

Two Coronations: King Athelstan and Queen Elizabeth IInd.

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by

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Introduction

This year, we celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the Coronation of our Queen. Thanks to television the public were able, for the first time, to see the ceremony. The Archbishop of Canterbury blessed her, anointed her with holy oil (orange, roses, cinnamon and musk) after she had taken her vows of duty, gave her the symbols of Royal authority (the orb, sceptre, sword and ring) and then placed the throne upon her head, to the shouted acclamation 'God Save the Queen!' And in that moment, a 27year old young woman was transformed into a Queen.

But if this is the Coronation of the latest of our monarchs, do we know anything about the coronation of the first of them: Athelstan, First King of all the English?

In this paper, I would like to explore this question. The paper will sketch in the historical background before Athelstan, then explain the political crisis which led to his accession. his coronation will be described, and some comparisons drawn with our own Queen. finally there will be a brief explanation of the reason behind the similarities between the two ceremonies.

Historical Background

In our Traditional History it says that Athelstan was accepted as king first of Mersea, then of Wessex. How does he become the first king of the English. In the

ninth century, England was divided into four kingdoms. There was Northumbria and East Anglia, while Mersea, the powerful midland kingdom, stretched from Essex to Wales, with its royal authority centred on Staffordshire. Finally, there was Wessex, located between the south coast and the Thames valley, with its capital at Winchester.

In 865, a huge viking army, mostly Danes, arrived to conquer rather than raid. Within six years this 'Great Heathen Army' had destroyed the kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia. Only Wessex remained, under its King Alfred. Wessex too was almost overrun, but as the invaders sought to settle in the territory that they had conquered, a fragile peace was agreed giving the Vikings much of England. Powerful Viking kingdoms developed in East Anglia and York, and fiercely aggressive settlements sprang up in the East Midlands at Nottingham, Derby and Leicester. The line of the old Roman road from Bedford to Chester was the frontier, and this left part of the old Mercian kingdom in English hands.

Wessex and English Mercia were two separate entities and in the absence of a Mercian king, Alfred had arranged the marriage of his daughter Aethelflaed to a leading Mercian nobleman, thus he exercised influence but did not rule.

Alfred was succeeded by his son, Edward the Elder, as King of Wessex. Edward exploited the vacuum in Mercia, and when his sister Aethelflaed was widowed, an extraordinary partnership was formed, by which the brother and sister pooled their resources and engaged in years of warfare to reclaim the Danish settlements.

Edward's eldest son was Athelstan, but when Edward married for a second time and had other children Athelstan was sent from Wessex to be brought up at the court of his aunt, Aethelflaed in Mercia.

The Succession Crisis

Aethelflaed died before Edward, and whatever informal arrangements existed between the two kingdoms ended with the death of Edward in July 924.

Interestingly, Edward died in Mercia at Farndon, just outside Chester, probably dealing with the latest waves of invaders from the powerful Viking kingdoms in Ireland surging into Cheshire and Lancashire.

Unlike the situation of our own Queen Elizabeth, there was at this time no automatic right of succession to a throne. Any member of the royal family could be eligible, and would be chosen by the leading nobles of the kingdom. Athelstan's grandfather Alfred had been married to a Mercian princess, and this was enough to give Athelstan Mercian royal blood. Having been brought up at his aunt's court, he was effectively a Mercian prince, and it is probable that he already had a reputation as a mighty warrior- important in the light of the new waves of Viking invaders from across the Irish Sea. At Tamworth, the old power centre of Mercia Athelstan was chosen as King of Mercia.

In Wessex, things were different, and the leading men chose Athelstan's half brother (the eldest child of Edward's second marriage) to be King of Wessex.

The two kingdoms would have remained separate, except that Athelstan's half brother died of natural causes sixteen days later, and Athelstan was chosen as king of Wessex in August 924.

The Coronation

The common feature of Elizabeth and Athelstan's coronations is that both were delayed for sixteen months after their respective accessions. In the case of Elizabeth, it was to adequately prepare a unique spectacle in austerity-plagued post-war Britain. Athelstan's priorities were very different.

Mercia was the frontier in the wars against the pagan Vikings, and he was the acknowledged warlord. His reception in Wessex was much less warm (there is evidence of a plot against him) and he had to win over the Wessex nobles. He did it ultimately through the symbolism of a new kind of coronation- and that ceremony took time to plan.

We are fortunate that there exists in the French National Archives in Paris an almost contemporary account of the coronation. Athelstan needed to bind the two kingdoms into one, and his genius lay in developing a whole new order of coronation, one that expressed his ideas of kingship. It would make important statements about the King's understanding of his powers and responsibilities, his vision of a united flock under God and his new conception of a single nation made up of two peoples.

The coronation took place on September 4th. 925. Its location was symbolic, not Tamworth, the Mercian capital or Winchester, the Wessex capital, but Kingston upon Thames - a place on the border of the two kingdoms, and where the Thames becomes tidal.

The location was a great royal estate, with a royal hall and a bishop's hall, a sheep farm, mills and a stud. The church itself was the estate church- built of stone, simple, but with a balcony chapel at the west end on which the king could be shown.

As a Christian king fighting against pagan Vikings, the religious aspect of the ceremony cannot be overemphasised. Anointing the king made him in a special way consecrated to God (just like a bishop). The man and the job were not the same thing. The job carried a great responsibility, and anointing was indispensable, the king was consecrated to rule. If a king were not anointed, he was a 'sword without a handle'. And of course, it was the most senior churchman, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who performed the ceremony, both boosting the legitimacy through God's sanction and binding him to the Church.

The Archbishop began with a prayer appealing to god to bless Athelstan with the gifts of faithfulness, meekness, fortitude, humility and wisdom. Then Athelstan was anointed, after making a three-fold promise: that he would keep his people in peace (i.e. defend them in war by carrying war to their enemies), that he would protect them from robbery and wrongdoing by all men, no matter how great the status of the wrongdoer, and promote justice and mercy through the rule of law.

The Archbishop then blessed the symbols of royal authority and handed them to Athelstan: the ring (to identify the hand that would be stretched forth to raise all who had fallen), the sceptre to defend the holy church and christian people, the rod to soothe the righteous and terrify the reprobate, and the sword to smite the enemies of the people. Finally, a crown was placed upon his head, the first time we hear of a crown in English history. Then, there were repeated acclamations by the people of their king as he was enthroned in glory.

Linking the ceremonies

Anyone listening to that account of that new ceremony devised by athelstan will note its close resemblance to the coronation of Elizabeth, and for that we have to thank King Edward VIIth, who reigned 1901-1910.

Edward was the son of Victoria, whose 60 year reign had seen the monarchy fall into unpopularity, basically because Victoria was increasingly reclusive, cut off from her people and never seen by them.

Edward, who was a freemason, wished to emphasise a new beginning and he did it, as it were, by going back to the 'first principles' of English monarchy, just as Athelstan needed to show that he was king of a newly united people, Edward needed to bind all the different peoples of the Empire together in the same way. Where better than the new ceremony devised by Athelstan. consequently, it is Athelstan's coronation that has provided the inspiration for all coronations since 1904.

Conclusion

We recently celebrated the birth of a new heir to the throne, Prince George of Cambridge. Perhaps, in the fullness of time, his coronation will resemble that of his great grandmother Elizabeth. If so, I trust there will be a member of our order ready to draw attention to the debt that George will owe to the genius of Athelstan, first King of all the English.

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