

Edward the Elder

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Edward the Elder (Old English: *Eadweard cyning*; c. 874–877 – 17 July 924) was King of the Anglo-Saxons from 899 until his death. He became king in 899 upon the death of his father, Alfred the Great. He captured the eastern Midlands and East Anglia from the Danes in 917 and became ruler of Mercia in 918 upon the death of Æthelflæd, his sister.

All but two of his charters give his title as "*Anglorum Saxonum rex*" or "king of the Anglo-Saxons". He was the second king of the Anglo-Saxons as this title was created by Alfred.^[1] Edward's coinage reads "EADVVEARD REX."^[2] According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the Kings of Scotland and Strathclyde and the rulers of Northumbria "chose [Edward] as father and lord" in 920, but the claim is dismissed by most historians.^[3] Edward's eponym "the Elder" was first used in Wulfstan's *Life of St Æthelwold* (c. 996) to distinguish him from the later King Edward the Martyr.

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Background

Mercia was the dominant kingdom in southern England in the eighth century and maintained its position until it suffered a decisive defeat by Wessex at the Battle of Ellandun in 825. Thereafter the two kingdoms became allies, which was to be an important factor in English resistance to the Vikings.^[4] In 865 the Danish Viking Great Heathen Army landed in East Anglia and used this as a starting point for an invasion. The East Anglians were forced to buy peace and the following year the Vikings invaded Northumbria, where they appointed a puppet king in 867. They then moved on Mercia, where they spent the winter of 867–868. King Burgred of Mercia was joined by King Æthelred of Wessex and his brother, the future King Alfred, for a combined attack on the Vikings, who refused an engagement; in the end the Mercians bought peace with them. The following year, the Danes conquered East Anglia, and in 874 they expelled King Burgred and Ceolwulf became the last King of Mercia with their support. In 877 the Vikings partitioned Mercia, taking the eastern regions for themselves and allowing Ceolwulf to keep the western ones. The situation was transformed the following year when Alfred won a decisive victory over the Danes at the Battle of Edington. He was thus able to prevent the Vikings from taking Wessex and western Mercia, although they still occupied Northumbria, East Anglia and eastern Mercia.^[5]

Childhood

Alfred the Great married his Mercian queen Ealhswith in 868. Her father was Æthelred "Mucel", Ealdorman of the Gaini, and her mother, Eadburh, was a member of the Mercian royal family. Alfred and Ealhswith had five children who survived childhood. Their first child was Æthelflæd, who married Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians and ruled as Lady of the Mercians after his death. Edward was next, and the second daughter, Æthelgifu, became abbess of Shaftesbury. The third daughter, Ælfthryth, married Baldwin, Count of Flanders, and the youngest child, Æthelweard, was given a scholarly education, including learning Latin. This would usually suggest that he was intended for the church, but it is unlikely in Æthelweard's case as he had sons. There were also an unknown number of children who died young. Neither part of Edward's name, which means 'protector of wealth', had been used previously by the West Saxon royal house, and Barbara Yorke suggests that he may have been named after his maternal grandmother Eadburh, reflecting the West Saxon policy of strengthening links with Mercia.^[6]

Æthelflæd was probably born about a year after her parents' marriage, and Edward was brought up with his youngest sister, Ælfthryth. Yorke argues that he was therefore probably nearer in age to Ælfthryth than Æthelflæd. However, he led troops in battle in 893, and he must have been of marriagable age in that year as his oldest son Æthelstan was born about 894, so Edward was probably born in the mid-870s.^[7] According to Asser in his *Life of King Alfred*, Edward and Ælfthryth were educated at court by male and female tutors, and read ecclesiastical and secular works in English, such as the Psalms and Old English poems. They were taught the courtly qualities of gentleness and humility, and Asser wrote that they were obedient to their father and friendly to visitors. This is the only recorded case of an Anglo-Saxon prince and princess receiving the same upbringing.^[8]

Ætheling

Edward the Elder



Portrait miniature from a 13th century genealogical scroll depicting Edward

King of the Anglo-Saxons

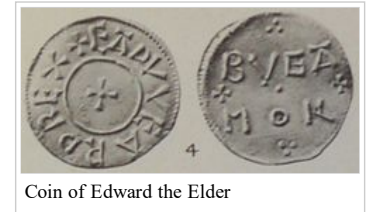
Reign	26 October 899 – 17 July 924
Coronation	8 June 900 Kingston upon Thames or Winchester
Predecessor	Alfred
Successor	Æthelstan
Born	c.874
Died	17 July 924 <div>Farndon, Cheshire, England</div>
Burial	New Minster, Winchester, later translated to Hyde Abbey
Spouse	Ecgwynn Ælflæd Eadgifu
Issue	<i>See list</i>
<i>Detail</i>	
House	Wessex
Father	Alfred, King of Wessex
Mother	Ealhswith
Religion	Catholicism (pre-reformation)

As the eldest son of the reigning king, Edward was an ætheling, a prince of the royal house who was eligible for kingship.^[9] However, his accession was not assured, as he had cousins who may have been thought to have a stronger claim to the throne. Æthelhelm and Æthelwold, were sons of Æthelred, Alfred's older brother and predecessor as king. Æthelhelm is only recorded in Alfred's will of the mid-880s, and probably died at some time in the next decade, but Æthelwold is listed above Edward in the only charter where he appears, probably indicating a higher status. Æthelwold may also have had an advantage because his mother Wulfthryth witnessed a charter as queen, whereas Edward's mother Ealhswith never had a higher status than king's wife. However, Alfred was in a position to give his own son considerable advantages. In his will, he left the bulk of his estate to Edward, and only a handful of estates to his brother's sons, and once Edward grew up Alfred was able to give him military commands and experience of royal business. In a Kentish charter of 898 Edward witnesses as *rex Saxonum*, suggesting that Alfred may have followed the strategy adopted by his grandfather Egbert of strengthening his son's claim to succeed to the West Saxon throne by declaring him King of Kent.^[10]

Æthelwold's Revolt

Alfred died on 26 October 899 and Edward succeeded to the throne, but Æthelwold immediately disputed the succession.^[11] He seized the royal estates of Wimborne, symbolically important as the place where his father was buried, and Christchurch. Edward marched with his army to the nearby Iron Age hillfort at Badbury Rings. Æthelwold declared that he would live or die at Wimborne, but then left in the night and rode to Northumbria, where the Danes accepted him as king.^[12] Edward was crowned on 8 June 900 at Kingston upon Thames or Winchester.^[a]

In 901, Æthelwold came with a fleet to Essex, and the following year he persuaded the East Anglian Danes to invade and harry English Mercia and northern Wessex. Edward retaliated by ravaging East Anglia, but when he retreated south the men of Kent disobeyed the order to retire, and were intercepted by the Danish army. The two sides met at the Battle of the Holme (perhaps Holme in Huntingdonshire) on 13 December 902. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Danes "kept the place of slaughter", meaning that they won the battle, but they suffered heavy losses, including Æthelwold and a King Eohric, possibly of the East Anglian Danes. Kentish losses included Sigehelm, ealdorman of Kent and father of Edward's third wife, Eadgifu. Æthelwold's death ended the threat to Edward's throne.^[14]



Coin of Edward the Elder

Conquest of the southern Danelaw

No battles are recorded between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danish Vikings for several years after the Battle of the Holme, but in 906 Edward agreed peace with the East Anglian and Northumbrian Danes, suggesting that there had been conflict. According to one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* he made peace "of necessity", suggesting he was forced to buy them off. In 909, Edward sent an army to harass Northumbria. In the following year, the Northumbrians retaliated by raiding Mercia, but on their way home they were met by a combined Mercian and West Saxon army at the Battle of Tettenhall, where the Northumbrians suffered a disastrous defeat. From that point, they never ventured south of the River Humber, and Edward and his Mercian allies were able to concentrate on conquering the southern Danelaw in East Anglia and the Mercian Five Boroughs: Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford.^[11] In 911 Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians, died, and Edward took control of the Mercian lands around London and Oxford. Æthelred was succeeded as ruler by his widow Æthelflæd as Lady of the Mercians, and she had probably been acting as ruler for several years as Æthelred seems to have been incapacitated in later life.^[15]

Edward and Æthelflæd then began the construction of fortresses to guard against Viking attacks and protect territory captured from them. In November 911 he constructed a fort on the north bank of the River Lea at Hertford to guard against attack by the Danes of Bedford and Cambridge. In 913 there was a pause in his activities, although Æthelflæd continued her fortress building in Mercia. In 912 he marched with his army to Maldon in Essex, and ordered the building of an earth fortification, and this together with another fort south of the Lea at Hertford protected London from attack, and encouraged many English living under Danish rule in Essex to submit to him instead. In 914 a Viking army sailed from Brittany and ravaged the Severn estuary. It was defeated by a Mercian army, and Edward kept an army on the south side of the estuary which twice repelled attempts to invade Wessex. In the autumn the Vikings moved on to Ireland. In November 914 Edward built two forts at Buckingham, and many Danes at Bedford and Northampton submitted to him, while others left England with Earl Thurketil, reducing the number of Viking armies in the midlands. In 916 Edward built a fortress at Maldon as another defence against the Danes of Colchester.^[16]

The decisive year in the war was 917. In April Edward built a fort at Towcester as a defence against the Danes of Northampton, and another at an unidentified place called Wigingamere. The Danes launched unsuccessful attacks on Towcester, Bedford and Wigingamere, while Æthelflæd captured Derby, showing the value of the English defensive measures, which was aided by disunity and a lack of coordination among the Viking armies. The Danes had built their own fortress at Tempsford, but at the end of the summer the English stormed it and killed the last Danish king of East Anglia. They then took Colchester, although they did not try to hold it. The Danes retaliated by sending a large army to lay siege to Maldon, but the garrison held out until it was relieved and the retreating army was heavily defeated. Edward then returned to Towcester and reinforced its fort with a stone wall, and the Danes of nearby Northampton submitted to him. The armies of Cambridge and East Anglia also submitted, and by the end of the year the only Danish armies still holding out were those of four of the Five Boroughs, Leicester, Stamford, Nottingham, and Lincoln.^[17]

In early 918, Æthelflæd secured the submission of Leicester without a fight, and the Danes of Northumbrian York offered her their allegiance, probably for protection against Norse Vikings who had invaded Northumbria from Ireland, but she died on 12 June before she could take up the proposal. The same offer is not known to have been made to Edward, and the Norse Vikings took York in 919. Æthelflæd was succeeded by her daughter Ælfwynn, but the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that in December 918 she "was deprived of all authority in Mercia and taken into Wessex". Mercia then came under Edward's direct rule. Stamford had surrendered to Edward before Æthelflæd's death, and Nottingham did the same shortly afterwards. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 918, "all the people who had settled in Mercia, both Danish and English, submitted to him". This would mean that he ruled all England south of the Humber, but it is not clear whether Lincoln was an exception, as coins of Viking York in the early 920s were probably minted at Lincoln.^[18]

Later life

No charters of Edward dated after 909 have survived, and nothing is known of his relations with the Mercians after 919 until the last year of his life, when he had to put down a Mercian and Welsh revolt at Chester. Mercia and the eastern Danelaw were organised into shires at an unknown date in the tenth century, ignoring traditional boundaries, and historians speculate that Edward's imposition of direct control from 919 is a likely context for a change which ignored Mercian sensibilities, and may have provoked the revolt at Chester. He died at Farndon, near Chester, on 24 July 924, shortly after putting down the revolt, and was buried in the New Minster, Winchester.^[19]

Legacy

Edward is highly regarded by historians. According to Nick Higham: "Edward the Elder is perhaps the most neglected of English kings. He ruled an expanding realm for twenty-five years and arguably did as much as any other individual to construct a single, south-centred, Anglo-Saxon kingdom, yet posthumously his achievements have been all but forgotten."^[20] In the view of F. T. Wainwright: "Without detracting from the achievements of Alfred, it is well to remember that it was Edward who reconquered the Danish Midlands and gave England nearly a century of respite from serious Danish attacks."^[21]

Edward's cognomen *the Elder* was first used in Wulfstan's *Life of St Æthelwold* at the end of the tenth century, to distinguish him from King Edward the Martyr.^[11]

Marriages and children

Edward had about fourteen children from three marriages.^[b]

He first married Ecgwynn around 893.^[23] Their children were:

- Æthelstan, King of England 924-939^[11]
- A daughter, possibly called Edith or Eadgyth, married Sihtric Cáech, Viking King of York in 926^[24]

In c. 900, Edward married Ælflæd, daughter of Ealdorman Æthelhelm, probably of Wiltshire.^[25] Their children were:

- Ælfweard, died August 924, a month after his father; King of Wessex for that month^[26]
- Edwin, drowned at sea 933^[27]
- Æthelhild, lay sister at Wilton Abbey^[28]
- Eadgifu (died in or after 951), married Charles the Simple, King of the West Franks, c. 918^[29]
- Eadflæd, nun at Wilton Abbey^[28]
- Eadhild, married Hugh the Great, Duke of the Franks in 926^[30]
- Eadgyth (died 946), in 929/30 married Otto I, future King of the East Franks, and (after Eadgyth's death) Holy Roman Emperor^[31]
- Ælfgifu, married "a prince near the Alps", perhaps Louis, brother of King Rudolph II of Burgundy^[32]

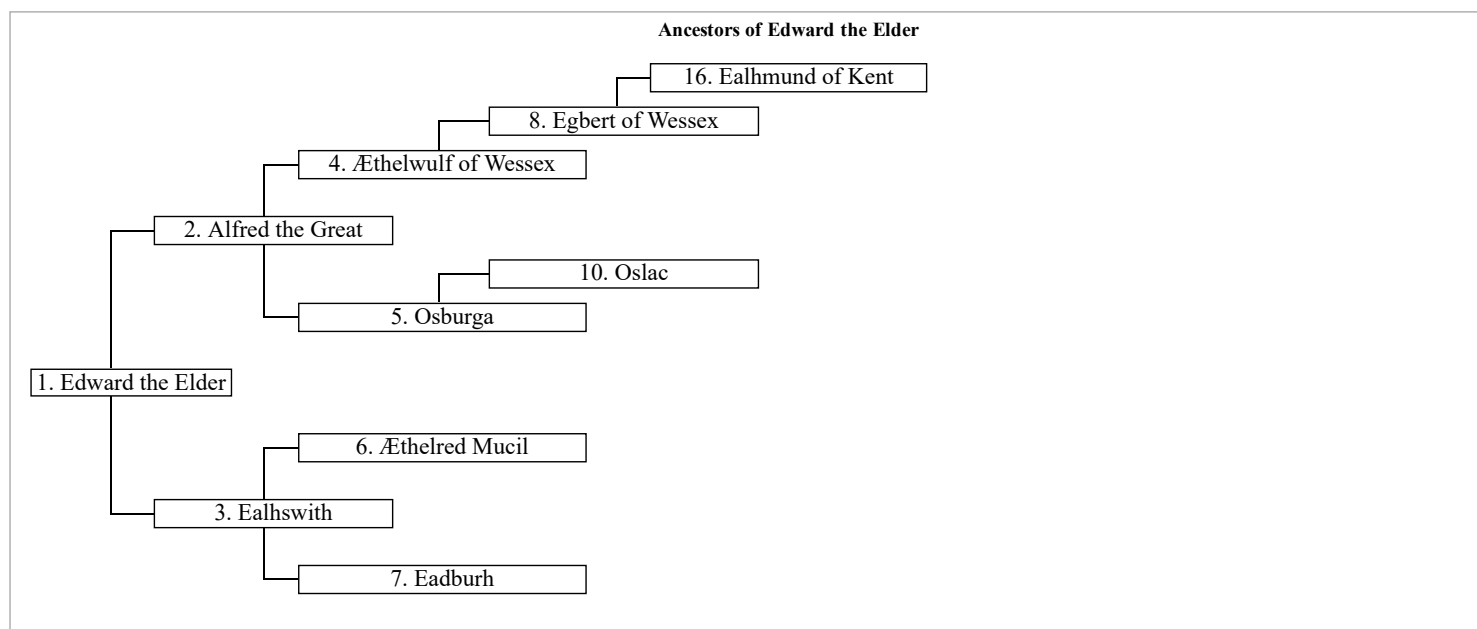
Edward married for a third time, about 919, Eadgifu, the daughter of Sigehelm, Ealdorman of Kent.^[33] Their children were

- Edmund, King of England 939-946^[22]
- Eadred, King of England 946-955^[22]
- Eadburh (died c. 952), Benedictine nun at Nunnaminster, Winchester, and saint^[34]
- Eadgifu, existence uncertain, possibly the same person as Ælfgifu^[35]



Silver brooch imitating a coin of Edward the Elder, c. 920, found in Rome, Italy. British Museum.

Genealogy



Notes

- The twelfth-century chronicler Ralph of Diceto stated that the coronation took place at Kingston, and this is accepted by Simon Keynes, but Sarah Foot thinks that Winchester is more likely.^[13]

b. The order in which Edward's children are listed is based on the family tree in Foot's *Æthelstan: the First King of England*, which shows sons before daughters. The daughters are listed in their birth order according to William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*.^[22]

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- Yorke 2001, pp. 29–32; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 321, n. 66; Æthelhelm, PASE.
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- Stenton 1971, p. 321; Lavelle 2009, pp. 53, 61.
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- Stenton 1971, pp. 321–322; Hart 1992, p. 512–515; Stafford 2004.
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External links

- Edward 2 (<http://www.pase.ac.uk/jsp/ASC/person.jsp?personKey=266>) at Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England
- The Laws of King Edward the Elder (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/560-975dooms.html#Laws%20of%20King%20Edward%20the%20Elder>)
- Edward the Elder Coinage Regulations (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/925edgar-coinregs.html>)
- Find A Grave: Edward the Elder (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=22392>)

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