

St. Oswald, King of Northumbria (AD 605-AD 642)



St. Oswald was the eldest son of the pagan King Aethelfrith of Bernicia by his second marriage to Princess Acha of Deira. He was probably born in AD 605 at the height of his father's power, just after he had invaded the Kingdom of Deira and forced its king, [Edwin](#), to flee. He was probably born at Yeavinger, though perhaps Acha preferred the newly acquired Deiran Court, from which her brother was expelled, at York. At the age of only eleven, however, it was Oswald who found himself on the run, when King Edwin reconquered Northumbria, with forces gathered in East Anglia.

Queen Acha took her children to the Court of Dalriadan King, Eochaid Buide, at Dunadd in modern Scotland. Here, the family was converted to Christianity by monks from Iona Abbey and Oswald and his brother, Oswiu, were sent to the same monastery to be educated. Little is known of these formative years in the far North, but it does appear that Oswald became a brave warrior at an early age, accompanying King Connad Cerr of Dalriada to Ireland to fight against Maelcaich and the Irish Cruithne at the Battle of Fid Eoin in AD 628.

While Oswald was growing up, his old enemy, King Edwin, had been waging a major war against the allied forces of Gwynedd and Mercia. In AD 633, he was killed in battle and Oswald's elder half-brother, Eanfrith, was able to establish himself on the Bernician throne for a almost a year. However, he was just as unpopular as Edwin with the Northern Welsh and the Mercians who were prompt in his capture and execution. Despite having a baby son still exiled in Pictland, Oswald clearly saw himself as his brother's heir, probably with encouragement from the Northumbrians. As his father was Bernician and his mother, Deiran, he was one of the few people who could unite the Kingdom.

Having been lent a small force of men by King Domnall Brecc of Dalriada (including monks from Iona), Oswald marched south to claim his inheritance. He clashed with King Cadwallon of Gwynedd at the Battle of Heavenfield. Oswald raised a large cross there before the fight and the prayers of his soldiers around it are said to have contributed to the King's victory, despite the superior numbers of the Welsh army. Triumphant he marched into York, while the Dowager Queen Ethelburga of Deira and her family fled from Yeavinger and the new King's expected wrath.

Oswald's reputation as a saint originates in his re-introduction of Christianity to Northumbria. The chief among the monks who accompanied him from Dalriada initially attempted to convert the Northumbrians, but met with little success. So Oswald sent to the monks of Iona for an evangelical Bishop. [St. Aidan](#), Bishop of Scattery Island in Ireland, arrived the following year and set up a strong missionary movement centred on Lindisfarne, near the Royal Court at [Bamburgh](#). It was at the latter that the [famous legend](#) took place which resulted in St. Aidan blessing the King's arm and making it incorruptible, even in death. King Oswald himself often acted as an ecclesiastical interpreter for the new Northumbrian Bishop who spoke only Gaelic. Oswald further increased the spread of Christianity in Britain by pressurizing King Cynegils of Wessex to allow [St. Birinus](#) to preach to his people. Oswald eventually agreed to a strategic alliance with the southern king, cemented by his marriage to Cynegils' daughter and the latter's baptism with Oswald standing as Godfather.

Such bonds were important to Oswald and he did not forget his old allies, the Dalriadan Kings, who had helped him gain his throne. For he appears to have sent troops to Ireland to assist King Domnall Brecc and his ally, King Congal Caech of Ulster, during the Irish dynastic wars. By AD 638, Oswald was in a secure position at home and he turned to expansionism. His army moved north and besieged and captured Din Eitin (Edinburgh). Then, in a stroke of, what appears to have been, diplomatic genius, he arranged for his brother, [Prince Oswiu](#), to marry [Princess Rhiainfelt](#), the last remaining heiress of North Rheged. The old Celtic kingdom was subsequently swallowed up by Northumbria in a peaceful takeover. Oswiu continued to expand the kingdom's borders by taking his brother's armies to Gododdin and conquering modern lowland Scotland as far north as Manau. The Venerable [Bede](#) claims that the King was thus recognised as *Bretwalda* by all of Saxon England.

There were, however, forces gathering who wished to bring to an end King Oswald's glorious reign in Britain. In AD 642, the old Northumbrian enemy, [King Penda](#) of Mercia gathered a large united Welsh and Mercian force against King Oswald. The Welsh contingent included the armies of Gwynedd, Powys and Pengwern. They clashed at *Maserfield*, now Oswestry (*Oswald's Tree*) in Shropshire on 5th August, and Oswald was killed.

Oswald was succeeded by his brother, Oswiu, in the Kingdom of Northumbria, but his body remained in enemy territory. It was hacked to pieces by the victors of Oswestry and his head and arms stuck on poles. An old legend has one arm taken to his sacred ash tree (*Oswald's Tree*) by his constant companion, a pet raven. Where it fell a holy well sprang up. Thus, Oswald came to be revered as a Christian martyr and his dismembered limbs eventually found their way into various [relic collections](#) in monasteries around the country. His body was removed to Bardney Abbey and later translated to [St. Oswald's in Gloucester](#).

The King's Royal Standard of purplish-red and gold, once to be seen at Bardney (and probably the banner which found its way to Durham), forms the basis of the coat of arms of modern Northumberland. Popular iconography depicts the King wearing a crown and carrying sceptre and orb, the ciborium (showing his charity to the poor), a sword, a palm-branch or his raven companion.