Emma was the only woman to be twice crowned Queen of England. She was the wife to two Kings and mother of two Kings. We know more about her than any of the other Anglo-Saxon Queens as she commissioned her biography. We also have two representations of her in art.

In the 990’s the Viking attacks on England were becoming more frequent and ferocious which King Ethelred II (later known as Ethelred the Unready) was attempting to combat. One of the Viking tactics was to launch attacks from the ports of Normandy across the Channel. Ethelred brokered a treaty between himself and Richard II of Normandy to prevent these attacks from continuing. Agreement was also reached that Ethelred would marry Emma, Richard’s sister. Emma and Richard were the children of Richard 1 of Normandy and his wife Gunnor who was of Danish extraction. We do not know the date of Emma’s birth but it was probably sometime during the 980s.

Emma came to England in 1002 to marry Ethelred and she became his second wife. It is probable that Ethelred’s first wife, Elgifu of York, had died. She had given him at least ten children, one of whom, Edmund Ironside, would play a significant part in the fight against the Danes. Emma in her turn would give Ethelred three children; two boys Edward and Alfred and a daughter, Godgifu.

It seems she played very little part in Ethelred’s government although she did attest his Charters signing near the top of the witness list. In 1012 he granted her an estate in Winchester on the north side of the High Street known as God Begot which is presently the home of an Italian restaurant. At the time it covered a larger area than it does at present and this would become Emma’s base when she was in England.

In November 1002, following Emma’s arrival in England, Ethelred sent out a decree that all the Danes living in England should be killed. We do not know exactly how many Danes were murdered or whether it referred to specific groups of people but it became known as the St Brice’s Day Massacre.

Viking attacks continued during the early years of the 1000s which, although sometimes met with resistance from the local shire armies, mostly ended up in a Viking success. Although by this time England was a united country geographically the concept of being one people had not been reached. The age was determined by fierce rivalries between the powerful leading families of the day. Far from acting together against a common enemy it was more of a power struggle between these rival factions, even to the extent of families siding with the invaders if it was felt to be to their advantage. It would take a strong leader indeed to hold the country together and Ethelred was not up to the task. Ethelred became increasingly paranoid and fell under the influence of Earl Eadric Steona from the Midlands. Eadric was highly ambitious and was not slow to accuse a rival of treachery. Nor did he shrink from murdering his opponents. He stood high enough in Ethelred’s favour to marry his daughter.

In 1013 Sweyn of Denmark arrived in England leading his forces in a full-scale invasion of England, intent on conquering the country. He made his base at Gainsborough and gradually received the submission of most of the leading nobles in the North and the Midlands where Danish settlement was strongest. Ethelred sent Emma and her children to the safety of her brother in Normandy and he followed suit by the end of the year. Sweyn was now King of England, a reign that would last for only six weeks as he died suddenly. Ethelred was invited back to England with his family but by now he was a sick man and died in April 1014. Sweyn’s son Cnut was declared King in the North but Wessex backed Ethelred’s eldest surviving son, Edmund Ironside. There followed several months of fierce fighting. Eventually, both armies fought each other to a standstill and Cnut and Edmund
agreed to partition the country. Edmund would rule Wessex and Cnut the North and the Midlands. Edmund, however, died at the end of November and Cnut became King of England. Ethelred’s young family had again been sent to Normandy where they would remain in exile throughout Cnut’s reign. Whether or not Emma went with them or remained in London is unknown.

Cnut needed to legitimise his right to the English throne and one of the ways he could achieve this was to marry Emma, the previous king’s wife. It is said that he “sent for Emma” then married her in 1017 and made her his Queen, thereby preventing any threat from her sons who were in Normandy. Although Emma was probably about twelve years older than her husband she gave him two children, a boy named Harthacnut and a daughter. At the time of the marriage it was agreed, either by Emma or maybe Cnut or both jointly, that it would be Cnut and Emma’s son who would succeed him as King of England. This was important to Emma as Cnut had a first wife, Elgifu of Northampton, who had already given Cnut a son known as Harold Harefoot. Cnut had probably married Elgifu when his father Sweyn invaded England, in order to gain the support of the powerful families in the Midlands and it would seem that Cnut never fully repudiated her. As the marriage probably took the form of a Handfast or so called Danish marriage, it had not been sanctioned by the Church which left the way open for Cnut to contract a second marriage as political expediency dictated.

The marriage of Emma and Cnut seems to have been a successful and affectionate one. It became much more of a working partnership and may even have been a love match. The pair was often seen working together and they were great benefactors of the Church. They are shown together presenting a gold cross to the New Minster in Winchester, which is depicted on the front of the Liber Vitae (The Book of Hyde). Emma is also known to have been a patron of the Old Minster, St Augustine’s Canterbury, Christ Church and the Abbey’s at Bury St Edmunds and Ely.

Cnut was a consummate politician ruling England in the Anglo-Saxon manner. He acquired a North Sea Empire becoming ruler of England, Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden. In 1027 he was present at the Imperial Coronation of Conrad II in Rome. Emma, as his Consort would have enjoyed her own share of prestige and influence but she would never become Regent during Cnut’s absences abroad. Cnut sent Elgifu, his first wife with their son Harold to govern Norway which must have been irksome to Emma but their rule there proved unpopular and they were both forced to return to England. Hathacnut went to Denmark and when he came of age ruled there on behalf of his father.

In 1035 Cnut died. He was probably only around forty years old. Emma sent for her son Hathacnut from Denmark but the political situation there prevented him from leaving. Harold, Cnut’s eldest son, seized his opportunity and was able to command enough support to take the throne. Emma was desperate as she had lost her power and influence despite the support of England’s premier earl, Godwin. As Hathacnut delayed, Earl Godwin then sided with Harold so Emma’s only hope of clinging to power was to appeal to her two sons by Ethelred, Edward and Alfred, to come to her aid. Her two sons, at this point, were still in exile in Normandy. Edward returned to England and landed on the Isle of Wight but realising he had little support he quickly turned back. Alfred reached Guildford but was captured by Godwin’s men, blinded and sent to Ely Abbey where he died. Godwin latter denied responsibility for the crime saying that he had acted on King Harold’s orders. As Earl Godwin had been an ally of Emma’s there was a suspicion that Emma herself might have been involved in the murder. Emma was forced to flee. This time she sought refuge at the court of Count Baldwin of Flanders.

King Harold reigned for five years but was deposed and killed in 1040. Emma, now with Harthacnut, was able to return to England. As King Harthacnut’s mother, Emma was at the height of her power and it was about this time that she commissioned a monk from the Monastery of St Omer in St Bertin to write her biography, ‘The Encomium Emmae Reginae’. This takes the form of great praise
for Emma and seeks to exonerate her from any involvement in her son Alfred’s murder. Strangely it completely omits any mention of her marriage to Ethelred. The cover shows Emma seated and wearing a crown as the monk presents his work to her, while her sons Harthacnut and Edward are looking up at her.

Harthacnut was not the ruler his father had been and he invited his half-brother Edward to return from exile in Normandy to share power with him. In 1042, two years into his reign, Harthacnut collapsed and died leaving Edward as sole ruler thus restoring the Anglo-Saxon line. Edward would later be known as Edward the Confessor.

Emma returned to her estate in Winchester where shortly afterwards Edward rode with his chief nobles and relieved his mother of her treasure “because earlier she had kept it from him too firmly.” Edward was to relent a little afterwards and allowed her to return to Court. Emma was never to regain her power and influence and is likely to have passed her final years living quietly at her estate in Winchester where she died on 6th March 1052. Emma was buried beside her second husband Cnut in the Old Minster.

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