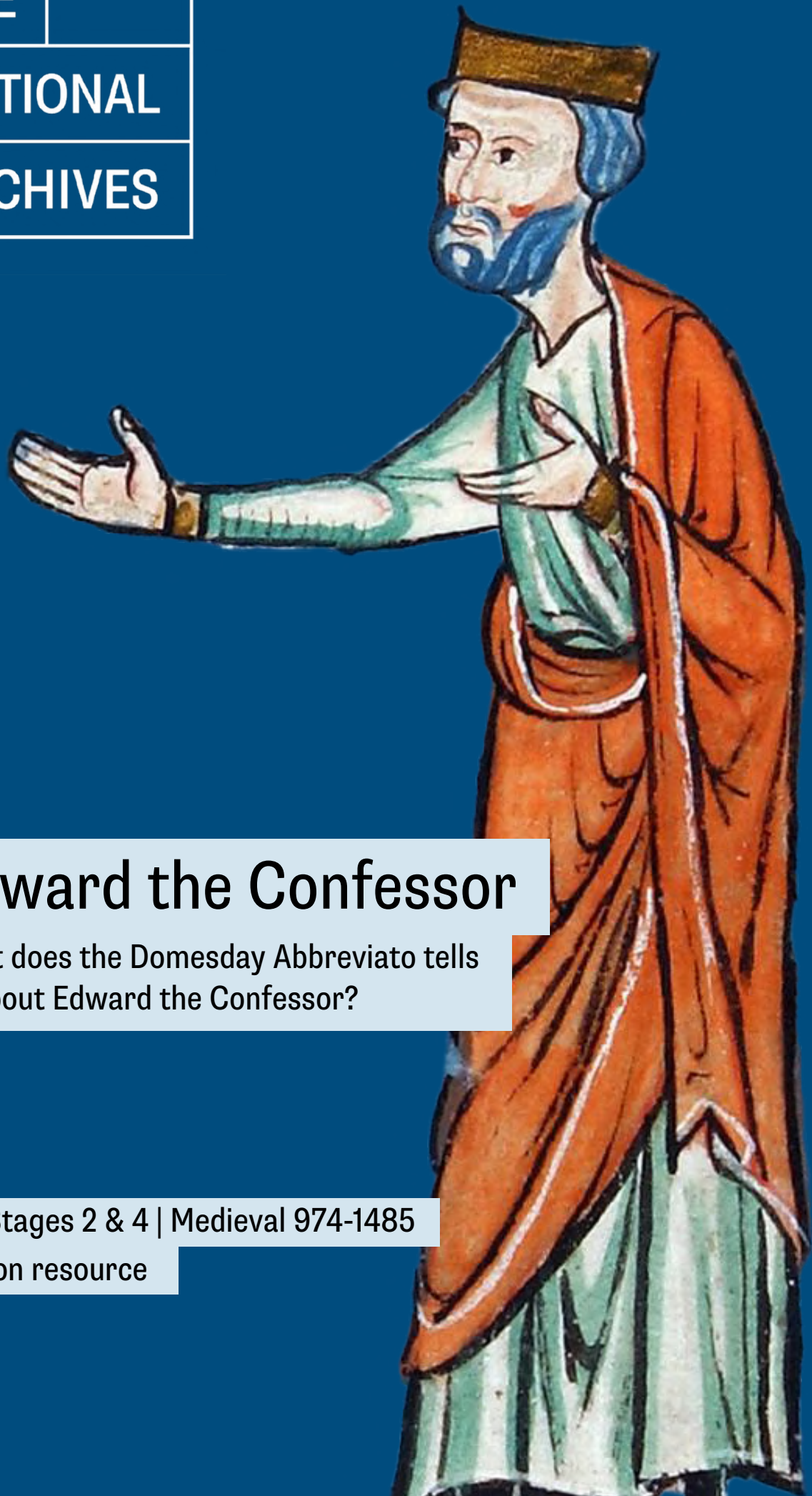


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# Edward the Confessor

What does the Domesday Abbreviato tell us about Edward the Confessor?

Key Stages 2 & 4 | Medieval 974-1485

Lesson resource

# Introduction

Illuminated manuscripts are luxury items, displaying the wealth and often piety of their owners through golden details on religious or secular imagery. It is unusual, however, to see such religious iconography in the pages of Domesday. The importance of Domesday Book meant that several copies were needed, with three being made in the 13th Century. This copy, the Abbreviato, was made for the Exchequer and presents a shorter (abbreviated) version of the original book. The copy begins with the story of Edward the Confessor, showing scenes from his life to show his religious piety.

Use this lesson to find out more about what the Domesday Abbreviato can tell us about Edward the Confessor. The images are described within their source pages. Click on each image to find out more.

## Suitable for:

KS 2 & 4

## Time period:

Medieval 974-1485

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 2:

The Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor.

Key stage 4:

AQA GCSE History:  
Causes of Norman Conquest, including the death of Edward the Confessor, the claimants and claims.

# Contents

Introduction	Page 2
Contents	Page 3
Teachers' notes	Page 4
Background	Page 5
Tasks	Page 6
Source 1	Page 9
Source 2	Page 10
Source 3	Page 11
Source 4	Page 12
Source 5	Page 13

## Teachers' notes

These five images were taken from Domesday, but they have little to do with the content of that book. Instead, they show scenes from the mythology surrounding Edward the Confessor. This particular copy of Domesday is believed to have been created in Westminster Abbey during the reign of Henry III, which goes some way to explaining why the images exist. Henry was a very pious man and a follower of the cult of Edward the Confessor, idolising his reign and even making him his own patron saint. He attended Mass once a day, unlike most people of the period, and promoted religious festivals and ceremonies. It is not surprising then that Edward would feature as inspiration in his and his people's administrative books.

Edward is intrinsically linked with Domesday, with his reign and the battle that followed serving as a benchmark point with which to compare growth within the survey itself. A copy of a draft survey for Cambridgeshire appears to show the questions asked in Domesday, including 'who held the manor at the time of King Edward?' and 'How much was the whole worth [in 1066] and how much now [1086]?'

The possibility of the book being made in Westminster Abbey also adds to the reasoning for these images as the Abbey, built under Edward's orders, is home to Edward's shrine. The monks of the Abbey by the time of Henry III were particularly keen to promote Edward's sainthood, with many writing biographies and illustrating his life as particularly pious – despite earlier stories of his love of hunting and short temper. Henry III worshiped Edward enough to create a grander tomb for the earlier king, name his first son after him, and request to be buried in the place where Edward had been before his new tomb.

It is important, therefore, to consider these images and miracle stories as propaganda, with each one adding another spin to the King's power and religious piety. They show a man who is blessed with visions, constantly reaffirming his position and divine right to rule. Even the story that is known to be true, that of Earl Godwin's death at a banquet in Winchester, has been embellished to show the King's mystical power. The story of the Earl choking on his bread appears in the 12th Century, rather than the earlier reports of a sudden illness – likely to have been a stroke – that resulted in his death.

As such, it is difficult to use these images to find out the truth of Edward the Confessor's life and reign, however they clearly show the enduring power of his reputation long after his death, and the influence he had over the country for hundreds of years after his own reign.

The tasks associated with these images have been split into those recommended for Key Stage 2, and those recommended for GCSE, however teachers should feel free to read through all of the suggested questions and activities and choose those that are most appropriate to their class. Similarly, some stories may prove more useful than others for understanding the cult of the King, and some like the Seven Sleepers might need more religious and historical context for their true meaning to be appreciated.

## Background

Edward was born as the 8th son of King Ethelred II in Islip, Oxfordshire in around 1003. His mother was Ethelred's second wife, Emma, daughter of Richard I of Normandy.

During the Viking raids on England where Elthelred was forced off the throne, Edward, his brother Alfred, and the rest of his family fled to Normandy for safety. When his father died, his mother remarried the Viking King Cnut, joining him to rule England before ensuring their son Harthacnut became King on Cnut's death. Harthacnut, however, returned to Denmark to fight for his crown, leaving England under the rule of his elder half-brother Harold Harefoot.

It was at this time that Edward and his brother Alfred received a letter, asking them to return to England to see their mother. When they arrived, they found that they had been betrayed and Alfred was captured by Earl Godwin. He was sent to Harold Harefoot who had seen their return as a threat to his power. Harold had Alfred tortured, blinding him to make him an unsuitable king, but Alfred died from his wounds.

Edward never forgave Earl Godwin for this betrayal and years later, after his own ascension to the throne, during a banquet at Windsor accused Earl Godwin of his brother's murder. The Earl denied the murder, claiming that if he were guilty the morsel of bread he was eating would be his last. Legend tells that the Earl then choked on his bread, and died.

Edward ruled England for many years, and was known for his religious piety. He commissioned the building of a great Abbey to St Peter to the west of the existing Abbey of St Pauls. It would become known as West Minster, and still stands in its later form today as Westminster Abbey.

Edward had no children, leaving confusion about his line of succession on his death in 1066. Three parties claimed the throne should be theirs, including Earl Godwin's son, Harold Godwinson, who had been a powerful figure throughout Edward's reign and had managed to conquer Wales for him. Edward's connections to Normandy meant his cousin William, who Edward had spent a lot of his childhood alongside, felt he had claim to the throne, while the Viking descendants of King Harthacnut also felt they had a claim due to the earlier wars and Viking Kings. The war for the throne would become infamous with William the Conqueror beginning the Norman reign of England after the Battle of Hastings.

Many years after Edward's death, people began telling stories of miracles that happened during his lifetime. He had been made a saint, known as 'confessor' as he had not died as a martyr for the church. Many of these miracles are proven to be factually inaccurate, but people believed they were true and as time went on the stories became grander.

King Henry III was a devout believer of the cult of Edward the Confessor. Five of these stories are illustrated at the beginning of a copy of Domesday Book created in Henry III's reign. The book was created at Westminster Abbey by monks who would have been very familiar with his stories.

# Tasks

## Key Stage 2 Tasks:

- How often does the King appear in these images? Why doesn't he appear in the last two?
- The images are 'illuminated.' This means they have sections of real gold in their decoration. Why would people use gold in the decoration in their books?
- Look at the feast scene in Source One – Can you describe what and how the people are eating? Look at the figure on the left – is this how we would usually eat today?
- Look at the monk in Source Two – how do we know he is a monk? How is he different from the other people? Why does he look this way?
- Look at Source Three – compare the people in this picture. Do they look rich or poor? What differences can you see?
- How are the people in these images dressed? Can you describe the clothes they used to wear? What about the soldiers in the boat in Source Four?
- Three of the stories happen when the King is at Mass. What is Mass and what does it tell us about the King?
- Pick one of the stories and create your own illustration. Try to make the King look powerful and pious (religious).

## 1. King Edward challenges Earl Godwin

Source 1: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor challenging Earl Godwin – Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue ref: E 36/284

Before Edward returned to England from Normandy, his brother Alfred travelled to England and was captured. Earl Godwin took Alfred to Harold Harefoot who tortured him but Alfred died from his wounds. Edward never forgave Earl Godwin for this betrayal and years later, after his own ascension to the throne, during a banquet at Windsor accused Earl Godwin of his brother's murder. The Earl denied the murder, claiming that if he were guilty the morsel of bread he was eating would be his last. Legend tells that the Earl then choked on his bread, and died. This scene shows Godwin at the far right of the frame, preparing to eat his bread.

- How has the scribe made the King seem more important than the other figures?
- How do they show the King is unhappy with Earl Godwin?
- Based on the picture alone, do the other lords seem to be on the side of the King or the Earl?
- Does the image of the figures behind the table look like any other famous image?

## 2. King Edward sees a vision of Christ in the Eucharist

Source 2: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor seeing a vision of Christ in the Eucharist – Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue ref: E 36/284

Edward the Confessor was said to be a very pious man, meaning he was devoted to his religion and lived his life according to its rules. While at mass and receiving the Eucharist, a wafer said to

## Tasks

represent the body of Christ, Edward looked down to see the Christ child in the wafer. In this image, the Christ child can be seen in the disk held by the priest who is about to turn and hand it to Edward.

- How important does Christianity seem to the King in this image?
- Why are the King's clothes white in this image?
- The figure in front of the King is a monk. How do we know? What does the image show about religious orders?
- The monk is holding the Eucharist on which the image of Christ has appeared. What would this suggest about the King?

### 3. King Edward gives a ring to St John the Evangelist in disguise

Source 3: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor giving a ring to St John the Evangelist in disguise – Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue ref: E 36/284

It is said that on a journey back from mass on the feast day of St John the Evangelist, King Edward was stopped by a beggar asking for Alms, or money for the poor. The King who had no money on him, took a ring from his finger and gave it to the man. Some time later, two pilgrims in Jerusalem met an old man who asked them to return the ring that he had been given by the king. He told them that in six months, the King would come to live with him. When the pilgrims asked who he was, the man replied 'St John the Evangelist.' Supposedly, this happened six months before King Edward died.

- Compare the two figures in this image. Do they seem rich or poor?
- Why would the character of St John the Evangelist approach Edward in disguise? What is his purpose in approaching the King?
- The ring is said to have been returned to Edward many years later by pilgrims. What does this show about the rest of Edward's reign?

### 4. King Edward has a vision of the Danish King drowning

Source 4: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor having a vision of the Danish King drowning – Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue ref: E 36/284

King Edward was known as a king who never laughed. During a court session on Whitsunday Edward is supposed to have broken into uncontrollable laughter during mass. When asked why he was laughing, he explained that he'd had a vision of the King of Denmark drowning on a voyage to invade and conquer England. When they sent messengers to Denmark to investigate, they found that the story was true and the king had indeed died. The image shows the moment where the king fell from his ship. This particular miracle is known to be untrue as King Svein of Denmark did not die until after Edward himself.

## Tasks

- The King of Denmark is shown in full armour. What does this suggest about his relationship with England?
- In reality, the king described in the 'miracle' died many years after Edward the Confessor. What does this myth show about the threat of invasion during Edward's reign?

### 5. King Edward has a vision of the Seven Sleepers

Source 5: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor having a vision of the Seven Sleepers – Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue ref: E 36/284

While at a feast with his nobles, King Edward suddenly began laughing. When the nobles asked him why, he told them that he had seen a vision of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. In Christian and Muslim religion, the sleepers are said to have hidden inside a cave for hundreds of years to escape religious persecution. In Edward's vision, he is said to have seen the sleepers roll onto their left side, suggesting many years of bad luck. He predicted that the next seventy four years would be full of war, disease and natural disasters.

- The story tells that Edward saw the sleepers roll over in their sleep, signifying years of bad luck. Yet the story is told as a positive miracle. Why would the vision be seen as a good thing for the King?
- This story only became associated with Edward I many years after his death. Why would later priests want to connect Edward with bible stories?

### 6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using this source for finding out about the reign of Edward the Confessor?



Source 1: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor challenging Earl Godwin - Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue Ref: E 36/284



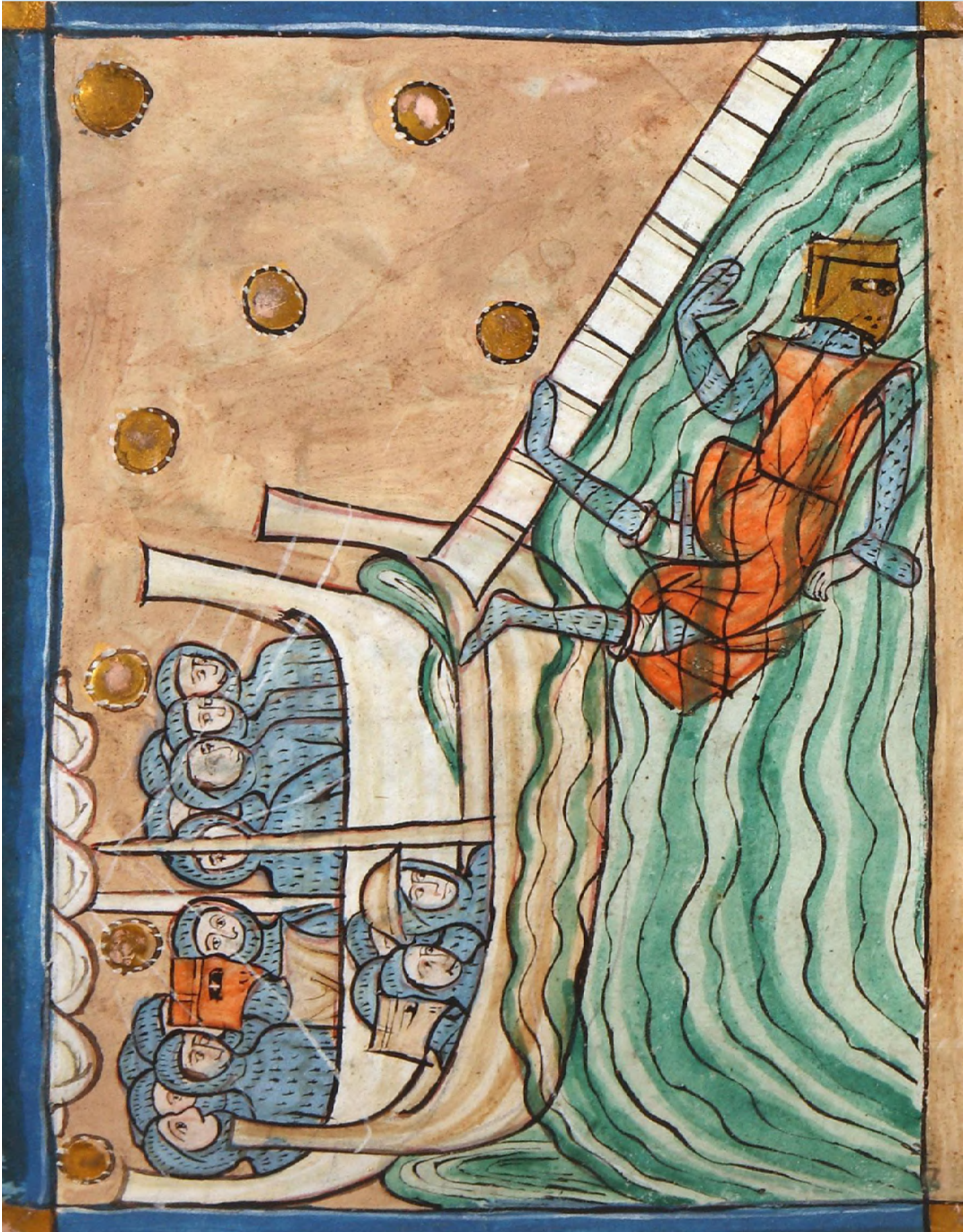
Source 2: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor seeing a vision of Christ in the Eucharist - Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue Ref: E 36/284



Source 3: Illuminated panel of King Edward giving a ring to St John the Evangelist in disguise - Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue Ref: E 36/284



Source 4: Illuminated panel of King Edward having a vision of the Danish King drowning - Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue Ref: E 36/284



**Source 5: Illuminated panel of Edward the Confessor having a vision of the Seven Sleepers - Domesday Abbreviato. Catalogue Ref: E 36/284**





## Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

## Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

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Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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