

Mary Elizabeth Blanchard and Christopher Riedel, eds, *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig, 939–959: New Interpretations*

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*Review*

*The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig, 939–959* makes a compelling case for re-considering the importance of King Edmund (r. 939–46), King Eadred (r. 946–55), and King Eadwig (r. 955–59). The essays in this volume bring these kings out from under the shadow of their better-known predecessors and successors and presents to us a fuller picture of tenth-century England. The neglect shown to these kings is difficult to justify. As this volume persuasively argues, Edmund, Eadred, and Eadwig made certain that the ‘semi-autonomous north’ did not re-establish independence, while their political and religious patronage sustained the environment in which reformist energies could flourish (p. 1). Indeed, without these kings, the celebrated ‘Golden Age’ of the later tenth century, especially the heights of the Benedictine Reform in the 960s and 970s, would not have been possible (p. 2).

Here we are presented with a diversity of approaches brought by its contributors. These cohere around three central themes: the complexity of tenth-century West Saxon courtly and dynastic politics and their later remembrance; the cultural and religious creativity of the mid-tenth century; and the consolidation of power by the West Saxon line (p. 7). While these overarching themes connect the

essays in *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig*, the structure is sporadic. My main critique of the collection is that this organisation, at times, made it difficult to see how the individual contributions related to one another in any meaningful order. Considered on their own, however, the chapters certainly offer some noteworthy findings. Chapters one and eight offer compelling insight into the fraught relationship between the royal authority, the court, and ecclesiastical influence. In chapter one, Alison Hudson examines how the erasure of Edmund's successors, Eadred and Eadwig, began almost as soon as they died. She demonstrates that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and other surviving texts devote little space to the reigns of these kings. Essentially, later reformers, whose writings came to dominate the records that survive, deliberately 'tried to downplay' the records of Eadred and Eadwig, thus embedding a consequential negative narrative that has seemingly endured centuries after (p. 25). In chapter eight, Katherine Weikert looks to Eadwig's court, where factional conflict aimed to 'denigrate' the king's authority and legitimacy (p. 175). Through a reading of hostile accounts of Eadwig's marriage to Ælfgifu, and the infamous scandal involving her mother Ælthelgifu, Weikert shows how distorted, and often fabricated, tales of sexual impropriety were deployed to delegitimise kings, while also attempting to elevate more saintly figures, such as Dunstan, who acted as political counterweights and models of righteous behaviour.

The bulk of this volume is dedicated to its second theme, of which there are five chapters concerned with the cultural and religious developments in the 940s

and 950s. In chapters two and three, Nicole Marafioti and Isabelle Beaudoin focus on particular clauses in Edmund's law codes which tend to have 'gotten short shrift among legal historians' (p. 40). Marafioti argues that Edmund's legislation regarding the Church deserves far more credit than it has received. This chapter shows how the cooperation between secular and ecclesiastical courts established patterns that shaped the reform movement under Edgar much earlier than previously assumed. Beaudoin then builds on the importance of Edmund's laws by demonstrating that the oath of loyalty imposed by Edmund acted as a turning point in English legal history. Beaudoin argues that more scholars should recognise that the oath of allegiance made to English kings was made 'explicitly' first in the laws of King Edmund (p. 59). Stuart Pracy and Gerald Dyson extend this focus towards development and innovation. In chapter 4, Pracy examines the emergence of heriots in wills. This was a practice that reflected the increasingly public and performative nature of kingship in relation to magnates. In essence, Pracy argues that the practice of heriots in this period 'marked a period of intensified royal authority' (p. 82). In chapter 9, Dyson analyses a unique penitential which reveals how scribes outside reformed centres adapted elements of reformist practice. His study exemplifies that there was a creative diffusion of reformist ideals across the English Church. In chapter 7, Mary Blanchard combines both themes of politics and cultural creativity by examining Eadred's reign through the lens of infirmity and the underestimated role of queenship. She shows that Eadred's chronic illness was an important reason as to why we see the elevated role of his mother, Eadgifu. The prominence of the

*mater regis* in charters and court politics reveal the importance of queenship and dynastic continuity when the male lineage was at times incapable of fulfilling their duties.

The final theme of the volume, which focuses on West Saxon lineage, is enriched by Andrew Rabin and Neil McGuigan. In chapters 5 and 6, these scholars reconsider the fraught incorporation of Northumbria into the emerging English kingdom. In chapter 5, Rabin's contribution foregrounds the characterisation of Wulfstan I, Archbishop of York's, long dismissed for his 'opportunism' and 'disloyalty' (p. 100). Here Rabin argues that we should recast Wulfstan as a cleric navigating a precarious political environment, striving to protect his diocese amidst competing Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian pressures. In chapter 6, McGuigan shifts his attention to the Norse world. He argues that York's politics were shaped as much by external dynamics across the North Sea as by southern royal authority, reminding us that later historians were perhaps a little too eager for neat succession lists, which were indeed often 'misguided' (p. 132). Consequently, McGuigan sees this as oversimplifying the complex reality of leadership in York.

Overall, the collection of essays presented in *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig* are exceptional works that do exceedingly well to explore the reigns of three kings which have been sidelined too often in the scholarship. The text is very accessible to those wanting to open up new pathways to better understand the tenth

century. It should also be of value to a wide range of scholars interested in kingship more broadly, and it will surely earn a place on their shelves.

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