

# Waltheof, Earl of Northumbria

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**Waltheof, 1st Earl of Northumbria** (1050 – 31 May 1076)

was the last of the Anglo-Saxon earls and the only English aristocrat to be executed during the reign of William I.

## Contents

- 1 Early life
- 2 First revolt
- 3 Second revolt and death
- 4 Cult of martyrdom
- 5 Family and children
- 6 In popular culture
- 7 References
- 8 Sources
- 9 External links

## Waltheof

### Earl of Northumbria

<b>Reign</b>	1072–1076
<b>Predecessor</b>	Cospatrick of Northumbria
<b>Successor</b>	William Walcher
<b>Spouse(s)</b>	Judith of Lens
<b>Father</b>	Siward, Earl of Northumbria
<b>Mother</b>	Aelfflaed
<b>Born</b>	c.1055
<b>Died</b>	31 May 1076 <div>St. Giles's Hill, Winchester</div>
<b>Buried</b>	Croyland Abbey

## Early life

Waltheof was the second son of Siward, Earl of Northumbria. His mother was Aelfflaed, daughter of Ealdred, Earl of Bernicia, son of Uhtred, Earl of Northumbria. In 1054, Waltheof's brother, Osbearn, who was much older than he, was killed in battle, making Waltheof his father's heir. Siward himself died in 1055, and Waltheof being far too young to succeed as Earl of Northumbria, King Edward appointed Tostig Godwinson to the earldom.

He was said to be devout and charitable and was probably educated for a monastic life. In fact around 1065 he became an earl, governing Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire. Following the Battle of Hastings he submitted to William and was allowed to keep his pre-Conquest title and possessions. He remained at William's court until 1068.

## First revolt

When Sweyn II invaded Northern England in 1069, Waltheof and Edgar Aetheling joined the Danes and took part in the attack on York. He would again make a fresh submission to William after the departure of the invaders in 1070. He was restored to his earldom, and went on to marry William's niece, Judith of Lens. In 1072, he was appointed Earl of Northampton.

The Domesday Book mentions Waltheof ("*Walleff*"); "In Hallam ("*Halun*"), one manor with its sixteen hamlets, there are twenty-nine *carucates* [~14 km<sup>2</sup>] to be taxed. There Earl Waltheof had an "Aula" [hall or court]. There may have been about twenty ploughs. This land Roger de Busli holds of the Countess Judith." (Hallam, or Hallamshire, is now part of the city of Sheffield)

In 1072, William expelled Gospatric from the earldom of Northumbria. Gospatric was Waltheof's cousin and had taken part in the attack on York with him, but like Waltheof, had been pardoned by William. Gospatric fled into exile and William appointed Waltheof as the new earl.

Waltheof had many enemies in the north. Amongst them were members of a family who had killed Waltheof's maternal great-grandfather, Uchtred the Bold, and his grandfather Ealdred. This was part of a long-running blood feud. In 1074, Waltheof moved against the family by sending his retainers to ambush them, succeeding in killing the two eldest of four brothers.

## Second revolt and death

In 1075 Waltheof joined the Revolt of the Earls against William. His motives for taking part in the revolt are unclear, as is the depth of his involvement. However he repented, confessing his guilt first to Archbishop Lanfranc and then in person to William, who was at the time in Normandy. He returned to England with William but was arrested, brought twice before the king's court and sentenced to death.

He spent almost a year in confinement before being beheaded on 31 May 1076 at St. Giles's Hill, near Winchester. He was said to have spent the months of his captivity in prayer and fasting. Many people believed in his innocence and were surprised when the execution was carried out. His body was initially thrown in a ditch, but was later retrieved and was buried in the chapter house of Croyland Abbey.

## Cult of martyrdom

In 1092, after a fire in the chapter house, the abbot had Waltheof's body moved to a prominent place in the abbey church. When the coffin was opened, it is reported that the corpse was found to be intact with the severed head re-joined to the trunk.<sup>[1]</sup> This was regarded as a miracle, and the abbey, which had a financial interest in the matter began to publicise it. As a result, pilgrims began to visit Waltheof's tomb.

After a few years healing miracles were reputed to occur in the vicinity of Waltheof's tomb, often involving the restoration of the pilgrim's lost sight.

Waltheof also became the subject of popular media, heroic but inaccurate accounts of his life being preserved in the *Vita et Passio Waldevi comes*, a Middle English *Waltheof saga*, since lost, and the Anglo-Norman *Waldef*.

## Family and children

In 1070 Waltheof married Judith de Lens, daughter of Lambert II, Count of Lens and Adelaide of Normandy, Countess of Aumale. They had three children, the eldest of whom, Maud, brought the earldom of Huntingdon to her second husband, David I of Scotland, and another, Adelise, married the Anglo-Norman noble Raoul III of Tosny.

One of Waltheof's grandsons was Waltheof (d. 1159), abbot of Melrose.

## In popular culture

- Waltheof was portrayed by actor Marcus Gilbert in the TV drama *Blood Royal: William the Conqueror* (1990).
- Waltheof is the subject of Juliet Dymoke's 1970 historical novel *Of the Ring of Earls*
- Waltheof is a major character in Elizabeth Chadwick's 2002 historical novel *The Winter Mantle*

## References



statue traditionally identified as Waltheof, at Croyland Abbey, west front of ruined nave, 4th tier

## Sources

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- Lewis, C. P. "Waltheof, earl of Northumbria (c.1050–1076)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.). Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/28646. (Subscription or UK public library membership (<http://www.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/freeodnb/libraries/>) required.)

## External links

- Waltheof 2 (<http://www.pase.ac.uk/jsp/ASC/person.jsp?personKey=18109>) at Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England

Peerage of England		
Preceded by <b>Cospatrick</b>	<b>Earl of Northumbria</b> 1072–1075	Succeeded by <b>William Walcher</b>
<b>New title</b>	<b>Earl of Huntingdon and Earl of Northampton</b> 1072–1076	Succeeded by <b>Vacant</b> Next held by: <b>Simon I of St Liz</b>

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