

How powerful were English kings c.1050?

In 1050, the King of England seemed to be at the peak of his power. Edward the Confessor was undeniably master of the land, with an authority over his country which far out-shone many of his Continental peers. In terms of administration, and by extension the administration of the royal will, England under Edward was possibly the most advanced country in Europe. Its borders seemed more secure than they had ever been in the previous fifty years. In terms of wealth, the king had a strong base from which to effectively tax his subjects and from which to hire mercenary warriors to guard his frontiers. A national militia force in the shape of the *fyrð* was available to the king in times of trouble and his system of law was sufficiently rigid to ensure that daily life for most of the people was as prosperous as at any time in recent memory. Yet despite all this, Edward the Confessor was humiliated just two years later by one of his principal nobles. Although the kings of England enjoyed more power and prestige than ever previously, their power ultimately rested on the goodwill of their subordinates.

In terms of administration, Edward the Confessor was directly master over a great deal of national life. The system of writs was clearly understood and seems to have been widespread. This system contained several means for enforcing the king's desire. Firstly, the most important nobles and clergy of the king's *witanagemot* witnessed the composition of the writ¹, thus bolstering its authority; secondly, it was addressed to a clear chain of command in the locality - bishop, earl and sheriff²; finally, it was written in Anglo-Saxon³, thus making the instructions abundantly clear to not just the Latin-speaking clergy but also the laity. Two other things should be noted at this point. The vital elements in this system were literate clerks and sheriffs. The clerks drafted what was in effect direct contact between the king and the localities; the position of sheriff - a man whose sole purpose was to see the king's orders put into practice. Without their support, the king would have been reduced to ordering something, only to not have it carried out by his chief nobles. The king's new direct influence on localities can only be emphasised by grants of *sake and soke* with a tenure. Although a delegation of authority, it in fact served to increase the king's prestige. Since he was the source of authority, threats such as - 'And if anything be taken away from it unjustly we ask that it may be restored. Nor shall it be done otherwise.'⁴ - could be acted on.

To the average person, the king's most obvious form of control was in his coinage. Since this was all stamped with the king's portrait, his image was seen by a far greater number of people than would otherwise have been. He held control of the treasury and money-supply in an iron grip. Indeed his dispossession of his mother Emma for tinkering with the royal treasury shows his determination to fully govern this vital aspect of trade. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that 'he took from her all that she owned in gold and silver and things beyond description, because she had withheld it too firmly from him.'⁵: clearly Edward's authority over his own finances was paramount.

In terms of receiving money in the first place, Edward possessed all the administrative machinery needed to receive a general tax - something unprecedented in most of Europe. Taxable units were understood and enforced. The Northamptonshire Geld Roll, although

¹ *English Historical Documents*, volume 2, no.32

² *ibid*, no.31

³ *ibid*, nos.31 and 32

⁴ *ibid*, no.32

⁵ ASC version CE, 1043, cf also *Florence of Worcester*

compiled soon after William I's accession, is specific that tax liabilities were 'as was the case in King Edward's time'⁶ Although Edward lifted the *Danegeld* in 1051⁷, he may well have reimposed it at a time unrecorded by the Chroniclers. What is certain is that the capacity to receive money hugely bolstered Edward's authority and left him sufficient funds to hire whatever mercenary forces he deemed necessary⁸.

However, it was in terms of military organisation that although the king appeared to hold control, he in fact remained a hostage to the good-will of his magnates. England over the previous fifty years had been plagued by invasion from Scandinavia. To meet this threat, the *fyrð*, a national militia force, was available. As Stamford Gate in 1066 demonstrated, this could in most cases deal with the threat from abroad. Unfortunately for Edward, it was organised along feudal principles, meaning that each magnate was responsible for providing his own contingent. The difference between Edward's vassals and those of William of Normandy was that William's needed his support as much as he needed theirs. As foreigners in a foreign country, mutual support was crucial for their survival. Edward's earls, on the other hand, were practically autonomous and were revered in their own domains⁹. The raising of armies was done by the earls, with or without the king's command or consent. Although it is true that the king did have forces of his own in his household and hired troops, the *Vita Edwardi Regis* is careful to point out that in 1052, Edward came 'with such military force as he could muster to London'¹⁰ to halt Godwin's advance and was clearly outnumbered: 'the earl in any case appeared much superior in arms, if he chose to use them.'¹¹

Consequently the king's power ultimately rested on his continuing good relations with his earls. The king's personal resources were considerable, but not enormously greater than the Godwin family. In 1066, one valuation placed the king's estates at £5000 while that of Godwin's children (excepting Tostig) is £4000¹². The balance of power therefore rested in the earls collectively. If Edward received help from them, as he did from Earls Siward and Leofric in 1051¹³, he was able to overthrow a serious rebellion. If this was not forthcoming, as in 1052, he was unable to prevail. This fine balance of securing the support of all his powerful subjects was Edward's prime task, and one which he needed constantly to review. The best example of this is that Edward's very coronation was delayed by 10 months, something which might have been caused in part by negotiations with Mercia and Northumbria, and perhaps with Scandinavian princes.¹⁴

In the years approaching 1051, it is clear that Edward was trying to change this, and to stamp his personal authority on his country. He possessed great power to make decisions which upset other people. His decisions regarding the English church and the filling of episcopal vacancies, for example, clearly raised hackles not merely with the lay nobles, but also with

⁶ *English Historical Documents*, volume 2, no.61

⁷ ASC version D

⁸ as he did in 1049 when requested by the emperor to guard the English Channel against the Flemings. The ASC versions CDE specifically mention the king's personal force as opposed to that contributed by Godwin.

⁹ ASC version D 1051: 'Then Earl Godwin was indignant that such a thing should happen in his earldom.' ASC version E 1051: 'The earl would not consent to this expedition because he was reluctant to injure his own province.' VER ed. Barlow p.41: 'All the eastern and southern English who could manage it met his ship; all came to meet him, I repeat, like children their long-awaited father.'

¹⁰ VER ed. Barlow p.43

¹¹ *ibid* p.45

¹² quoted in Barlow *Edward the Confessor* p.74

¹³ ASC versions DE, 1051

¹⁴ Barlow *Edward the Confessor* p.60

the clergy.¹⁵ Yet they succeeded. On the other hand, when in 1051-2, Edward the Confessor attempted to destroy his most powerful subject, and he failed. Kingship in this period was a task which required the good upkeep of the law, but which did not offer supreme power. When Edward was forced to accept this, in the years after 1052, his kingdom enjoyed an easy peace and stability. Rebellions and invasions were dealt with by the king's major vassals. In return his vassals expected the king to do his duty in upholding the law, and also to show mercy to chastened nobles. When Edward did this, as with Emma and Stigand in 1043-4; with Swegn in 1050; with the Godwin family in 1052; and Ælfgar in 1055 & 1058; things were calm enough. However, the supreme power of royalty required a common purpose and need binding the king to his principal subjects: something England did not possess until after the accession of William the Conqueror.

¹⁵ *VER*: 'but since the good king lent his ear more to the rival party, the earl suffered a defeat in pressing his request. Indeed Robert...migrated to the Kentish church, while all the clergy protested with all their might against the wrong.'