

St. Hardulph and Anchor Church

Leif Stimpson

St. Hardulph vs. Eardwulf of Northumbria

St. Hardulph is a mysterious figure within Anglo-Saxon texts. It seems certain that his history is somehow intertwined with that of Eardwulf or Eadulf of Northumbria, and that perhaps they are one and the same. Hardulph's name chiefly appears immortalised in the joint dedication of the Priory Church at Breedon-On-The-Hill, Leicestershire, to St. Mary and St. Hardulph. The incomplete story of Eardwulf ties into that of 'Hardulph' extremely well. From what we know, Eardwulf was recalled from exile in 796 CE, to replace the deposed King Osbert of Northumbria. Eardwulf's lineage is not known, other than that his father was also called Eardwulf.

The Reign of King Eardwulf

A certain Eardwulf is also recorded as having succeeded a King Aldfrith of Northumbria in, 705 CE (according to Bede) — a full 91 years earlier, thus who perhaps may be the same or a different king. This does indeed highlight the reason for this period being known as the Dark Ages. Eardwulf was inaugurated at York Minster on 26th May 796 CE, though was, depending on the source, dethroned within either a few weeks or years. In the year 790 CE, it is reported that the Northumbrian King Aethelred I put Eardwulf to death in Ripon. Eadwald was found alive the next day, and so was venerated by some as a saint. Eardwulf was reinstated as King sometime between 808–830 CE (dependent on sources). Little is known about the end of his reign, although it is assumed that he died in or near Breedon-on-the-Hill and is buried there, which could be why the church is dedicated to him. This information comes from a list of saints' final resting places written by Hugh Candidus in the 12th Century, which lists an 'Ardulphus Rex' as buried at Breedon. This is also where the link between Hardulph and Eardwulf is made.

St. Hardulph and Anchor Church?

The connection between Hardulph and Anchor Church becomes even more obscure. The main evidence linking the two is a fragment written in a 1541 book on the life of St. Modwenna which lists a 'St. Hardulche' as living in a 'cell in a cliff a little from the Trent'. Whilst Anchor Church is very likely the 'cell' referred to here, there is no explicit mention of it. Similarly, it has been pointed out that Modwen died in the late 6th century, and so unless this is a different Modwen, this cannot also be Eardwulf. The dating is closer to that of the 'Eadwulf' mentioned earlier, though not close enough. The link, then, is tentative — however, with the gaps in history and a great lack of written documents from the time, it is by no means impossible that all of what has previously been stated is very close to the truth. Hardulph, then, is an endlessly mysterious character. Perhaps we shall never know whether he truly ever inhabited Anchor Church, and indeed whether he was a King a long way from home, whisked away from a tumultuous home in Northumbria. Either way, the mystery of the cave and the mystery of the man seem a perfect fit for one another, a story perhaps never to be fully told, but never ceasing to intrigue.

References

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Further information kindly provided by Dr. Rachel Askew, Breedon Heritage.