off the coast of the region of Syria in support of the First Crusade, whose crews eventually burned their dilapidated ships and joined the advance by land to Jerusalem.<sup>[16]</sup> This is rendered doubtful by the fact that this fleet is known to have arrived off the Syrian coast by March 1098: since Edgar invaded Scotland late in 1097, he could not have made the voyage in the time available. It may be though that he travelled overland to the Mediterranean and joined the fleet en route; this is the view taken by Runciman.<sup>[17]</sup> William of Malmesbury recorded that Edgar made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1102, and it may be that Orderic's report is the product of confusion, conflating the expedition of the English fleet with Edgar's later journey. Some modern historians have suggested that at some point during these years Edgar served in the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Empire, a unit which was at this time composed primarily of English emigrants, but this is unsupported by evidence. William of Malmesbury stated that on his way back from Jerusalem Edgar was given rich gifts by both the Byzantine and German emperors, each of whom offered him an honoured place at court, but that he insisted on returning home instead.<sup>[18]</sup>

## 7 Later life

Back in Europe, Edgar again took the side of Robert Curthose in the internal struggles of the Norman dynasty, this time against Robert's youngest brother who was now Henry I, King of England. He was taken prisoner in the final defeat at the Battle of Tinchebray in 1106, which resulted in Robert being imprisoned for the rest of his life. Edgar was more fortunate: having been taken back to England he was pardoned and released by King Henry.<sup>[19]</sup> His niece Edith (renamed Matilda), daughter of Malcolm III and Margaret, had married Henry in 1100. Edgar is believed to have travelled to Scotland once more late in life, perhaps around the year 1120. He lived to see the tragic death at sea in November 1120 of William Adeling, the son of his niece Edith and heir to Henry I. Edgar was still alive in 1125 according to William of Malmesbury who was writing at the time. The general consensus is that Edgar died shortly after 1125. The location of his grave is not known.

There is no evidence that Edgar had married or produced children apart from two curious references to an "Edgar Adeling" found in the *Magnus Rotulus Pipae Northumberland* (Pipe rolls) for the years 1158 and 1167.<sup>[20]</sup> Historian Edward Freeman writing in *The History of the Norman Conquest* says that either this was the same Edgar and aged at least 110 years or it was a son of his or it was some other person known by the title "Ætheling". Nevertheless, as far as anyone knows, the death of Edgar ex-

tinguished the male line of the original royal family of England.

## 8 Ancestry

## 9 Notes

- [1] The Old English term *Aetheling*, in contemporary spelling *Æpeling*, denotes a man of royal blood.
- [2] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and tr. Michael Swanton, 2nd ed. (London 2000), pp. 187–8
- [3] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 199–200; Florence of Worcester, *A History of the Kings of England*, tr. Joseph Stephenson (Lampeter 1988), pp. 134–5; Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford 1968–1980), vol. 2, pp. 182–183
- [4] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 200–2; Florence of Worcester, p. 136
- [5] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 202–3; Orderic, vol. 2, pp. 220–3
- [6] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 203–4; Florence of Worcester, pp. 136–7; Orderic, vol. 2, pp. 226–9
- [7] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, p. 208
- [8] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 209–10; Florence of Worcester, p. 140
- [9] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, p. 217; Florence of Worcester, p. 145
- [10] *Domesday Book: a complete translation*, ed. and tr. Ann Williams and G. H. Martin (London 1992), pp. 392, 441, 670
- [11] Donald Henson, *The English Elite in 1066: gone but not forgotten* (Thetford 2001), pp. 24–6
- [12] Orderic, vol. 4, pp. 186–7
- [13] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 226–7; Florence of Worcester, pp. 150–1
- [14] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 227–8, 230; Florence of Worcester, pp. 152–4
- [15] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, pp. 234; Florence of Worcester, p. 157
- [16] Orderic, vol. 5, pp. 270–3
- [17] *History of the Crusades* 1968 (1951) Vol 1, p. 227, p. 228 note, and p. 255)
- [18] William of Malmesbury, *A History of the Norman Kings (1066–1125), with the Historia Novella or history of his own times (1126–1142)*, tr. John Sharp (London 1854), pp. 237–8
- [19] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, p. 241

- [20] Freeman, Edward A. *The History of the Norman Conquest of England* (1869), Vol. III p.766 citing Hodgson, J., and Hinde, J. H. *History of Northumberland* (1820–1858), Part III, Vol. III, pp. 3, 11

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