



*Edgar, King of the English 959–975:  
New Interpretations,  
Donald Scragg (ed.)  
(Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014).*

Review by:  
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*Edgar, King of the English 959-975: New Interpretations*. By Donald Scragg (ed.). Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2014 (Hardback Edition, 2008). ISBN 9781843839286. 294 pp. £25.

**K**ing Edgar of Anglo-Saxon England is an enigmatic figure. Due to a paucity of sources, serious gaps persist in his biography. Those sources that have survived confuse as well as clarify. Depending on which eleventh- or twelfth-century author one reads, Edgar is either an admirable king or a tyrant; he embodied either royal piety or lustful vice. Recently republished in paperback, this volume of thirteen essays does not seek to resolve these contradictions, but instead to reevaluate Edgar as king in light of the dynamic changes occurring at the Anglo-Saxon court and in the wider community during his reign.

Originating as part of a conference series on Anglo-Saxon kings, *Edgar: King of the English 959-975* performs a detailed analysis of the documentary record while also isolating three focal periods for study: his first position as king of the Mercians from *c.* 957 to 959, his tenure as king of a reunited Anglo-Saxon England from 959 to 975, and the impact of the Benedictine reform movement during his kingship.

Simon Keynes' chapter and accompanying conspectus of King Edgar's charters constitute Part I. Stepping back from the elaborate eleventh- and twelfth-century reports of Edgar's character, Keynes grounds the historical king through a comprehensive analysis of the extant contemporary law codes and coins, alongside a particular emphasis on the diplomatic material. Since the sources do not allow a complete narrative of Edgar's kingship, Keynes identifies six central themes for inquiry concerning the exercise of the royal government, the relationships between the king and his councilors, the socio-economic ramifications of reunification, the monastic reform, Edgar's 973 coronation, and events after his death in 975. The conspectus arranges the surviving diplomatic evidence into four categories: authentic charters issued from 957 to 959, authentic charters issued from 959 to 975, problematic charters, and "lost" and incomplete charters. Keynes' thematic framework, along with his strong case for reassessing Edgar's actions and reputation upon the extant tenth-century evidence, provides an excellent guide for navigating the discussion of specific sources and topics in the essays following.

The authors in Part II contemplate the complex dynamics of Edgar's kingship in Mercia. Shashi Jayakumar's essay probes the validity of Edgar's brother Eadwig's reputation as an ill-advised and inefficient king. Jayakumar finds that some of Eadwig's supporters forcibly suffered "the very personal enmity" of Edgar. Indeed, Jayakumar argues that the origin of Eadwig's posthumous reputation can be traced to Edgar's court. C. P. Lewis narrows

in on Edgar's grant to the secular clerks of St. Werburgh, Chester in 958. This charter, Lewis contends, projected Edgar's expansionist ambitions for a reunited kingdom at this early stage. Frederick Biggs proposes another reevaluation of the political realities of this brief period between 957 and 959. Biggs posits that a joint kingship was envisioned by both Eadwig's and Edgar's supporters from 955. Ultimately, Biggs argues that the Anglo-Saxon church was uncomfortable with the concept of a non-linear succession, which resulted in a downplaying of Edgar's and Eadwig's joint kingship in many extant sources. These three authors do not present a unified view of the political events of the years 955 to 959; Jayakumar's arguments for contesting factions do not necessarily align with Biggs' assertion of a joint kingship. Yet each author underscores the range of possibilities available to Edgar in this tenuous state as well as how fundamental this period was for the development of Edgar's later reign.

Part III comprises four central aspects of Edgar's kingship: his relationship with the women in his family, his connections to the Danelaw, his pre-reform coin issues, and the frequent appearance of Albion in his charters. Barbara Yorke clearly disentangles the tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-century narratives surrounding the identifiable women in Edgar's life and at his court, most especially Queen Ælfthryth. As Yorke concludes, Edgar's "predatory interest in nuns" (151) and his appetite for serial monogamy set the stage in the centuries after his death for moralizing Anglo-Norman chroniclers to create an adverse reputation for Edgar and, by association, for Ælfthryth. In a similar fashion, Lesley Abrams casts her essay as a reconsideration of Edgar's relationships, albeit with those who dwelled in Danelaw. Abrams begins with a reconsideration of Lund's 1976 thesis, which argued that important northern laymen supported Edgar's cause in 957 in order to pursue their own separatist agenda. By combing through the sparse evidence, Abrams counters this influential argument by demonstrating, among other factors, that "the Danes" did not constitute a single separatist group nor was their ethnic identity necessarily defined by genetic ties.

Two further essays in Part III concentrate on Edgar's projection of his regal persona through his coinage and charters. Hugh Pagan conducts a survey of Edgar's coinage before the major reform of 973, suggesting the outlines of series of regional, if not administrative, practices that would gradually give way after 973. Julia Crick focuses on the application of Albion in Edgar's charters. Crick begins with an elucidation of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historiographical tradition of Albion and its particular attachment to Edgar. This leads Crick to speculate to what extent the tenth- and eleventh-century evidence permits this association. After demonstrating that three times as many of Edgar's charters include Albion than any other pre-Conquest tenth-century king, Crick argues that for Edgar and his court, the

term Albion communicated aspirations of insular hegemony.

While several authors touched on monastic reform, Part IV concentrates solely on Edgar's impact on the Benedictine reform movement. Two of these articles broaden their analyses to incorporate Edgar's court and beyond. Julia Barrow argues for a reassessment of the standard chronology of the Benedictine movement through a modified dating of the *Regularis Concordia*. By discerning three factors surrounding Archbishop Æthelwold, Queen Ælfthryth, and a cluster of episcopal deaths, Barrow shifts the standard dating of this central text from 970 x 973 to 964 x 966. Alexander Rumble shifts the conversation from the clergy to the laity. He considers how various registers of the laity were affected by the reform movement. The remaining articles in this section focus on the artistic output that can be associated with the reform movement. While Mercedes Salvador-Bello argues that the elegiac poems *The Coronation of Edgar* and *The Death of Edgar* were envisioned as a unit to propagandize reformist ideas, Catherine Karkov delves into the pluralistic meanings imbedded in the New Minister refoundation charter's frontispiece. Instead of arguing for a political or religious significance of the famous portrait, Karkov argues that this splendid artwork symbolized both Edgar's royal majesty and the (re-)dedication of the foundation. The prominent figure of Edgar represented not only the king himself but also embodied the physical space and community of New Minster.

This collection provides an erudite reassessment of King Edgar and Anglo-Saxon socio-political developments during his kingship. These authors present a nuanced trajectory of a kingdom that transitioned from a divided realm to a reunified domain aspiring to uniformity, whether in its coinage, its monastic foundations, or royal ideology. Many of these essays reconsider past assessments of Edgar's reign, whether from the twelfth century, seventeenth century, or a few years ago. Accordingly, the volume will be of interest to scholars concerned with Edgar himself, as well as researchers studying the wider historical, artistic, numismatic, and literary developments of late Anglo-Saxon England.

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