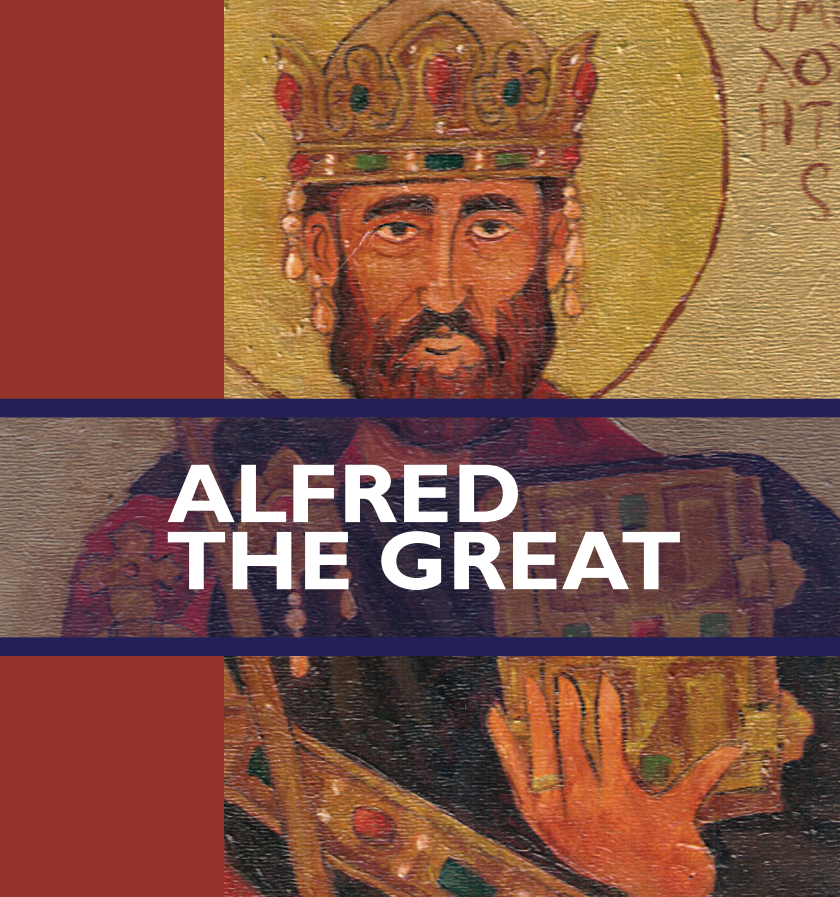




ALFRED THE GREAT

Daniel Anlezark

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Alfred the Great

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Abbreviations

<i>Alfred the Wise</i>	<i>Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of Her Sixty-fifth Birthday</i> . Edited by Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson, with Malcolm Godden. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997.
<i>EHD</i>	<i>English Historical Documents: Volume 1, c. 500-1042</i> , 2nd ed. Translated by Dorothy Whitelock. London: Eyre Methuen, 1979.
Lapidge and Keynes	Michael Lapidge and Simon Keynes. <i>Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources</i> . Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983.
Reuter	<i>Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conference</i> . Edited by Timothy Reuter. Studies in Early Medieval Britain 3. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

Preface

This small book is about one of the great figures of history. Alfred the Great was king of Wessex—the southern part of present-day England—from 871 until his death in 899, during a period often called the “Dark Ages,” though perhaps better called the early Middle Ages. This foundational moment of European history is not famous for its contributions to human development and is increasingly neglected in schools and universities. The period began with the collapse of Roman rule in the west in the fifth century. It was a difficult time, when people lived through rapid economic decline, falling living standards, social fragmentation, and an international order rooted in violence. Across the following centuries a handful of rulers attempted to restore something like the old order, and others attempted to create something new. One of these was Alfred. Alfred fought against Vikings who wished to overrun his country, but his response was not only to fight back on the battlefield, but to surround himself with the greatest minds that he could find, at home and abroad. Alfred’s cultural renewal inspired his contemporaries, and left a legacy in the area of law, literature, and education that underpins many of our global society’s highest aspirations to this day. Alfred’s Wessex was not Baghdad under Harun al-Rashid, or Italy in the Trecento; his resources were far more limited, but

his vision was also great. This book tells Alfred's story, but does so in the awareness that he has been the object of historical study for more than a thousand years, and any book about him could easily be thousands of pages long. Furthermore, many of the historical sources for Alfred's reign are closely associated with his court or that of his successors, and historians have noted their polemical character. With what I hope is due caution, I have focused on these primary sources in the account that follows. In particular these are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (the *Chronicle*) and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. I have aimed to be concise rather than omit details in offering a new reading of aspects of Alfred's life. The first chapter explores the genesis of the Alfredian legend and tries to understand his early life. The second chapter is concerned chiefly with his wars with the Vikings and his role in redefining England. The final chapter reconsiders Alfred's contribution to English literary history. The inflection given to Alfred's story by Asser and the chronicler reflects the king's own ideological and political program, and this requires caution when reading them. The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury felt he had to apologize to readers for the barbarity of Anglo-Saxon names. We are more sensitive about cultural difference, but for the reader unaccustomed to early English history, names can present a challenge. Many names in the West Saxon royal family begin with the component "Æthel-", which means "noble." Anglo-Saxon names usually have meanings: Alfred's father was Æthelwulf, meaning "noble-wolf," cognate with the Germanic "Adalwolf," which has become "Adolf." More than one Æthelwulf appears in this book, beside Æthelreds and Æthelstans. Alfred's name, unique among Æthelwulf's sons, does not begin with "noble." His contemporaries would have heard his name with meaning—"Ælf-ræd"—"elf-counsel." The reader can pursue the meanings of others.

I would like to thank those who have encouraged and supported this project. Francis Leneghan, Anya Adair, Margaret Rogerson, and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe read the book in draft, and rescued me from some errors. The format of this series requires brevity and asks authors to keep footnotes to a minimum, meaning that my pervasive debt to the work of some scholars is greater than it might seem to the reader. The anonymous readers for the series offered suggestions that have both tightened the argument and made the book better. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Anne Rogerson, for putting up with Alfred around the house.



Alfred's England, ca. 890.

Chapter I

Finding Alfred

Alfred the Great, king of Wessex from 871 until 899, is not the man he used to be. From the mid-nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, schoolchildren across the English-speaking world, and many in British colonies, knew the king as one of the great men of history, a founder of the English nation, and therefore ultimately of the British Empire itself. He was a warrior king whose intellect brought light to the “Dark Ages,” with his love of poetry, his Latin learning, his English translations, and the invention of the candle-clock. Alfred was a great soldier and statesman, who subdued the Viking threat that had engulfed the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms across Britain during the ninth century, and made peace. However, the twentieth century has robbed us of Alfred in various ways. Most fundamentally, he is falling out of cultural memory, largely as the result of new approaches to teaching history in schools. The rigours of academia have not helped—some literary scholars have disputed the assertion that Alfred ever translated anything from Latin into English, and despite some defence, doubts remain about his personal contribution to the history of English literature. There is no doubting Alfred’s military success—here his credentials are good—but Vikings exert a stronger influence over the historical imagination and modern taste than do the sober-minded Christian kings

who halted their depredations and made deals with them. Alfred's recent characterization as untrustworthy and ambitious in the television series *The Last Kingdom*—adapting Bernard Cornwall's historical fiction—is unlikely to have won him new admirers. Alfred and his historical standing also find themselves up against monumental developments in western society, at a moment when European and North American cultural hegemony gives way to a global culture, often relegating formerly “central” historical narratives. Why should anyone care today about a mythologized founder of a defunct empire, born into royalty, and an unwitting hero of the white race? The Alfred bequeathed to us is in many ways the epitome of the “dead white male,” but such a view is only possible through the narrow lens of the moment in which we ourselves live. To neglect or repudiate all interest in a man who has been seen as a key figure in human history by a millennium of historians simply because he is too different from us, the product of a distant culture that we do not understand, would be in itself a stance both narrow-minded and bigoted, no matter how accidental the irony.

This short book is not designed as a revisionist study attempting to undo Alfred; nor is it intended as a defence of Alfred, either as an historical person or a mythic figure conjured out of history in the course of creating English national identity. However, I do assume throughout that Alfred, king of Wessex, is important to our understanding of the past and present. Many people across the centuries have agreed that Alfred was indeed “the Great,” but this was not a style he arrogated to himself, and nobody in his own time called him that, nor anyone for some centuries after his death. I would like to find the Alfred before he was “great,” the Alfred who lived and died across the second half of the ninth century, in a material and cultural world very remote from ours, but one facing many of the same

issues: foreign attack, international instability, the displacement of peoples, the need for social and legal reform, economic turmoil, tensions arising from religious difference. In Alfred's kingdom of Wessex, the southern-most of the four kingdoms into which the territory of the English was divided at the time of his birth, these problems came to be experienced acutely, to the point where the king found himself in hiding as a refugee in his own country. This Alfred, I believe, emerges as more compelling than the chimera created by the many centuries since his death.

The Cakes

Once famously, King Alfred is the one who burnt the cakes. Up until recent times, the story about him best known to schoolchildren casts the king as an underdog, presenting him at the nadir of his career. Alfred, king of Wessex, had been surprised by a Viking invasion soon after Christmas, in January 878. He went underground with his family and closest followers, giving rise to legend. In the earliest known version of this story, a life of the Cornish saint Neot (d. ca. 870), Alfred doesn't burn cakes, but loaves of bread. Like all hagiographers, the anonymous late tenth-century author of the saint's life had a strong desire to convince his readers of the saint's status. Who better, then, to bestow a claim to fame than King Alfred, who had been dead for nearly a hundred years, but who was still remembered as an important ruler? The author is aware of the chronology, and presents the king's devotion to Neot not long after he had died. In the *Life of Saint Neot*, Alfred prays to the saint at a low point in his life, when he has been driven temporarily from his throne by Viking invaders. According to historical record, the king retreats to the marshes of Athelney, where the writer's imagination takes over:¹

There is a place in the remote parts of English Britain far to the west, which in English is called Athelney and which we refer to as “the princes’ isle”; it is surrounded on all sides by great salt marshes with some ground raised up in the middle. King Alfred came alone as a traveller to this unexpected place.

The king is in a bad way, and the “unexpected” (*insperato*) place also evokes the king’s loss of hope (*spero*, “I hope”). Alfred notices the cottage of a swineherd and looks for rest there with the poor man and his wife, who fail to recognize him. Alfred suffers with the patience of Job, and prays for Neot’s help. One day, when the swineherd is out, Alfred is left at home with the woman, who delegates a simple task, which the hagiographer describes in a characteristically convoluted way:

The wife, concerned for her husband’s return, had entrusted some kneaded flour to the husband of sea-borne Venus. As is the custom among countrywomen, she was intent on other domestic occupations, until, when she sought the bread from Vulcan, she saw it burning from the other side of the room.

The cryptic reference to Vulcan, husband of Venus, means “fire” within an elite literary culture delighting in Classical allusion. When the poor woman scolds the king for his neglect, she does so in Latin hexameter verse:

You balk at turning the loaves that you see burning,
But you’re happy to eat them when they’re hot!

Alfred accepts this rebuke as part of his divine chastisement, and pays attention to the task at hand. The story quickly became a popular one (like all bake-offs), and was included with adaptations into an Old English homily on Saint Neot that survives in a twelfth-century manuscript (British Library, Cotton Vespasian D.xiv), and was also included in the Latin *Annals of Saint Neot’s*, a chronicle with strong local interest made at Bury Saint Edmunds during

the first half of the twelfth century. However, having made the leap across genres from saint's life to historical annal, the story of the burnt loaves could become historical fact, and a century later was incorporated into the chronicle attributed to John of Wallingford, which enlarges every element from the original story.² In this chronicle, the wife is now little and old; she forgets the bread entirely, and impatiently scolds Alfred at length for his neglect. The king does not stand on his dignity, and condescends to supervise the baking.

Is the account of Alfred's baking failure true? Almost certainly not. The first reason to treat the story with suspicion is that it initially appears nearly one hundred years after the supposed event. Alfred is privileged among early English kings in having a biography written about him by a contemporary who knew him closely, the Welsh bishop Asser. There will be more to say about Asser's own reliability on certain subjects, but generally his *Life of King Alfred* is a trustworthy account of many events of the king's life, especially where these concern his coming to power and mature years up to 893, when Asser's *Life* ends (chap. 91 describes the king in his forty-fifth year at the time of writing). Asser describes the king's refuge at Athelney, but there is no reference to baking. The second reason builds on the first: during the time the king spent at Athelney he was not alone, as Asser and other sources tell us, but with his family and close circle. The third reason is literary. The figure of the unrecognized wayfarer has a deep prehistory in folklore and literature. It is possible that the anonymous hagiographer is making deeper classical literary allusions in his story than to Alfred's neglect of Vulcan. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8.624–724), a text potentially available to the author of the *Life of Saint Neot*, Jupiter and Mercury travel to Phrygia in inhospitable territory. The topography is remarkably similar to Alfred's: "Not far from the place I

speak of is a marsh, once a habitable land, but now water.” Like Alfred, the two gods seek rest, but are refused hospitality a thousand times, until they find refuge with a poor couple. Baucis and Philemon show their unrecognized guests hospitality, with the wife taking great care over the fire. The point of the Classical story is the piety of the couple; the point of Alfred’s is his own piety. Ovid may be the source or not, but Alfred’s encounter is literary folklore, not history. Various similarities in style and content between parts of the *Life of Saint Neot* and the *Life of King Alfred* led Matthew Parker, the Elizabethan antiquary and archbishop of Canterbury, to interpolate the story of the burning loaves into his first printed edition of Asser’s *Life* in 1574.³ This authority bestowed on the story of the cakes led to its inclusion in all histories of Alfred until the nineteenth century, when suspicions were raised. The dubious origin of the account does not mean, however, that either the tale or its transmission are without importance in mythologizing the king as a deep thinker, resilient in adversity.

Sources

So what is left of the cakes? As an historical event of the life of King Alfred, not much. But as an insight into his reputation in the late tenth century, less than a hundred years after his death, it is telling. The author of *Saint Neot’s* life clearly knows a few things about the king, and Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* is his source.⁴ Asser describes the king’s piety in detail (including a youthful visit to the later resting place of Saint Neot when hunting in Cornwall, chap. 74), and the *Life of Saint Neot* develops this to the point where the king almost matches Neot in his sanctity. The inclusion also tells us something about the place of Alfred in late tenth-century English national memory. Alfred is not simply being used as an historical peg to give Neot veracity; the

story presumes and builds on the knowledge of Alfred's character that is expected from readers of the saint's life. There are other indications that Alfred's figure already loomed large. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is an important source for all early English history, and especially so for Alfred, whose reign it describes in detail, and who had a large hand in its production.⁵ Around the year 980, a translation of the *Chronicle* was made under the auspices of Ealdorman (or Duke) Æthelweard, a member of the English royal family, to be sent to his cousin Matilda, a German abbess.⁶ In his Preface, the author makes much of how both the ealdorman and his cousin are related to Alfred. When it comes to noting Alfred's death, the Latin *Chronicon* tells us:

Then in the same year [899], there passed from this world Alfred, king of the Saxons, unshakable pillar of the people of the west, a man full of justice, active in war, learned in speech, steeped in sacred literature above all things, for from the ornate Latin tongue he turned unknown numbers of books into his own language with such variety and richness, that not only for scholars, but for any who might hear it read, the tearful passion of the book of Boethius would be in a measure brought to life. He died on the seventh day before the festival of All Saints, and his body lies in peace in the city of Winchester.

The *Life of King Alfred* must be the source of some of this information, especially concerning the king's learning, though the Old English Boethius is not mentioned in Asser's work. The Latin *Chronicon's* distant recollection of the king's passing is more elaborate than the Old English *Chronicle* entry made closer to his death:

In this year Alfred died, son of Æthelwulf, six nights before All Saints' Day. He was king over all England except that part which was under Danish rule, and he reigned twenty-eight and a half years.

This earlier annal's interest is political and chronological. There is no mention of the king's reputation as an author, which nevertheless seems to have been cemented by the late tenth century. There will be more to say about this later, but we can note now that Ælfric of Eynsham, a monk and prolific author of around the year 1000, who enjoyed the patronage of Æthelweard (supposed author of the Latin *Chronicon*), attributes to King Alfred the translation into Old English of the Venerable Bede's (d. 735) *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*. This is not correct, but Ælfric provides us with evidence of widespread interest in King Alfred in the late tenth century, and an awareness that had already departed from historical fact when remembering him, though in the early medieval context historical fact and fiction could easily mix, and fabrication could flourish. Ælfric's interest in Alfred also surfaces in one of his own works that blends history with legend, the account of the martyrdom of King Edmund of East Anglia by Vikings in 869. Ælfric translated into English a Latin original for a wider readership, and comments that Edmund's death happened in the year in which "prince Alfred was twenty-one years old, who afterwards became the famous king of the West Saxons."⁷ Ælfric is contemporary with the author of the *Life of Saint Neot*, and it is remarkable that both late tenth-century writers should in different ways use Alfred as a contextualizing historical marker. As Ælfric notes, Alfred was by then already famous.

The close investigation of any personal history in the distant past is hampered by differing assumptions across the centuries about what in life is important, and whose life story is worth telling. Saints' lives were considered important, but these biographies bear little relation to the lived reality of their subjects. From the early Middle Ages the people we know most about were at the summit of society, but even about them we usually know very little—their

participation in important battles might be mentioned in annals, their names appear on charters. The deaths of the most senior aristocracy, bishops, and kings were recorded for commemoration by the Church. The reliance on these kinds of records means that we know very little about women, even those at the top of the social order; and about men and women at the lower levels of a hierarchical system, we know almost nothing at all. However, for Alfred, we have a remarkably full record by the standards of his time. Asser's Latin *Life* of the king is the most important source for biographical details of Alfred. Asser tells us that he himself was tonsured at Saint David's (chap. 79), and that Alfred summoned him from the "remote, most western part of Wales," so that the king might meet him at the royal estate at Dean in Sussex. This was probably in 885; the move was integral to Alfred's drive to boost the intellectual calibre of his court circle by including men famous for their learning. Asser's attainments are on display in his *Life* of the king, and for this reason and probably others (he was possibly bishop at Saint David's) he was reluctant to be away from Wales permanently.⁸ The agreement between Alfred and his Welsh helper was that Asser would alternate his living arrangements, with six months at court in England and six months at his monastery in Wales, though this may never have been strictly observed.

In all likelihood Asser's literary inspiration for writing the king's biography was the *Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard (d. 840), known to the Welsh monk.⁹ Royal and imperial biography in the ninth century was a genre removed from hagiography, but not entirely separate from it. As for all biographical writing in all ages, authors must choose what to include or exclude, and these decisions will be based not only on what they consider to be of greater or lesser importance as history, but also their own intentions in characterizing their subject. An important source for Einhard's

Life of Charlemagne was Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, a work apparently unknown to Asser, though the echo of Suetonius's emphasis on moral character and its relationship to the exercise of power resonates, albeit within a Christian frame of reference. Asser's *Life* depends largely on three sources of information: his own association with the king; Alfred's personal reminiscences of his early life; and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It is not known why Asser's *Life* reaches only as far 893—he died in 909, ten years after the king's death. The *Life* does not end suddenly, though the conclusion does seem abrupt to modern readers, and there are clues that we don't have a final draft.¹⁰ The termination of the biography may have to do with its intended audience, which was probably Welsh rather than English, explaining the Saxon king to the Welsh rulers, who had accepted Alfred's lordship by 893. In this light the emphasis on Alfred's love of learning and the pursuits of peace, beside his success in war, makes perfect sense. But this should also make the reader wary of a biography that was written to persuade and explain, rather than simply to record. Since the middle of the nineteenth century some readers of Asser have exercised this caution to an extreme degree, and concluded that the biography is a later medieval forgery. Old arguments were given the support of scholarly eminence when the historian V. H. Galbraith weighed in on the side of the doubters in 1964.¹¹ However, Dorothy Whitelock pointed out where Galbraith had erred, and the supposed anachronisms in the text's language suggested by sceptics as evidence for a later date have proven illusory. As we have seen, Asser is the likely source for biographical information included in Æthelweard's *Latin Chronicon* around 980, before any putative date of an imagined forger. Any reservations to be expressed about the reliability of the *Life of King Alfred* stem not from false attribution, but rather about historical

writing in the early Middle Ages. I lean on Asser across this work, hopefully with the right degree of dubiety.

Across the European Middle Ages, the keeping of annual records was a normal practice at major centres where literacy was practised, such as monasteries, cathedrals, and at court. The character of such annals was at first determined by where they were recorded—in the margins of tables listing dates for Easter in successive years. These short notes on deaths and happenings in a given year could give way in time to slightly more expanded versions of events. In about 890 scholars associated with Alfred's court collected local annals available to them and edited them into a national chronicle written in the vernacular—a unique phenomenon in the early Middle Ages—which was then circulated widely. This English history begins with a royal genealogy extending from Cerdic, the conquering founder of the royal house of Wessex, down to Alfred, who “succeeded to the kingdom when he was twenty-three years old.” This genealogy, coupled with the *Chronicle's* report that Alfred became king in 871, is a possible source of Ælfric of Eynsham's calculation that Alfred was twenty-one years old when Edmund of East Anglia was killed by Vikings in 869; alternatively, Ælfric was using Asser's *Life*, which states in similar phrasing that the year 869 “was the twenty-first of King Alfred's life” (chap. 31). Ælfric must have used one or the other—there is no *Chronicle* entry recording Alfred's birth. After the preface giving the full list of West Saxon rulers down to Alfred, the *Chronicle* begins its account of British history with Julius Caesar's attempted conquests in 55 and 54 BCE—this timeline that begins with Caesar's failures ends in Alfred's victories. Between the two is the story of how the ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain from the European continent in the fifth and sixth centuries, and invaded large parts of the island that the Roman Empire had relinquished. The earliest copy of

the *Chronicle* to survive is in manuscript Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 173, the so-called “Parker Chronicle,” in which all the entries up to 891 are written in a single scribal hand of the late 890s, providing us with the best evidence of the kind of text available to Asser as he was writing. After 893, when Asser’s *Life* breaks off, the *Chronicle* becomes our major, if diminishing, source for information about Alfred’s reign.

Other sources for Alfred’s life are less comprehensive in the information they provide, but important nonetheless. Æthelweard’s Latin *Chronicon* was based on a lost version of the Old English *Chronicle*, and offers a slightly different account of the last years of Alfred’s reign than other versions. The legal documents from Alfred’s kingship include his *Laws* (the *Domboc*, “Judgment-Book”), revising, updating, and augmenting earlier codes.¹² No complete charter survives from Alfred’s time, but the process of granting land continued sporadically across his reign. The *Burghal Hidage*—postdating Alfred—provides us with a description of Alfred’s kingdom divided up into defensible areas, listing towns and the number of “hides” (a land division able to support a household) required to garrison the defensive network of “burhs” (fortified settlements) that the king established from the 880s onwards.¹³ Not least of all, Alfred’s will tells us not only what the king owned at his death, but also how he valued the people around him and envisioned the future (*EHD* no. 96). The king’s diplomatic correspondence with foreign powers offers insight into various aspects of his rule, and in particular the urgent need for reform, especially of the Church (*EHD* nos. 221–27). The prefaces and epilogues that accompany the various Old English translations attributed to Alfred are of varying reliability as evidence for the king’s literary contribution and intellectual interests. There is no doubt that the Preface to the translation of Pope Gregory the

Great's *Pastoral Care* is written in the king's voice, or that it emanated from the royal court, as is demonstrated by a surviving late ninth-century manuscript—Hatton 20 in the Bodleian Library—sent from Alfred to Bishop Werferth of Worcester. This famous letter to the bishop, describing the state of the kingdom in the early 890s, will be discussed later, with other works attributed to Alfred.

Alfred's Early Years

Alfred was born at Wantage in Oxfordshire in 849, the youngest of five brothers. His father was Æthelwulf, king of Wessex, and his mother Osberh, a "most religious woman, noble in character and by birth" (Asser's *Life*, chap. 1); her father was Oslac, the royal butler of King Æthelwulf. The England into which Alfred was born was a land under threat. Viking raiders had been attacking the kingdoms of Britain in search of wealth and plunder since the 790s, though his native Wessex had not fared as badly as others, such as Mercia in the middle of England, Wessex's northern neighbour across the Thames Valley; and East Anglia, Mercia's eastern neighbour on the coast. Northumbria in the northeast had suffered most. The earliest Viking raids would not have seemed alien within an Anglo-Saxon culture that lauded warrior values and accepted violence among neighbouring kingdoms as normal. For example, in 794 King Offa of Mercia, the great magnate of his day, had King Æthelbert II of East Anglia beheaded for rebellion, though even contemporaries considered this excessive. In 838, eleven years before Alfred's birth, his grandfather King Egbert defeated a combined army of Danish Vikings and local Britons in Cornwall, representing part of the gradual escalation in scale of the attackers' operations. The following year Egbert died, leaving an important legacy to his kingdom of Wessex, which under his long rule had

eclipsed Mercian hegemony and become the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdom. As a young prince in the late 780s Egbert had been forced into exile by the combined will of kings Offa of Mercia and Beorhtric of Wessex, but he returned in 802 as king. On his death in 839 the running of Wessex was divided between his son and grandson: Æthelwulf, Alfred's father, was given Wessex proper; and Alfred's eldest brother, Æthelstan, was given Kent, Essex, Surrey, and Sussex, all ancient kingdoms absorbed under West Saxon dominion. Such a division between rulers was familiar in Anglo-Saxon England; Kent had earlier been ruled by Æthelwulf under his father Egbert. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports various battles against the Danes across the following decade, some won by the English, others by the Vikings. In 850, the year after Alfred's birth, the chronicler notes ominously that "for the first time the heathen remained over winter." Where in preceding decades Viking fleets had been made up of thirty or thirty-five ships, suddenly in 851 the *Chronicle* reports that "350 ships came to the mouth of the Thames," surprising the Mercian king Beorhtwulf in London, and forcing him to flee across the river into Surrey seeking West Saxon help. This was forthcoming, and the English won the day under Æthelwulf, Alfred's father, and his brother Æthelbald, but it must have been apparent that the raiders were becoming invaders.

The Mercians' difficulties required them to seek King Æthelwulf's assistance again the following year. In 853 the new Mercian king Burgred needed help on his western frontier against the Welsh, who Asser reports were then "struggling against him with unusual effort" (chap. 7), no doubt taking advantage of the central English kingdom's difficulties with the Vikings. Æthelwulf's authority was demonstrated not just by his victory over the Welsh, but also by his army's march through Mercia to reach them. The *Chronicle's* characteristically laconic statement

that “they made them all obedient to them” reveals the continuing shift in power away from Mercia, as the Welsh kings submit to not one English king, but two. In this same year a remarkable event took place in the life of the four-year-old Alfred—his father sent him to Rome. The journey from England to Rome through the Frankish Empire would have taken between three and four months on foot (little Alfred is unlikely to have walked all the way), and would not have been attempted in winter. Asser is more informative than the *Chronicle* about the journey, telling us that the young prince was “accompanied by a great number of both nobles and commoners” (chap. 8). The context of the journey looks like a large pilgrimage, visiting the city attacked only seven years earlier by Saracens, who sacked the basilicas of Saint Paul’s and Old Saint Peter’s.¹⁴ England was not the only Christian land under threat, and the pope’s strategy included meeting Saracen pirates at sea, winning a major victory at the battle of Ostia in 849. We can probably detect in Asser’s version the grown man’s recollection of a childhood event—it’s hard to imagine many other witnesses still alive in the 890s. Alfred was certainly old enough to know what was going on to some extent, and later able to remember, and probably embellish. Both Asser and the chronicler agree on what happened, though historians don’t trust either: “At that time lord Leo [IV] was pope in Rome and he consecrated [Alfred] as king, and stood sponsor to him in confirmation.” Asser adds that the pope received Alfred as his “adoptive son” (chap. 8). According to a letter of Pope Leo himself, the prince was instituted as a Roman consul (*EHD* no. 219). There can be no doubt that the unexpected rise decades later of the fifth son to the place of first man in the kingdom led to deliberate or accidental reinterpretations of this event, giving it a prophetic status that harmonizes with readings of later events by Asser.

In the same year that Alfred first went to Rome, his sister Æthelswith married King Burgred of Mercia. Asser tells us that the wedding took place “regally” at her father’s estate at Chippenham after Easter (April 2, 853). These details seem also to rely on the childhood memory of a spectacular event nearly forty years earlier, presumably before the prince set out for Rome during spring. After turbulent years in Mercia, Queen Æthelswith would die in Pavia in 888. Pavia, in Lombardy—conquered by Charlemagne in 774—lies on the Via Aemilia, an old Roman highway between Vercelli and Rome, and therefore on the Anglo-Saxon pilgrim route south of the Alps. This location might explain why two royal Mercian women—Æthelswith and Eadburh—both happened to die there, though the connection could be stronger. Pavia was the Lombard capital under King Theoderic, who imprisoned and executed Boethius there, as described in the Old English translation of Boethius’s *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, attributed to King Alfred.¹⁵ In 855 Alfred was back in Rome again, this time taken by his father, because, Asser tells us, “he loved him more than his other sons” (chap. 11). There is no mention made of his mother Osburh, who must have died. It seems imprudent from the modern perspective that King Æthelwulf should choose to absent himself from his kingdom for about two years at the very moment when the *Chronicle* tells us that the “great Viking army” did not return home to Denmark, but rather wintered off his coast on the Isle of Sheppey in the Thames Estuary. The king may have been satisfied with his Mercian partnership, cemented by his daughter’s marriage, or he may have been looking for new alliances to help with the Viking problem. Before Æthelwulf departed he granted a tenth of his land to the Church—alienating the land in perpetuity, and freeing it from service to the crown. We can wonder how the king’s sons viewed this action, though Alfred, aged six,

might not have realized the implications. The king's generosity was notionally for "the glory of God and the salvation of his soul." Such a gesture is not surprising before a pilgrimage, but Æthelwulf may also have hoped for divine help in coming battles.

The royal party remained in Rome for twelve months, so that Alfred would have been aged seven when their homeward journey began. At the time, Rome was already a city in ruins, and had not been an imperial capital since Diocletian removed administration to Milan in 286. In the ninth century, the city, which had housed more than one-and-a-half million people at its peak, was home to no more than fifty thousand. As it slowly fell into ruin, old Rome must have felt like a ghost town. The English king would have stayed in the new part of the city, the Borgo (Old English "burh"), close to Old Saint Peter's Basilica. The Saracen raid on the ancient church in 846 had been resisted by the English, beside the Franks, Lombards, and Frisians, whose *scholae* (or "quarters," thus the "English School"), like the basilica itself, lay outside the city's Aurelian walls. They had been defeated, but had no doubt won honour for their nations. Between 848 and 852, Pope Leo IV, who would make the toddler Alfred a Roman consul in 853, commissioned the building of a large wall to enclose Old Saint Peter's and the Borgo, creating the Leonine City. It is possible that both the English pilgrimages that included Alfred were associated with rebuilding in the English quarter. The city that perhaps impressed the smaller child must have inspired the seven-year-old's imagination. Alfred found himself living for a year beside the ancient church founded by Constantine, first Christian emperor, within a newly constructed fortification, with two miles of walls forty feet high and protected by forty-four towers, which transformed the English quarter into the burh. The pope also constructed towers on the Tiber to halt the movement

of Saracen ships. In later life King Alfred would deploy these same defensive strategies against the Vikings.

After remaining in Rome for twelve months the royal party returned homeward through the Frankish Empire, where on October 1, 856, the English king, in at least his late forties, married the Frankish emperor's daughter, the twelve-year-old princess Judith. The *Annals of Saint-Bertin* describes what young Alfred saw:¹⁶

In July Æthelwulf king of the western English, on his way back from Rome, was betrothed to King Charles's daughter Judith. On 1 October, in the palace of Verberie, he received her in marriage. After Hincmar, bishop of Rheims, had consecrated her and placed a diadem on her head, Æthelwulf formally conferred on her the title of queen, which was something not customary before then to him and to his people. When the marriage had been sealed by mutual exchange of royal gear and gifts, Æthelwulf sailed with Judith to Britain, where his kingdom lay.

This marriage to the daughter of Charles the Bald represented a diplomatic coup, securing not only the recognition of Æthelwulf's domination of Britain, but also a useful alliance in a worsening international situation. The West Saxons had also succeeded where the Mercians in the late 780s had failed, when King Offa provoked the ire of Charlemagne with botched attempts at marrying into the imperial family.¹⁷ That the young Alfred was aware of the significance of events is evident from Asser's discussion of the curious fact that West Saxons did not want to have queens beside their kings. This presented a problem for Æthelwulf on his return, bringing a consecrated queen to a kingdom where most would prefer to call her "the king's wife." Asser relates the story of the murderous Eadburh, daughter of Offa, who had married the West Saxon king Beorhtric. She abused her position of power, accidentally poisoned her husband, and was ejected from the kingdom.

Because of the stigma attached to her, it was agreed that Wessex would never again have a queen, nor tolerate a king who gave his wife such status. Asser describes the custom of not allowing queens as “wrongful,” “detestable,” and “perverse” (chap. 13). It would be surprising if such strong language were not approved by the West Saxon king who was the biography’s subject. Asser tells us that he discussed the custom, its origins, and worth with Alfred: “I have heard the explanation from my lord the truthful Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, who still often tells me about it; and he likewise had heard it from many reliable sources, indeed to a large extent from men who remembered the event in all its particulars.” The story reads like a romance: the exiled Eadburh offended Emperor Charlemagne, and eventually died a beggar in Pavia, as first-hand witnesses reported to Asser (chaps. 14–15). It is, however, unlikely that Eadburh was still alive when young Alfred himself passed through Pavia four times in the early 850s. Despite the tradition, it is clear that Alfred, who as a child had attended two royal weddings in which queens were made, disagrees with the old custom. Pauline Stafford has noted that by the 890s Eadburh and her story’s moral were “outliving their usefulness.”¹⁸ Alfred was by then looking to the next generation, and the case for succession by a son whose mother had been a queen would be stronger than one whose mother was the “king’s wife.” Coincidentally, King Beohtric’s death by poison had brought Alfred’s grandfather Egbert to the West Saxon throne.

We do not know how young Alfred reacted to gaining a stepmother only six years his senior, but we know that his eldest surviving brother Æthelbald was now in serious conflict with their father. When Æthelwulf had become king of Wessex, his first son Æthelstan had been given control of its eastern territories. In the early 850s the king’s eldest son had died, and before his departure to Rome Æthelwulf

divided the kingdom's government between his two older surviving sons, with Æthelbald in Wessex, and the eastern parts going to Æthelberht. It takes no imagination to surmise the situation that arose from Æthelwulf's King Lear moment. Æthelbald conspired with Bishop Ealhstan of Sherborne and Ealdorman Eanwulf that the king not be allowed back into the kingdom on his return from Rome; it is clear, however, that the usurper had the crucial support of the royal council (the *witan*). Asser elaborates the perfidy of the crime at length, and his inflected account of the "disgraceful" episode must again reflect Alfred's understanding of the event, based perhaps not only on any king's horror of such a fate, but also attachment to his father's cause. The compromise that was reached allowed the old king to rule in his eastern territories, while his defiant son kept Wessex, which Asser notes was "more important" (chap. 12). Alfred must have lived in the east with his father and stepmother—Judith's own father must have thought that the bargain with the English king had turned out badly. In 858, two years after his eventful return from Rome, Æthelwulf died. His will, summarized by Asser, reveals a pious man with a devotion to the Roman See. Æthelwulf provided in his will that for every ten hides of his cultivated land, one poor man "whether native or foreigner," should be kept with food, drink, and clothing. He also bequeathed one hundred gold mancuses¹⁹ each to the recently restored Roman basilicas of Saint Paul's and Old Saint Peter's, and another hundred to the pope (chap. 16). The adult Alfred would share his father's piety and devotion to the papacy, and in the late 880s sent large annual donations to Rome. Alfred was nine years old when his father died. We do not know who took over his upbringing, but it is likely that he stayed in the east of the kingdom, where his brother Æthelberht succeeded under the terms of their father's will. Alfred's eldest brother Æthelbald

married their father's childless widow, their stepmother Judith, an act that Asser describes as against God's law and Christian dignity, a deed unpractised even by pagans, and a "great disgrace" (chap. 17). Young Alfred can't have approved, and subsequent events imply that the irregular marriage happened without the blessing of Judith's father, the emperor Charles the Bald. After Æthelbald's death Judith was confined to the convent of Senlis, north of Paris, but then eloped with Count Baldwin (I). The angry emperor at first would not condone this third marriage, but later relented and the couple (legally remarried at Auxerre) were made Count and Countess of Flanders. Some time around 890 King Alfred's daughter Ælfthryth (877-929), married Judith's son Baldwin (II); it is not known when Judith died. Judith gave Æthelbald no offspring, and his reign until his death in 860 is summarized by Asser as "lawless" (chap. 17), while the *Chronicle* is silent. Alfred's *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life* are probably practicing *damnatio memoriae* on a brother that Alfred did not want history to remember well.

After Æthelbald's death his younger brother Æthelberht ruled the whole kingdom of Wessex, east and west. This development seems to modify the intentions of their father's will, which probably envisaged a lasting arrangement wherein two branches of the royal family would succeed in time to the different territories—the Anglo-Saxons did not strictly practise primogeniture, so that while older sons succeeded ahead of younger sons, brothers could also succeed brothers if nephews were not ready to rule. This did not mean uncles ruled as regents, but rather that those who weren't ready waited for or missed their turn. The instability of such a system across time is obvious, and when Alfred himself died in 899, his son Edward immediately had to deal with the rebellion of his cousin Æthelwold, who was dissatisfied with the settlement in his

uncle Alfred's will. In 860 neither King Æthelberht's younger brother Æthelred nor the eleven-year-old Alfred were ready to take over western Wessex, but it was understood that they in their turn would assume, if the moment came, the rule of the kingdom between them. It was no time for the kingdom to be ruled by a child. During Æthelberht's five-year reign a great Viking army attacked Winchester, and in the year of his death (865) the Viking army established a permanent base on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. Alfred's relationship with Æthelberht seems to have been better than with their elder brother: Asser remembers Æthelberht's reign as one passed in "peace, love and honor," with his death causing "great sorrow" (chap. 19). At Æthelbald's death Alfred's last remaining brother Æthelred took control of the whole kingdom. Alfred sought to gain some of their father's property, but instead the sixteen-year-old was granted the status of crown prince.²⁰ Wessex was in need of stable rule. The eastern seaboard of Britain was beginning to give way under intensified attack. In 865 the Vikings based on Thanet had made a treaty with the leaders of Kent, who offered them money in return for peace. In a pattern that would repeat itself, the Vikings used this agreement as a cover to steal inland and plunder the eastern part of Kent. The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia was on the brink of collapse, and in 866 "a great heathen army" led by the Dane Ivar the Boneless, a son of Ragnar Lothbrok, arrived there and set up a permanent base. The East Angles made a difficult peace with the Vikings, and were required to supply them with the horses they needed to raid inland.

The Young Man

At this dangerous moment we should pause for a retrospect, as Asser does, and consider the character of the young man Alfred. This is hardly a digression on the part

of Asser—at the age of sixteen Alfred was a man, and the formation he had received up to this time made him the man he was. We are told that like any true aristocrat he enjoyed hunting of all kinds, “at which he excelled all others.” When describing Alfred’s childhood, Asser’s mode of telling becomes almost hagiographical (chap. 22):

He was greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother—indeed, by everybody—with a universal and profound love, and he was always brought up in the royal court and nowhere else. As he passed through infancy and boyhood he was seen to be more comely in appearance than his brothers, and more pleasing in manner, speech and behavior. From the cradle onwards, in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom, more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which have characterized the nature of his noble mind; but alas, by the shameful negligence of his parents and guardians (*nutritorum*) he remained ignorant of letters until his twelfth year, or even longer.

We might hope that this characterization emerges from Asser’s pen rather than Alfred’s self-assessment, but doubtless flattery is overwhelming record. The statement that Alfred was always brought up in the “royal court” is not illuminating, because for much of his childhood there were two West Saxon royal courts. Furthermore, either Asser does not include the time spent during the child Alfred’s first visit to Rome, away from court, as part of his upbringing, or this passage was written as a paean. We can compare the description of the childhood of Guthlac, a late seventh-century scion of the Mercian royal family, in Felix’s eighth-century *Life of Saint Guthlac* (chaps. 13–15):

possessing remarkable wisdom, he showed a cheerful face, a pure mind, a gentle spirit, a frank countenance; he was dutiful to his parents, obedient to his elders, affectionate to his foster-brothers and sisters, leading none astray, chiding

none, causing none to stumble, recompensing no man evil for evil, always even-tempered. For the brightness of spiritual light shone in him so brilliantly that in all things it was clear to all what manner of man he was to be.

Asser didn't borrow from Felix, but rather they both wrote within a tradition that characterized the childhoods of great men in particular ways. How then, do we separate fact from convention in Asser's description of Alfred's childhood? The question is of crucial importance because of the vexed problem of the progress of Alfred's education.

Literacy was not unknown among early medieval monarchs, but it was not common.²¹ After lamenting Alfred's ignorance of letters up to or beyond the age of twelve, Asser tells what has become the most famous story from Alfred's childhood (chaps. 22-23). Alfred, we are told, "was a careful listener, by day and night, to English poems, most frequently hearing them recited by others, and he readily retained them in his memory." This memory came into good use:

One day, therefore, when his mother was showing him and his brothers a book of English poetry which she held in her hand, she said: "I shall give this book to whichever one of you can learn it the fastest." Spurred on by these words, or rather by divine inspiration, and attracted by the beauty of the initial letter in the book, Alfred spoke as follows in reply to his mother, forestalling his brothers (ahead in years, though not in ability): "Will you really give this book to the one of us who can understand it the soonest and recite it to you?" Whereupon, smiling with pleasure she reassured him, saying: "Yes, I will." He immediately took the book from her hand, went to his teacher and learned it. When it was learnt, he took it back to his mother and recited it.

When are we supposed to imagine this competition to have happened, if it took place at all?²² The key role played by Alfred's mother Osburh would set the event before

Alfred's second trip to Rome, by which time his father Æthelwulf was free to marry Judith of Flanders. Any suggestion that Osburh might have been set aside rather than have died is unconvincing, given the fact that Judith's father, Charles the Bald, opposed irregular marriages, and Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims, would not have blessed one. This would place the contest before Alfred had reached the age of six, but it could not have happened during the year that Alfred was first in Rome. Asser says the king was a prodigy, but if this is history then either Alfred was younger than four, or the exchange took place in 854/855. The inclusion of Alfred's brothers presents further problems for the scene's historicity: his eldest brother Æthelstan had taken over the rule of eastern Wessex in 839, and died before Alfred went to Rome with his father in 855; his brothers Æthelbald and Æthelberht took over the running of the kingdom that same year. The story presumes a competition among boys young enough to desire the book—but kings can have any book they want, and men old enough to run a kingdom are unlikely to stand around covetously admiring their mother's poems. We could imagine Alfred competing with only his brother Æthelred for the poetry prize, but by this point it is clear that the story's details are unlikely to represent an historical event. Central to the episode is the notion that Alfred cannot read, a skill that Asser tells us he did not acquire until aged twelve or older because of the neglect of his parents and guardians. This would seem a harsh judgement on the boy's mother Osberh, who probably died when he was five. The reference to Alfred's guardians—Latin *nutritor* can mean "tutor," but more often "guardian"—may be to those who cared for Alfred after he was orphaned at age nine, or more generally to court officials responsible for a prince's care. In Asser's story, however, the supposedly neglected Alfred takes

the book to his teacher (*magister*), a title that implies he was already receiving some kind of instruction.

Despite his pervasive desire to laud the king, it is unlikely that Asser has set out wilfully to deceive, however, and he may be including in his *Life* a poorly remembered episode shared with him by Alfred—the detail of the decorated initial suggests a real event at the anecdote’s heart. The story’s point is clear enough: Alfred, his mother’s favourite, was a clever boy who enjoyed English poetry and loved books. We might also expect that if the king’s interest in hearing and reading English poetry developed into an ability to compose it, Asser, who never misses the chance to praise the king’s talents, might have mentioned it here. The chronology of Alfred’s education is made even more problematic by the following claim by Asser that “after this,” the prince learnt the “daily round” of the Latin services of the Church, including psalms and prayers that “he collected in a single book, which he kept by him day and night” (chap. 24). Asser claims to have seen this book himself. It is difficult to believe that Asser means the six-year-old Alfred learnt his Latin prayers and owned such a book. “After this” must refer to Alfred at age “twelve years or more” when he first started to learn letters. The juxtaposition of the story about his mother’s gift with the statement that Alfred was illiterate at least until the age of twelve, and also with the report elsewhere that he did not learn to read Latin until his late thirties, implies that as a young man he first learnt to read in English, and then because he knew letter forms, had an ability to follow services in Latin. This must have happened in the early 860s. This interpretation harmonizes with the later account of the king reading to children in the royal household (chap. 76), and also finds a parallel in the staggered education of the Mercian royal saint, Guthlac of Crowland. As a child Guthlac was

"instructed in the noble learning of the ancients in the paternal halls," but only learned to read Latin when he entered the monastery at Repton at the age of twenty-four; there is no indication that Guthlac's early education included English literacy, but it did include poetry (*Life of Guthlac*, chaps. 11, 18, 22).

Asser paints for us a picture of a devout childhood and youth enjoyed by Alfred, but one disturbed by sexual scruples (chap. 74). No doubt there was a strong strain of piety in the West Saxon royal family, and Alfred inherited this to a high degree. Asser explains that when the king was "in the first flowering of his youth"—that is puberty—like many early teenagers he found it difficult to reconcile his fear of acting against God's will with uncontrollable sexual urges. He would get up secretly at dawn to visit churches and relics. In a practice not uncommon in the Middle Ages, and with a dramatic self-absorption found among the young in all periods, Alfred prayed for an illness that would help him keep his sexual desire at bay, but one that would be tolerable, and not make him disabled (chap. 74). God met the young man's exact requirements by giving him piles (Latin *ficus*), though at times became too generous with the pain. Later in his youth, during a hunting trip to Cornwall, Alfred visited the shrine at Saint Gueriir (probably Gwinear) and asked for the first illness to be removed because of its almost unbearable pain, and for a substitute. The desired new illness should ideally be less severe, but also not outwardly visible or disabling. Alfred left the shrine believing himself cured. Asser's source for these stories can only be the king himself, but what they tell us about Alfred is more difficult to understand. Alfred was certainly devout, and he believed in the miraculous power of holy places and relics. Later, Pope Marinus would send King Alfred a fragment of the true Cross; such a devotional object would also have had a practical medical use

for one who believed in miraculous cures (chap. 71). Alfred was obsessed with his health. In Bald's *Leechbook*—a medical recipe compilation in Old English made during or near Alfred's reign—there are cures described for lower intestinal and bowel disorders; these were sent to King Alfred from Patriarch Elias of Jerusalem.²³ But we should not be either glib or dismissive when considering the importance of health anxieties in the early Middle Ages. Most diseases and injuries were untreatable, and pain had to be endured, no matter how extreme. Alfred's respite from his bowel disorder did not last. On his wedding night in 868 he was struck down by possibly a new and more debilitating condition in the same part of the body (maybe Crohn's disease). Asser tells us that many people thought the attack was perhaps demonic, or the result of witchcraft and spells; all were within the realms of medieval medicine. This illness would cause recurrent bouts of intense and almost disabling pain until and beyond the king's fortieth year. In medieval political practice a disabling sickness could be considered as disqualifying a candidate from kingship.²⁴ Alfred was not being vain when he prayed that he not be disabled and that his illness not be visible, but anticipating a possible future. However, it is clear from Asser's authentic account that Alfred would later rule and reform his kingdom despite living with painful disability.²⁵

The 860s—when young Alfred was obsessing over his prayers, learning to read English, and hunting—were a time of relative peace for Wessex, but catastrophic in the kingdoms of Northumbria and East Anglia. The royal line of Northumbria failed when a coup deposed King Osberht and installed Ælle, who was not of royal blood. This instability came at an inopportune moment, as the Vikings based in East Anglia moved north to take the Northumbrian city of York in 867. A counter-attack by the combined forces of the deposed king Osberht and the usurper Ælle

besieged the Vikings in the city, but after initial success in breaching the city wall, the English armies were slaughtered beside their rival kings, leaving the survivors to make peace with the victors. Client rulers would serve the Vikings into the next decade, and under their dominion its geographical identity remained, but to all intents and purposes the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, celebrated by the Venerable Bede, ended. Alfred's marriage the following year to Ealhswith—daughter of the Mercian Ealdorman Æthelred Mucel, and through her mother Eadburh a bearer of the Mercian royal line—is not an unrelated event. The Mercian king Burgred had married Alfred's sister Æthelswith in 853, and it must have been becoming increasingly apparent to the Mercians and West Saxons that they would stand or fall together. In 868, the same year as the marriage of Alfred and Ealhswith, the Vikings marched south from Northumbria into Mercia, reaching Nottingham. Burgred immediately sought the help of his brothers-in-law, Æthelred and Alfred, who together led a large army across Mercia to Nottingham. No great battle took place because the Vikings refused to leave the fortified town to meet such a large force, and the English could not breach the wall. The West Saxons went home, and Burgred made peace with the Vikings. Alfred was now twenty years old and married, and this was the first time he led an army to war and encountered the Vikings. The alliance between Wessex and Mercia had proved strong, even if battle had not been joined. The Vikings returned to Northumbria, and after a sojourn at York, turned south through Mercia and into East Anglia. In November 869 they killed King Edmund and many of his men in battle; the East Anglian royal line ended, and the kingdom faded away. The *Chronicle* reports that Edmund fell in battle; local tradition incorporated into the saint's passion written more than a century later suggests he

was captured, tortured, and beheaded. The great Viking army's next move would be into Wessex in 871, the year in which Alfred would establish his credentials as a warrior, and become king.

Notes

¹ The relevant sections are translated in Lapidge and Keynes, pp. 197–98; this book is an indispensable resource. Quotes from Asser's *Life* are based on their translations; the Latin text is Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, rev. ed. Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). See "Vita prima sancti Neoti," ed. Michael Lapidge, in *The Annals of St Neots with Vita Prima sancti Neoti*, ed. David Dumville and Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition* 17 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), pp. 125–26.

² Lapidge and Keynes, pp. 200–01.

³ *Ælfredi Regis Res Gestae* (London: John Day, 1574).

⁴ Against probability, there is residual skepticism about Asser; see Alfred P. Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). Smyth's arguments against the authenticity of Asser, answered comprehensively by Lapidge and Keynes, have since moved into conspiracy theory.

⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961).

⁶ *Chronicon Æthelweardi / The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. A. Campbell (London: Nelson, 1962), pp. 1–2.

⁷ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, vol. 2, EETS 94, 114 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881–1900; repr. 1966), p. 316; the comment does not appear in Abbo's Latin "Life of St Edmund."

⁸ Lapidge and Keynes, pp. 49–52.

⁹ Lapidge and Keynes, p. 54.

¹⁰ Lapidge and Keynes, pp. 242–43 n. 72.

¹¹ V. H. Galbraith, "Who Wrote Asser's Life of Alfred?," *An Introduction to the Study of History* (London: Watts, 1964), pp. 91–103; Dorothy Whitelock, *The Genuine Asser, Stenton Lecture 1967* (Reading: University of Reading, 1968).

¹² Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 264–85.

¹³ See Nicholas Brooks, "Alfredian Government: The West Saxon Inheritance," in Reuter, pp. 153–73.

¹⁴ See *The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of Ten Popes from A.D. 817–891*, trans. Raymond Davis (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1989), pp. 111–60.

¹⁵ See Simon Keynes, "Anglo-Saxon Entries in the 'Liber Vitae' of Brescia," in *Alfred the Wise*, pp. 99–119 at 101–03.

¹⁶ *The Annals of St-Bertin*, trans. Janet L. Nelson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 83.

¹⁷ Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 184–88.

¹⁸ Pauline Stafford, “Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective on Alfred’s Family History,” in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 251–64 at 264.

¹⁹ A coin weighing 4.25 grams, equaling thirty silver pennies.

²⁰ Lapidus and Keynes, p. 16.

²¹ George Hardin Brown, “The Dynamics of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 77 (1995): 109–42.

²² See Malcolm Godden, “Stories from the Court of King Alfred,” in *Saints and Scholars: New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis*, ed. Stuart McWilliams (Cambridge: Brewer, 2012), pp. 123–40 at 127–28.

²³ Oswald Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, Rolls Series 35, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1864–66), pp. 174–75, 288–91.

²⁴ See David Pratt, “The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001): 39–90.

²⁵ Alfred Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 199–216, considers Alfred’s disability as a proof of Asser’s inauthenticity.

Chapter 2

Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons

In 871 the great Viking army that had been in England since 866 turned its attention towards Wessex. During the intervening five years the army had conquered Northumbria and East Anglia, and had begun incursions into Mercia. The next eight years would involve the last survivor of King Æthelwulf's five sons in ceaseless warfare, at times with little hope of victory, and facing national annihilation. In his exile at Athelney in the Somerset Marshes, Alfred would have to confront the genuine possibility that like King Edmund of East Anglia, he might be the last ruler of a kingdom won by his ancestors from the Britons centuries earlier. Alfred was almost caught by his enemies at Chippenham in 878, but this major setback was quickly reversed, and by the middle of the year Alfred found himself back in control of Wessex, though the active threat of Viking armies continued across his lifetime. One significant moment would be Alfred's conquest in 886 of the Mercian town of London, which had become a Viking stronghold. The people of England also understood this strategic moment as signalling Alfred's ascendancy to real rather than notional power, not only in his contest with the Vikings, but also over English territory outside the old borders of Wessex. This turning point would give Alfred time to breathe, so that his consolidation of power could involve

the reimagination and renewal of a redefined English people. Where there had been four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, now there was effectively one, with many English people living in the territory of the Danelaw. Alfred could never hope to reconquer the lost kingdoms through military force—it was enough of a struggle to hold Wessex and what remained of Mercia. However, the title soon to be taken up by Alfred, king of the Angles and the Saxons, or the “Anglo-Saxons,” hints at claiming jurisdiction over all English people, no matter where they found themselves in the wake of the Viking storm. Alfred’s consolidation of England as an ideological conviction to be adhered to, as well as a geographical and political reality to be lived in, embraces church and legal reform, the writing of history, the renewal of education, town planning, and military engineering. To make sure that this program worked, King Alfred recruited the brightest minds available, many of whom were not even English, let alone West Saxon. Alfred’s strategic determination to have the best people working for him meant that his eldest child, his daughter Æthelflæd, would take up a role in the governance of Mercia. Through the fog of what is undoubtedly an historical record crafted by his sympathizers, the Alfred who emerges nevertheless is someone who would not give up, and a leader who commanded the loyalty of others even when victory seemed unlikely. He was constantly willing to change tactics when old ways no longer worked, but at the same time he was a king who knew that no people can forge their future without a shared sense of who they are.

The Vikings were navigators, and their first target in Wessex reflects their strategy of using rivers for transportation and to attack their targets. Soon after Christmas in 870, and initially unopposed, a section of the great army took the royal estate at Reading, at the confluence of the

River Thames and the Kennet. Three days later the greater part of the army rode out to plunder under the leadership of two jarls ("chief," "earl"), while others remained to create a defensible position by building a rampart between the two rivers, upstream from where their waters joined. The Vikings soon found a fight, and Æthelwulf, the ealdorman of Berkshire, gave them battle at Englefield, just to the west of the old Roman road which is now the A340, about six miles west of the Vikings' base at Reading. The West Saxons were victorious in this first skirmish, killing one Viking leader and a large number of his followers before the survivors fled to Reading. Four days after this victory, a combined army led by King Æthelred and his brother Alfred, now heir-apparent, made its way to Reading. The brothers and their army can't have been too far away, suggesting that the Vikings' movements were known, and an attack expected. With the arrival of the new English force things went wrong. It seems that Ealdorman Æthelwulf had fought his battle four days earlier, having caught the Viking army in the field away from their stronghold, perhaps tired and weighted down with plunder. Æthelwulf might have come from the south, along the Bath Road (a Roman road), and caught his enemy west of this road at Englefield. The second battle would offer no strategic advantage to the English. At Reading they attacked the Vikings in their fortification, cutting down any they found outside. The tactic of full-frontal and sudden assault was necessary, because (we can assume) the Vikings could simply have boarded their boats and left along the Thames if they had been besieged rather than immediately attacked. After a fierce fight the Vikings broke out, "like wolves" says Asser (chap. 35), getting the upper hand, so that "the Christians" fled. Ealdorman Æthelwulf, who had enjoyed victory less than a week earlier, was killed with many others. According to the Latin *Chronicon*

of Æthelweard, his body was taken secretly for burial in his Mercian home town of *Northworthig*, soon to be known by its new Viking name of Derby.

Events were moving quickly, and despite their defeat at Reading, the English had to meet the entire Viking army on the battlefield only four days later at Ashdown, on January 8, 871. The exact location of the battle is not known, but it was probably not far from Ashbury in Oxfordshire, close to the Neolithic highway called the Ridgeway, which runs along the Berkshire Downs after crossing the Thames at Goring. This would mean the battle took place after a journey of about thirty-five miles from Reading, and both armies are likely to have followed the Ridgeway. The Vikings had now left the river behind, and were being pursued by an English army deep in the heart of the “most important” part of Wessex, only a few miles from the royal estate at Wantage, where Alfred was born. Asser tells us that the English were “aroused by grief and shame” (chap. 37), and there can be little wonder given their desperate situation; such sentiment may reflect Alfred’s personal recollection. The great Viking army was led by two of their kings—Bagsecg and Halfdan—as well as a number of jarls. As the English army led by the two brothers approached, the Viking army split in two, forming shield-walls, with the two kings in one division, the jarls leading the other; the English army split into divisions to meet them. Asser tells us a story about the preparation for the battle that he claims to have from “truthful authorities who saw it.” In fact, Asser has visited the site of the battle, and a guide has explained the course of the day’s action. As battle loomed, King Æthelred was attending Mass, and would not leave until the priest had finished, stating loftily that he would not abandon the divine service for the sake of the human. Asser cannot but commend the king’s devotion, but also notes that Æthelred’s delay meant that

Alfred's division reached the battlefield earlier "and in better order." Alfred's division, as decided beforehand, fought against the jarls; Æthelred fought Bagsecg and Halfdan. The orderly progress of the battle was hindered, however, by Æthelred's lingering over his prayers, as the perhaps not-so-pious Vikings advanced quickly. Protocol required that prince Alfred should wait for his brother before joining battle. However, circumstances made this impossible if the English were not to retreat even before fighting, so after an anxious wait the heir-apparent formed his shield-wall and advanced. The prince is presented as acting thoughtfully but nevertheless bravely, "like a wild boar" in Asser's heroic simile (chap. 38).

The English were at a strategic disadvantage as their quarry had chosen the place of engagement and taken the higher ground. The two armies met around a single, small thorn tree, the Vikings "wrongfully," and the English in a fight "for life, loved ones, and country" (*pro vita et dilectis atque patria*, chap. 39). Despite their disadvantage, the West Saxons won the day, as the Vikings fled towards the southeast in the face of defeat. Their losses were great, with the deaths of King Bagsecg and five jarls. The English pursued the fugitives into the night (which would have come at about four o'clock) and the following day. The campaign for West Saxon survival continued fourteen days later at Basing, where the two brothers led their army against the regrouped Vikings; this time the Danes won the day. The winter campaign must have exhausted both armies, and the next battle we hear of took place at the end of March at Merton, now in greater London, suggesting a slow pursuit as the Vikings headed overland back towards the town. Again the armies broke into two divisions, but the Vikings won the day after a fight with "great slaughter on both sides," when English success had looked likely. On the West Saxon side Bishop Heahmund

of Sherborne was killed, along with “many good men,” in the words of the *Chronicle*. Wessex could not afford such losses. A month or so later, after Easter (April 15, 871), King Æthelred died of unnamed causes, and Alfred, the last of five brothers, came to the throne at about twenty-two years of age.

Alfred’s rise to power was not without irony—the kingdom that he inherited had almost no power left. In the few months between Christmas and Easter the army of Wessex had fought in five battles against the Vikings. The English had won two of these, and the Vikings clearly had the upper hand. Things were about to get even worse—in the month or so between the defeat at Merton and the death of King Æthelred, a “great summer host” arrived in England, that is, a visiting army of Vikings based abroad. Asser’s commentary on Alfred’s accession mixes the panegyric of retrospect and the apprehension of the moment. Alfred took over the kingdom with God’s approval and the unanimous wish of all the people, and, Asser suggests, he could have done so earlier if he had wished, but was restrained by his sense of unworthiness, though he “surpassed all his brothers in wisdom and all good habits” (chap. 42). These included his skill in war and the fact that he “was victorious in virtually all battles.” Asser overreaches with this last claim—he himself has told us that Alfred had suffered various setbacks. There is no doubt that Alfred had established his credentials in war, and he demonstrates the kind of practical wisdom that the otherworldly Æthelred may have lacked, but Asser exaggerates. Alfred’s first major action against the Vikings as king came only a month after he took the throne. The Vikings had been reinforced, the West Saxon army was depleted. In May the weakened West Saxons met the Vikings at Wilton, on low ground south of the River Wylfe. Wilton is a couple of miles southwest of the Iron Age fort rising out of the plain at Old Sarum, a

strategic position at the intersection of two Roman roads: the Ackling Dyke running from Dorchester to Silchester, cutting southwest to northeast across the middle of Wessex; and the Roman Road running west from Winchester towards Wells. Control of these major routes would give the Vikings great freedom in moving around Alfred's kingdom. After fighting most of the day the English were gaining the upper hand, forcing the Vikings to draw back. As they withdrew, however, they realized their numerical superiority and returned to the fray. The Viking numbers were telling, and the English were defeated. Asser suggests that the reader should not be surprised by this defeat and those that followed—the English fought in nine major engagements in 871 in the kingdom south of the Thames, as well as innumerable smaller skirmishes led by Alfred when he was prince, and by ealdormen and thegns. The West Saxons were depleted, “annihilated almost to a man” says Asser, but they had also inflicted losses, including killing nine Viking jarls and a king. The stalemate that emerged was one in which the Vikings had the upper hand, but were in no position to overrun the kingdom—undoubtedly Alfred's tenacity hindered them. The sources tell us that at the end of the year the West Saxons made peace with the Vikings, on condition that they left Alfred's kingdom, but they are silent on the concessions made by the king.²⁶ In all probability the great army was paid to leave, initiating a policy of trying to manage a Viking problem that couldn't be resolved.

The next eight years were relatively quiet for the West Saxons, when containment proved a more or less successful way of keeping invasion at bay. At the end of 871 the great army gave up its base at Reading and returned down the river to London. This army was soon in the process of making the transition from living the piratical life to settling down in a new homeland. They spent the

winter of 871 in the old Mercian town of London, and the Mercians made peace with them. For the time being the truce with Wessex and Mercia encouraged the army to move northwards, and in 872 the Vikings campaigned in Northumbria, before returning to Mercia to spend the following winter in Lindsey in north Lincolnshire, near where the River Trent meets the Humber. Once again the Mercians made peace with the great army, but it would not hold. Alfred's West Saxon chronicler provides little detail of these campaigns. Only the big picture was important to the future of Wessex, and the southward movement of the "great heathen army" must have looked ominous. The Mercian policy of containment failed in 873, when the army captured the important royal centre at Repton in the Trent Valley, easily reached from the Vikings' winter base. In the words of the *Chronicle*, the great army "conquered the entire kingdom." The Vikings drove out Alfred's brother-in-law, King Burgred, who after ruling Mercia for twenty-two years opted for exile, living in the "English School" in Rome, where he was later buried in the church of Saint Mary-in-Saxia (rebuilt later as Santo Spirito in Sassia) in the Borgo. Burgred's queen Æthelswith may have accompanied him to Italy; it is known that Alfred's sister died in Pavia in 888. As they had done in Northumbria and East Anglia, the Vikings installed a client ruler in Mercia, one dismissed by the *Chronicle* in the retrospect of 890s as "a foolish king's thegn" (a lower noble rank) called Ceolwulf. Ceolwulf does not have his own chronicler, and the kinds of compromises demanded by such circumstances are difficult to gauge. Recent coin finds in Oxfordshire suggest that a younger, differently placed Alfred—who also cut deals with the Vikings—was happy to recognize Ceolwulf's royal authority, and minted coins in the 870s with Burgred's successor. The terms of the settlement crushed the Mercians: they had to swear oaths to the Vikings and hand

over hostages, guaranteeing that the kingdom would be at the invaders' disposal whenever required, promising to serve the great army's needs. Despite a long and suddenly vulnerable northern border, for the moment Wessex was spared. The army split into two from Repton, with Halfdan's section returning north into Northumbria and taking control of the Tyne Valley, where it passed the winter. Halfdan conquered all of Northumbria, from where he raided the Picts in the east and Strathclyde to the west. The remainder of the army, under the three kings Guthrum, Oscetel, and Anwend, went to Cambridge for winter.

Alfred can have been in no doubt as to his fate if he or his kingdom should fall into Viking hands. After subjugating Mercia the Vikings began probing Wessex's defences, especially along its long southern coast. In the summer of 875 Alfred's first recorded naval battle took place, when he sailed with a fleet from an unnamed port to engage seven ships, taking one and putting the others to flight. This action and others won Alfred the honour centuries later of being credited with founding the Royal Navy, which is an exaggeration in various ways; Alfred's brother Æthelstan had won a naval victory at Sandwich in 851. The brief account makes it clear that Alfred would not simply wait for an inevitable disaster: he took on the Vikings, even in their own territory. This vigilance is implicit in the *Chronicle's* brief statement that in the same year "the army eluded the West Saxon levies and got into Wareham." Wareham, on the south coast, west of Poole in Dorset, offered a fortified position between two rivers, with the same defensive advantages enjoyed by the great army at Reading in 871, though here they were probably trapped on their beachhead.

There is much that we don't know about the Vikings' military activity early in this new campaign, but we do know that part of their army was mounted. In 876 Alfred

accepted their oaths and made peace with them. When the Vikings extracted oaths they were generally in a position to enforce them. Alfred himself had no such advantage at the moment, though he was aware that the Vikings found it easier to give their word to the English than keep it. On this occasion Alfred persuaded the leaders of the great army to swear on their “sacred ring” (as the chronicler describes it), which they had never done before for any nation. Asser’s account misunderstands the event, perhaps accidentally, assuming that the *Chronicle* refers to oaths on Christian relics (chap. 49). But the ring was an object sacred to the pagan Vikings, probably associated with Thor. This challenges assumptions about Alfred’s early medieval Christian mindset. The reason a Christian would swear on relics is because those witnessing the oath knew that God would punish not just the liar, but the person committing sacrilege against the deity present with the sacred object. What then, from Alfred’s point of view, would be the point of an oath on a pagan ring? It would seem that Alfred accepted that the ring was sacred to the Vikings, and that within their system of belief there was a better chance of the oath being kept. The idea of respecting the beliefs of others is not unknown in early medieval Christian culture, but it is far from common.

Unfortunately for Alfred (and perhaps for the course of medieval history), his experiment in religious tolerance failed. The Vikings used the agreement as a *ruse de guerre*, and under cover of night the mounted army made its way west to Exeter, where they were joined by others who had been trapped at Wareham. However, the passage to Exeter went wrong for the Viking fleet when they were caught in a Channel storm off Swanage not long after setting sail, and they lost 120 ships. Alfred tried to intercept the land-based force but arrived too late, and the Vikings lodged themselves in the fortress of the old Roman town. The

course of events suggests that Alfred had contained the Vikings after they landed at Wareham, and that another stalemate emerged at Exeter. Again the Vikings swore solemn oaths (we don't know on what), and gave Alfred as many hostages "as he wished to have." The chronicler tells us that on this occasion the peace was firmly kept, with most of the Vikings returning to Mercia, where in late 877 they began sharing out the land of the old kingdom, some among themselves, and some with Ceolwulf. In the year before, Halfdan and his followers had divided up the lands of Northumbria and began growing crops. Even if Wessex were not to suffer the same fate of colonization, the ethnic map of Britain had changed forever, and those who had been foreigners would now be neighbours.

"Restored to Life"

The peace that was sealed at Exeter broke suddenly and catastrophically while Alfred was celebrating the festivities after Christmas at the royal estate at Chippenham, near Bath, in early January 878. The progress of this third and devastating Viking invasion of Wessex—probably out of Mercia just to the north—is not recorded, but Alfred was caught without an army to fight with. The *Chronicle* tells us that the great heathen army "rode over Wessex and occupied it," drawing out a subtle but significant distinction from the fate of "conquered" Mercia. The chronicler similarly notes that "a great part" of the West Saxon people became refugees overseas, while those left behind were reduced to submission. The exception to this exile or surrender was King Alfred. Asser sets the scene (chap. 53):

At the same time King Alfred, with his small band of nobles and also with certain soldiers and thegns, was leading a restless life in great distress amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had nothing to live on except what

he could forage by frequent raids, either secretly or even openly, from the Vikings as well as from the Christians who had submitted to the Vikings' authority.

There is no reason to doubt the truth of what happened, and Alfred or close followers must be the source of this detail that is not found in the *Chronicle*. King Alfred's humiliation recalls aspects of King David's flight in the face of rebellion by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 17:8-9), but it is grounded in historical reality nevertheless. In any discussion of Alfred's personal qualities, the reality of his abasement, and his refusal to accept it as his destined lot, must be reckoned with. However, the *Chronicle* emphasizes the fact that Alfred did not follow Burgred to retirement in Rome, and looking back from the 890s, Mercia's destruction is made definitive by erasing Ceolwulf's reign. Alfred chose to remain a refugee in his own country, a country that he would reimagine in the 880s and 890s. More than symbolically, the old order of Anglo-Saxon England had passed away, and what rose with Alfred from the marshes of Athelney would be an England redefined largely by his victories and the ideological program of a newly expansionist West Saxon monarchy.

As his mythic ancestor Cerdic had done, Alfred would have to conquer his own kingdom. The first order of business was necessarily the defeat of the Vikings and their ejection from Wessex. Alfred would largely achieve these objectives within six months, and the pacified Viking army would finally leave Wessex the following year. The attack on Chippenham in January 878 was part of at least a two-pronged coordinated attack. In the same winter Ubbe, brother of Ivar and Halfdan, sailed south from his winter camp in Dyfed in Wales and attacked the north coast of Devon. These invaders did not get the better of the West Saxons, who barricaded themselves inside the stronghold

at "Cynuit" (possibly Countisbury, in Exmoor National Park). The Vikings had the West Saxons trapped, and prepared for a siege rather than risk losses by attacking. However, on this occasion the Vikings themselves were caught off guard when the English launched a surprise dawn sally long before the siege began to bite. Ubbe and more than 800 of his army were killed, and the Vikings' raven banner was captured. Asser suggests that the trapped West Saxons' choice of either "death or victory" was divinely inspired (chap. 54), and despite the gloss, it is evident that while some submitted to Viking rule and others fled, many of Alfred's people hoped for more than their personal survival. His program for retaking his kingdom began after Easter (March 23, 878) with the construction of a fortification on an island in the marshes at Athelney, a few miles northeast of Taunton. This moment evokes a developing situation: Alfred now had resources and labour, and his defensiveness indicates a growing threat. He would need an army soon. From here, Alfred and the men of Somerset harried the Vikings. This western part of Wessex was the king's—the victory at "Cynuit" happened some fifty miles west of Athelney. The picture Asser paints of Alfred's movements around the countryside implies the cooperation of his subjects. Alfred rode to "Egbert's Stone" in the seventh week after Easter (May 4–10), and was met there by all the men of Somerset and Wiltshire, and a large part of Hampshire, revealing an extensive network of communication. The exact location of Egbert's Stone is unknown, but it was at the eastern end of Selwood Forest, and probably where the three counties met; somewhere near Stourton in Wiltshire is most likely, giving Alfred a journey on horseback of one or two days from Athelney. The king was ready to leave his reduced realm of forest, moor, and marsh.

The Viking army was based at Chippenham, where it had surprised Alfred in January. Assuming Stourton was

the place where Alfred assembled his army, this put the main body of Vikings a little over thirty miles to the north. After camping at Egbert's Stone for one night, the West Saxon army journeyed about fifteen miles to Iley (near Sutton Veny in Wiltshire), where they camped again. The army continued north the next day, and after just over five miles of marching, Alfred's force met the great Viking army at Edington.²⁷ The Vikings were clearly aware of the resurgent king's movements, though it seems they were mostly taken by surprise. Asser reports that the shield wall held tight and Alfred "destroyed the Vikings with great slaughter" (chap. 56). The Viking army was routed, and pursued to the stronghold at Chippenham. On the way the king seized horses, cattle—everything he found outside the fortress. The Vikings he captured were summarily killed. For two weeks the English camped outside the gates of Alfred's occupied royal palace. The surprised Vikings had not prepared for a siege, and after a fortnight "terrified by hunger, cold, and fear," they surrendered unconditionally. Their embassy came to Alfred and offered hostages as a guarantee of peace, but accepted that they themselves could ask for none. After these had been handed over, the Vikings also vowed to leave Wessex. The Viking king Guthrum also promised to receive baptism, with Alfred as his sponsor at the font. Three weeks later this oath was fulfilled when Guthrum and thirty leaders of the great army came to Alfred at Aller, near Athelney, where Guthrum was baptized. The festivities continued for twelve nights, and ended at Wedmore, where Alfred gave rich gifts to Guthrum and his companions. Alfred's godson Guthrum was now a part of Christian society, and there would be no more sacred rings. In the following year (879), Guthrum and his followers left Alfred's kingdom, and stayed for a year in Cirencester, just beyond the Mercian border, from whence in 880 they departed for East Anglia, which they colonized.

Alfred's reversal of fortune in the course of six months is remarkable. Much credit must go to the king's leadership. No doubt luck played a part, but Alfred evaded capture by the Vikings nevertheless, and having done so, chose to stay in his kingdom whereas his brother-in-law in Mercia had not. We have no idea how the military odds faced by the two men compared, but if Alfred had followed Burgred into exile, Wessex—and with it an idea of England—would have ceased to exist. If he had been captured, given the Vikings' practice, he would either have been expelled or killed. Alfred may have derived hope from the events at "Cynuit," where his subjects refused to capitulate and gained an important victory. This success probably left Vikings thinner on the ground in southwest Wessex—where the king went underground—than the invaders had planned. Life cannot have been easy at Athelney. The king, just under thirty years old, suffering from a chronic illness, suddenly found himself a refugee in deep winter, living in a swamp with some close supporters and his family, which included children. This moment is dramatized by Asser, and romanticized in the *Life of Saint Neot*, but the reality must have been harsh. Alfred's guerilla warfare against the Vikings and their collaborators would have begun out of necessity, but it also let his subjects know not only that he was alive, but that he was actively seeking to return. There was no hiatus, no moment when his followers might have considered resigning themselves to a new order in the land. The king undoubtedly developed a program of action—battle-ready armies don't materialize in the middle of the countryside without groundwork.

We can only guess at the planning that must have happened to bring about this meeting, but we may leave supposition behind and turn to what the sources tell us about the reaction of the men of the three counties when they met Alfred at Egbert's Stone. The *Chronicle* tells us

that they “received him warmly.” Asser embellishes the dramatic moment that the hidden king emerged before his people: “When they saw the king, receiving him (not surprisingly) as if one restored to life after such great tribulations, they were filled with immense emotion” (chap. 55). At this moment, when the cult of Alfred has its genesis, we are still close to the reality of events, though the account is inflected by a retrospective belief in Alfred’s, and his country’s, destiny. It should not be doubted that Alfred’s people could feel a genuine affection for their monarch—people can have strong feelings about kings and queens. It is also likely that some among the leaders of the gathered army had personal affection for a man they knew, the youngest son of five brothers, darling of his parents, grown into a warrior, now emerging as the saviour of their homeland. Emotion plays an important role in history—despair leads to failure, hope can bring victory, and Alfred actively gave his people hope. Victory was not the only possible outcome, but the day was won, and the winner tells us the story. The imagery that surrounds Alfred’s return in both the *Chronicle* and Asser’s *Life* draws on a framework of meaning that resonated more strongly for his contemporaries than it can today. The timing of Alfred’s exile and return are linked to the most important events of the Christian calendar. Alfred’s disaster at Chippenham came after Christmas and continued through the penitential season of Lent; the king roused himself after Easter to build a fortress, and fought back. In the seventh week after Easter—between Ascension and Pentecost—he showed himself to his followers. These festivals no doubt marked the appointment of the rendezvous, but Asser poignantly interprets Alfred as one “restored to life.” The joy that Alfred brings to his people makes him Christ-like, and the attribution of the victory at Edington to God’s will (chap. 56) is no throw-away line for those who accepted the divine determina-

tion of events. The resurgent Alfred is ruthless against his enemies, but “moved to compassion” by the Vikings who throw themselves on his mercy. The culmination of this sequence of events in 878 is the baptism of Guthrum the Viking. Asser’s practice of referring to the Vikings as “the pagans” resounds in this spiritual event, described at length by both the chronicler and Asser. There is no doubt a pragmatic element to Guthrum’s baptism—Alfred became his godfather, creating a spiritual kinship between the two kings. The gifts he bestowed on his new “son” established Alfred as both generous and more powerful.

Making England

Alfred had his kingdom back. He had proved himself to his people as a successful military leader, where rulers of the other English kingdoms had failed. His people (mostly) had also proved their loyalty to him. The map of England was reshaping, and an important question for Alfred would be how the throne of Wessex fitted into that new England. Over the next century West Saxon rulers gradually extended their domain, until it included all the English territory taken by the Vikings, but this future was not inevitable, and nor were Alfred’s successes. Wessex had defeated one occupying Viking army, but there were other armies seeking plunder and land, and other invasions were possible. Alfred’s kingdom was spared direct attacks for some years, and King Guthrum remained peacefully settled in East Anglia, but Vikings continued to probe Wessex’s defences. In the same year that Guthrum left Wessex, another Viking army arrived at Fulham, a short distance up the Thames from London on the Mercian side of the river, where they spent the winter of 878–79. Alfred’s restored position must have been a strong one, because this army decided to leave England without a fight in

879, for what is now northern France and Belgium, where they caused havoc until 892. The main threat to the kingdom's peace and safety would come from Vikings across the Channel, to the south and east. Alfred didn't wait, but showed he was willing to take the fight to them.

In 882, three years after the departure of the Viking army from Fulham, Alfred attacked a small Viking fleet at sea. There is no suggestion from the *Chronicle* or Asser that these ships were attacking Wessex. The crews of two of the Viking vessels were killed, while two others surrendered, throwing themselves on Alfred's mercy. We do not gain a strong sense of any distinctive approach to kingship on the part of Alfred in the time between his accession and his brief exile at Athelney seven years later. But his return from the marshes began with the building of a fortification, followed by a carefully coordinated and aggressive attack on the Viking occupiers, suggesting a new proactive approach to leadership. Alfred's extension of naval warfare was only part of this policy, and must have required the allocation of resources for the construction of sea-going ships designed for fighting. On land Alfred began a program of building—we are not sure precisely when—that continued throughout his reign, and beyond. This included not only royal halls and palaces, but also the fortification of existing towns and the construction of new ones that incorporated speedy communication into streets planned on a grid pattern. Iron Age and Roman fortresses were put to use, and walled towns were created on or near transportation routes.²⁸ Contemporaries do not describe the program, and Asser only mentions in passing Alfred's close supervision of building works (chap. 91). There is reference to a few of these towns in Alfred's renewed Viking wars of the 890s, but we have a full list of these burhs in the *Burgal Hidage*, a document from the reign of Alfred's son, Edward the Elder.²⁹

The king's intention to create a defensive system is implicit, but we cannot be certain about the inspiration that lay behind Alfred's plans, and various influences might have been at play. As a child Alfred twice lived within the English burh, the newly constructed Leonine City in Rome, built with the same purpose of keeping pirates out, and in his journeys across Frankish territories he would have visited fortified cities. Britain's Roman ruins were more visible in Alfred's day than now, and the orderly and practical layout of their towns and camps would have been apparent. Whatever the inspiration, Alfred got the work done and left to his heirs not scattered fortified towns, but a growing defensive network. The scale of effort must have been enormous in a war-ravaged kingdom, historically so diffuse that only recently it had two kings at a time. To achieve the building plan Alfred must have created a more centralized administration that could command such a program. The network of fortified towns meant that any West Saxon lived no more than roughly twenty miles away from a place of safety. This provides evidence that Alfred cared about his subjects' welfare. The success of the building project would have required their labour, resources, and fundamentally trust in his planning, though as James Campbell has pointed out, this was not universal.³⁰

In the years between 878 and 885 King Alfred's only recorded belligerent encounter with Vikings is that which took place at sea in 882. In 885 some of the Vikings who had been raiding on the continent decided to try their luck in England. The army in France split in two, with one part heading eastwards deeper into France and the other crossing the English Channel into Kent, besieging Rochester on the River Medway. This would be the first test of Alfred's rebuilt kingdom. The Vikings settled down for a siege of the old Roman town by building an opposing fortification outside Rochester's gates. The locals, however,

defended themselves, presumably expecting that help would come, which it did in the shape of King Alfred with a large army. It seems the Vikings did not even put up a fight, but abandoned their camp, including their prisoners and horses. These visitors departed across the Channel that same summer. However, they had not acted in complete isolation from the Vikings resident in East Anglia, north across the Thames. Alfred sent a flotilla against these local Vikings in the same year, with mixed results. As the English ships reached the mouth of the River Stour, just east of Colchester and south of Ipswich, they were met by sixteen Viking ships that they defeated in an engagement, killing the crews and capturing the ships. Asser and the *Chronicle* agree that the ships were carrying booty, but only Asser asserts that the Vikings initiated the engagement (chap. 67). The presence of plunder implies that the ships had been raiding (probably in Kent), and the English surprised (or pursued) them returning to port. We don't know how large the English squadron was, but having captured the sixteen ships, their crews would have been divided up to sail them. On the same day, this enlarged English fleet with depleted crews was in turn attacked by a much larger Viking fleet—there would have been many ships in the area—and it was the turn of the English to be pursued and defeated. Alfred's bold venture of sending a fleet not only against East Anglia, but to a locality where Vikings were thick on the ground, shows his willingness to take the fight to his enemy. This venture failed, and Colchester and the surrounding district would remain in Viking hands until Alfred's son Edward brought the ancient capital of Roman Britain back under English rule in 917. However, Alfred had made a point in his first attack on Viking East Anglia—inursions into West Saxon territory would meet with retaliation.

The attack on Kent revealed a strategic weakness at the eastern end of Alfred's dominions. The Vikings moved

easily by sea, but to do this they needed ports to operate from. The most important of these, as far as Wessex was concerned, was London, just across the Thames. Not only was London an important trading centre, it controlled access to a river that penetrated deep into Wessex, used in 870 to occupy Reading. Control of London was also important for commanding the waters of the Thames Estuary. We know little detail, but in 886 Alfred took London from the Vikings. Conquering the town was strategically necessary, but it meant that for the first time Alfred had invaded English territory that he had not inherited as king of Wessex. Alfred had been married in Mercia in 868, and through his queen Ealhswith into the Mercian royal family. That was the last year, as far as records tell us, that Alfred had been in Mercia, when he had also ridden with his brother King Æthelred to the gates of the besieged town of Nottingham, at the invitation of their brother-in-law Burgred. In the intervening eighteen years the Vikings had partitioned Mercia, and settled the eastern half of the kingdom—Nottingham was now deep inside what would soon be established as the Danelaw. Ceolwulf, the Viking's Mercian client ruler, was erased from history, and by 883 the western rump of the ancient kingdom was under the dominion of Ealdorman Æthelred, who had accepted King Alfred as overlord. In the mid-880s Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd—half Mercian by birth—married Ealdorman Æthelred. After her husband's death in 911 she would govern Mercia in her own right, as the "Lady of the Mercians." Her government included commanding armies against the Vikings and the Welsh, and working closely with her brother King Edward in his campaigns. Before her death in 918 she extended her father's burh network further into Mercia; she was certainly a child schooled in the Athelney marshes.

The marriage between Æthelflæd and Æthelred was an important moment in the changing relationship between

Mercia and Wessex. It might look like any other diplomatic marriage, strengthening the alliance between the kingdoms. It can only have enhanced her authority that Æthelflæd was bringing Mercian royal blood back to the old kingdom. However, the political reality was that Mercia was finished as an autonomous realm, and Alfred was now its king. As king he needed to ensure that English Mercia was not vulnerable, and that Wessex was not exposed to danger because of any Mercian weakness. The formidable Æthelflæd was part of this strategy and no mere adornment to Æthelred's household. By dismissing Ceolwulf's rule in Mercia in the later 870s as irrelevant, Alfred's historians created the impression that, after an interregnum, the successors in Mercia to King Burgred and Alfred's sister Æthelswith were in fact Ealdorman Æthelred and Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd, retracing West Saxon power behind the Mercian throne back to the royal wedding at Chippenham in 853. The taking of London was strategic in two ways: the Vikings lost control of the Thames, and Alfred consolidated sovereignty over Mercia. The victory was accomplished with spiritual help. In 887 Alfred sent the noblemen Sigehelm and Æthelstan to Rome, and from there to India "to Saint Thomas and to Saint Bartholomew," with alms for the apostles, as he had promised while besieging London the year before. Alfred's devotion to Peter and Paul is obvious, but it is not known why he would send alms to India, at the far end of his known world. However, Bartholomew may have been regarded as a particularly Mercian saint, an appropriate patron for helping to take London. The eighth-century Mercian saint Guthlac showed great devotion to Bartholomew, and after Guthlac's death this association intensified the reverence for the apostle in the Mercian kingdom.³¹ The apostles' prayers and Alfred's siege were successful, and London came under English control.

Asser likes to style Alfred not as “King of Wessex” but as “King of the Anglo-Saxons,” and at London in 886 this title first came into its full meaning when all the Mercians (Angles by descent) freely submitted themselves to King Alfred (chap. 83). These were not the only nationalities that Alfred incorporated into his kingdom, which expanded not only territorially, but also ethnically. Asser comments elsewhere that free people of all classes from many backgrounds—Franks from north and south, Welsh, Irish, Frisians, Bretons, and even Vikings—willingly embraced the king’s lordship (chap. 76); many of these must have been displaced by the chaos of war. One new subject seems to have been the wealthy Norwegian trader Ohthere, whose story of his sea voyage north of Scandinavia is incorporated into the geographical introduction to the Old English translation of Paulus Orosius’s *History against the Pagans*; the description begins “Ohthere told his lord King Alfred.” Alfred’s dominion was not nationalistic in a narrow sense, and belonging to his idea of Englishness was not determined by race—immigration was accepted, armed invasion was not. The “King of the Anglo-Saxons” restored London “splendidly,” made it habitable again, and gave it into the care of his son-in-law Æthelred. Delegating authority meant that Alfred wouldn’t stretch his own resources, but it also reveals an awareness of local sensitivities, perhaps readier to defend a Mercian town than a West Saxon one. Alfred’s position was strengthened by the taking of London, both in Mercia and towards the Vikings in East Anglia. At this time or soon after, a treaty was drawn up between Alfred and his godson and royal Viking neighbour, King Guthrum. The document is brief, but its boundary clause is significant, legally recognizing England to the south and west, and the Danelaw north and east. The line follows the Thames up to the River Lea, up the Lea to its source, then in a straight line to Bedford,

afterwards following the River Ouse up to Watling Street. The border proved far from rigid. The treaty concedes London to Alfred, and accepts the partitioning of Mercia. The document demonstrates Alfred's authority as a law-maker imposing order after the fragmentation of war, and giving geographic shape to a new kingdom. The *angelcynn* that Alfred crafted with his annexation of the Anglians of Mercia was a reimagined "English race," a social construct rather than a biological fact, as Sarah Foot has argued.³² Where Alfred fitted into the emergence of an "English nation" would become a source of controversy for later medieval legal historians wrestling with similar constructs.

Alfred's front-foot policy of dealing with the Vikings in East Anglia and London bought him six years of peace, during which the *Chronicle* implies few events worthy of note took place in his kingdom. In the years leading up to 892 and the return of Viking wars to England, the *Chronicle* reports catastrophes overtaking the Frankish Empire, as it fractured into five kingdoms, against the background of Viking attacks. Such disintegration is meaningful in the context of the history Alfred wants his subjects to know, contrasting with the order he has brought to England. In 887 Alfred again sent alms to Rome, with Ealdorman Æthelhelm, who had to avoid the Viking army moving up the River Seine. Alfred's devotion to the Roman See is attributable to his childhood visits and paternal influence, but also represents spiritual pragmatism in the context of religious and foreign policy—he wanted the apostles Peter and Paul on his side. The Church in England needed renewal and reform, and popes exerted influence across Europe. Pope Marinus (d. 884), who sent Alfred a relic of the Cross, released the "English School" in Rome from tax obligations, providing a context for Alfred's "gifts." Alms were also taken to Rome in 888, by Ealdorman Beocca, though not in 889, when only letters were sent by courier

from Alfred. In the following year Abbot Beornhelm, probably of Saint Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, took "the gift." No further donations are recorded, though this could mean that the gifts had become un-noteworthy. In the fourteen years since 878 Alfred had experienced only sporadic problems with the Vikings, and on at last three occasions he had actively sought engagement with them on land and sea.

In 892 this period of relative calm ended, but not before two remarkable events occurred. The first was the arrival at Alfred's court (held somewhere at the western end of his kingdom) of three Irish monks—Dubslaine, Macbethath, and Maelinmuin—washed up on the shore of Cornwall in an oarless coracle. They had left Ireland a week earlier with only seven days' food, practicing an extreme form of pilgrimage "for the love of God," an expression of great religious zeal in early Irish monastic culture. The Irish contribution to early English Christianity was vast and pervasive, and the relationship between the English and Irish at the time was one of peaceful coexistence. Irish monks were held in high esteem across Europe for their learning, but their monasteries both in Ireland and in the Low Countries had borne the full brunt of Viking attacks. Irish learning and its unique characteristics fell into decline with the destruction of communities and libraries, though its influence in England would continue well into the tenth century. The three monks would have enjoyed an air of divine grace after their miraculous journey, and probably knew of Alfred's reputation for piety. Asser's Alfred is an internationalist who had "daily involvement" with nations from the Mediterranean to farthest Ireland (chap. 91). The monks brought news of the death of Suibne of Clonmacnoise, "the greatest teacher among the Irish." The chronicler who reports this was implicitly working at Alfred's court, implicating the king closely in the memorialization

of his reign. The king hunted the world for learned men, and undoubtedly Alfred had heard of Suibne. If his death were not portent enough in a troubled world, after Easter in 892 a comet appeared, which the English called a “long-haired star.”

A New Great Army

In 892, 250 Viking ships came across the Channel from Boulogne to the estuary of the River Rother, bringing men and horses. They rowed inland to the eastern end of the forest *Andred*, now called the Weald. The chronicler's topography is unclear, but at a point four miles “from the entrance” of the estuary this new Viking army attacked a burh still under construction, with only a handful of common men (“churls”) inside. This new “great army” of Vikings encamped at Appledore, not far from their landing place. Another, smaller army, under the leadership of Hastein, then moved into the mouth of the Thames with eighty ships, before making a fortification at Milton Regis near Sittingbourne in Kent, not far from the Isle of Sheppey, and almost due north of Appledore, potentially cutting off the eastern part of Kent—including the primal see at Canterbury. These new invaders had many years of experience fighting in continental campaigns, and would draw local Vikings into new attacks on Alfred's kingdom. Hastein (or Hasting) is a figure of legend. One of his earliest adventures had been as a leader of the Viking expedition in the Mediterranean (859–62) that sacked Luni in Northern Italy, mistaking it for Rome.³³ For the next twenty years he sought his fortune on the Loire, France's longest river, before making a treaty with Louis III in 882. After this he moved north, and was probably involved with the continental operations of the great army in the late 880s; he was at Argoeuves in 890–91 and Amiens in 891–92.

The great army's departure from the continent followed a major defeat at the River Dyle (in present Belgium) in 891. A famine the following year brought them to the Flemish coast. Hastein's arrival on the north coast of Kent was coordinated with that of the larger force, and their encampments reveal a defined strategy. This plan would soon integrate the Vikings of East Anglia and Northumbria, creating for Alfred a synchronized war on multiple fronts.

Asser's *Life of King Alfred* breaks off its historical narrative before the events of 892, and the first published version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one of his most important sources, included entries until the same year. It is possible that the arrival of the great army precipitated the circulation of this new national chronicle. The trajectory of its narrative—from Julius Caesar's failed invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 BCE, through the successful invasions of the Angles and Saxons (especially the West Saxons), culminating in Alfred's successful wars saving Wessex (and Mercia) from the Vikings—told a story that both defined and rallied a people. Crucially and uniquely among early annals, it told this story in the vernacular, not Latin. It would give Alfred's countrymen a sense not only of who they were, but also of what they could achieve at a difficult new juncture in English history. Why Asser's *Life* breaks off is less clear, but likely to be related. The last chapters of his work depart from chronological narrative to discuss various achievements of the king, as well as his personal qualities, and though the work shows symptoms of not being quite ready for publication, Asser never returned to his project. It is significant that both histories break off at the same moment, indicating that the attention of king and court quickly turned away from peaceful occupations to the urgent matter of war. The coming four years of fighting across the country must have caused serious disruption to court life and literary pursuits. In the

course of these years Alfred would appoint Asser to the West Saxon bishopric of Sherborne; if he was still living by his original arrangement with the king—six months in England, six in Wales—Asser won't have had much time to spend with Alfred.

While Asser's *Life* simply ends, the *Chronicle* had its continuers, who describe the campaign against the new great army, though the remaining annals treating Alfred's reign imply that the new chronicler was not closely associated with king or court. In the twelve months before war began in earnest in occupied Kent, Alfred appears to have attempted to shore up his defences with diplomatic efforts. His godson King Guthrum of East Anglia had died in 890, and the chronicler notes that in 892 Alfred was given oaths guaranteeing peace from "the Northumbrians and East Angles," as the Viking settlers were now known, while the East Angles had also given him six preliminary hostages. None of this worked for peace. Whenever the Viking armies set out, the local Vikings would either join them or mount expeditions of their own. Alfred's first move was to bring his own army to Kent. Alfred's foot soldiery was made up of conscripts, as it had always been, but the king had devised a system whereby half the army would be with him, and half at home attending to the kingdom's practical needs. This also meant that fighting men would spend only six months in the field at a time. The king encamped his army where he had best access both to Hastein's river stronghold at Milton Regis in the north, and the great army next to the forest in the south at Appledore. Alfred did not have the strategic advantage that a defensive fortified position might give him—this belonged to the Vikings. They had also brought him eastwards across the breadth of Britain to fight. The *Chronicle* makes the point that the whole force of the combined Viking armies left their camps only twice: when they first landed

and when they finally abandoned these positions. In the meantime they conducted small raids from their bases, riding through the forest, away from wherever Alfred had drawn his preoccupied army.

Despite the confused narrative of the *Chronicle*, it emerges that Alfred used diplomacy to improve his situation in relation to the two continental armies. He gave money to Hastein, who provided him with oaths and hostages. Hastien's two sons were baptized, one with Alfred as godfather, the other the godson of Alfred's son-in-law, Æthelred of Mercia. Hastein was then allowed to move peacefully north to Benfleet, on the East Anglian side of the Thames in Essex. The raids of the great army remaining in Kent were aimed at plunder, which they began to amass, but this they then would have to take across Kent and to Essex to their ships, which they had already sent to Hastein. This general evacuation would be the moment at which a serious battle could be joined. The Viking army moved westwards along the ancient road running between Canterbury and Winchester, later called the "Pilgrim's Way," but it was stopped at Farnham in Surrey. The English won the day and took the plunder, and chased the beleaguered Vikings across the Thames (where there was no ford) and up the River Colne, where they defended themselves on an islet near what is now Heathrow Airport (southwest of Terminal 5, near King George VI Reservoir). At this point Alfred's reorganization of the army presented an unforeseen problem. The English army besieging the Vikings ran out of provisions, and their term of service expired while the king was bringing a relief division. For a time, then, there was no army surrounding the Vikings, but they could not seize their chance to flee because their wounded king couldn't be moved. In the end this didn't matter, because while none of these three armies was engaged in battle, the Vikings from Northumbria and East

Anglia sailed a fleet of about one hundred ships along the south coast to Devon. Forty of these ships attacked the north coast, while the rest stayed in the south besieging Exeter. The deployment mirrors that of the great army and Hastein, on the north and south coasts of Kent. The action must have been coordinated, catching Alfred at the wrong end of his kingdom with both English armies, one going home, the other beginning its tour of duty.

The king was forced to divide his resources, but his system of fortified towns was holding and formed part of his strategy. While the army was turned over every six months, the burhs were permanently garrisoned. Alfred turned back westwards to Exeter, and sent a small party eastwards to fortified London, rebuilt seven years earlier. A combined force of townsfolk and these reinforcements went east into Essex towards Benfleet, where Hastein had forgotten his oaths to Alfred. The indignant chronicler comments that Hastein was raiding the very part of the kingdom that was controlled by his son's godfather, Æthelred of Mercia. Hastein had recently been joined at his Benfleet fortification by the great army that had earlier left Appledore, and arrived via their escape at Farnham. When the English force from London arrived, Hastein was out plundering, having left the army at his camp. The weakened great army was overwhelmed by the English, who stormed the fortification, putting the Vikings to flight, leaving behind them women, children, and possessions. These were carried back to London; the captured ships that the townsfolk wanted were moved to London or Rochester, the rest destroyed. Among the captives were Hastein's wife and sons, who were taken to King Alfred; he returned them to Hastein because, the chronicler says, they were his and Æthelred's godsons. Alfred might have hoped that the gesture would remind Hastein of their special relationship and his promises—if this was the king's hope, it was in vain.

When Alfred arrived at Exeter the Vikings who were laying siege to the burh got back into their boats without taking the fortress. They had, however, drawn the king from the other side of the country, and would now keep him busy with their coastal raiding. While Alfred was in the west, the two Viking armies that had arrived from the continent the year before recombined at Shoebury in Essex and constructed a new fortification. When they had been reinforced by companies from East Anglia and Northumbria, they travelled up the Thames Valley, then crossed the Cotswolds, and went up the River Severn into the border country between Mercia and Wales. Alfred was not present, but his planning meant that he was able to trust his senior leaders to act without him, as they had already done at Benfleet. The king's son-in-law, Æthelred of Mercia, and two other Ealdormen—Æthelhelm and Æthelnoth—together with the king's thegns in charge of the burhs across a large area extending from western Wessex into western Mercia, with the troops they led, as well as a force from Wales, all overtook the Viking army at Buttington on the Severn, about sixteen miles west of Shrewsbury. The Vikings locked themselves in a stronghold, and the combined English-Welsh army laid siege. The great Viking army was not prepared for a long stay, with no fodder for their horses, some of which starved, others were eaten. This desperate measure left them without ground transportation, and before they themselves starved, the Vikings attacked their besiegers east of the river, but were defeated. Casualties were high on both sides, including among the king's thegns. The Vikings fled the battlefield and made their way across country back to Essex.

The Vikings were causing great trouble for Alfred and his new kingdom, but they were not enjoying great success. The Viking invasions decades earlier had led to the capitulation of three English kingdoms and the complete

conquest of two of them. However, while the invaders' tactics were unmodified, Alfred had radically changed his country's defensive system to exploit the weaknesses of the Vikings' methods. Central to this was the defensive system of the burhs, creating not only a series of defensive positions to hinder the Vikings' progress, but also providing garrisons to serve as a local militia. Other methods were used later in 893 after the Vikings had regrouped from their failed venture, revealing a hardening edge to Alfred's art of war. In early winter the Viking army was again reinforced at Benfleet in Essex with men from East Anglia and Northumbria. Before departing on this next campaign the Vikings secured their families, property, and ships. This precaution shows that the Vikings had learned from their setback earlier in the year not to underestimate English military strength. The great army then embarked on a forced march by day and night across the country—presumably through northern Mercia—until they reached the old Roman city of Chester in the Wirral, close to the Welsh border. This crumbling walled city had remained largely deserted since 616, when it was destroyed by the invading Anglo-Saxons; it was not yet a part of the system of burhs, but would become part of this network when restored in 907. It is possible that Chester had been the Viking army's objective before their defeat at Buttington, having determined to campaign in the area around northwestern Mercia and Wales, with ready access to the Irish Sea.

The invaders' winter campaigns no longer surprised anyone, but the great Viking army's rapid movement meant that the English could not overtake them before they reached the old city. There is no report of a battle at Chester, and the chronicler describes a siege of only two days. The English tactics were practical and ruthless. Any Vikings caught outside the walls were killed, all the cattle were seized, and all the corn stored in the neighbourhood

was either used by the English as fodder or burned. The English army, having scorched the earth, left the Vikings to their winter. The *Chronicle* does not mention what happened to local inhabitants, but they are unlikely to have remained in the Viking army's vicinity. Asser describes the plight of refugees in his account of Alfred's disaster in 878, but silence elsewhere about displaced people is likely the product of the phenomenon being familiarly mundane during the Viking wars. Immediately after the destruction of the region by the English, the Vikings went into Wales at the beginning of 894. The great army plundered north Wales before turning back to their base in eastern Essex, which they reached by travelling across Northumbria and East Anglia, giving them safe passage beyond the reach of any English army. In 894 the force of local Vikings that had earlier besieged Exeter also turned eastwards to raid along the south coast of Wessex, probably hoping to unite with the great army on the island of Mersea on the Essex coast, south of Colchester. If this was their intention, many were to be disappointed. When raiding in Sussex, they came too close to Chichester, one of Alfred's burhs. The men from the town attacked the Vikings, who fled, though hundreds were killed and some of their ships captured.

The setback at Chichester did not impede the progress of the great army, which at the beginning of winter in 894 rowed in ships from Mersea up the Thames. Before reaching London, they turned up the River Lea, which meets the Thames west of the Isle of Dogs. At the beginning of 895 the Vikings made a fortress on the Lea twenty miles north of London, probably at Hertford; the river was the border agreed in Guthrum's treaty—behind them was the friendly Danelaw, in front England. In the summer a large force, including the town's garrison and others, came north to their fortification from London, but they were defeated with the loss of four king's thegns. Much of the fighting

against the great army described in the *Chronicle* does not include the king, who was in the west at Exeter between the sieges near Farnham in 892 and at Hertford in the summer of 894. This does not mean that the king's own battles were unimportant, but it indicates that the record-keeping embodied in the *Chronicle* continuation was not associated with Alfred's retinue or court, neither at the time these wars took place, nor in subsequent years when events were recorded. The new chronicler decided that the fight against the great army was more important than skirmishes in the southwest, and these great wars mostly involved Mercia. Alfred returns to the narrative after the threat at Exeter had been removed, and at a moment of crisis and setback on the eastern edge of his kingdom. We rejoin the king taking the very practical step of guarding the corn harvest near Hertford in 895—the last thing he needed was for the Vikings to destroy his provisions.

Alfred was a practical man, but this was also combined with a creative intelligence. The king's next plan was to catch the Vikings at Hertford in a trap of their own making. The chronicler tells us that "one day he rode up the river," looking for a place to obstruct the Lea downstream so that the Vikings could not escape with their ships. Alfred ordered the building of two fortifications, on opposing banks of the river. Alfred had seen such a strategy during his childhood visits to Rome, where Pope Leo IV had towers used on either side of the Tiber to stop the movement of Saracen pirates. Now Alfred had his own pirates, and they realized quickly what was happening. The Vikings had their families with them, but these they made safe in East Anglia before abandoning their fortress and their ships, and again heading west across Mercia, pursued by the English army. At Bridgnorth on the Severn they built another fortification. The Vikings' flight from Hertford was a victory for Alfred—what had all the appearance of an

invasion force had been routed, and its matériel seized. The Londoners took the ships they wanted and broke up the rest. Alfred's victory had relied on the threat of arms, but had been achieved through thought, planning, and military engineering. The frontal attack of the London garrison had failed because the Vikings were stronger; the king had won the day because he was smarter.

The great army spent the winter of 895–96 in the west at Bridgnorth. They had been in England for about three years, and their achievements were limited. They had not seized any new territory, but some had become rich through plunder. In the summer of 896 the great Viking army gave up its English campaign, and dispersed. Their wives and families were in East Anglia on the other side of Britain, and some of those with wealth decided to settle there, others in Northumbria. Those who were not ready to retire from the piratical life left England for Normandy and the Seine, to become someone else's problem. The English could not know, of course, whether another Viking army would return the next year, or at any time afterwards. The three years had not been catastrophic for Alfred's country, but they had taken their toll in the destruction of human life—including among the leaders of the kingdom—and the loss of livestock. But while the major threat had been removed, the harassment from Northumbrians and East Anglians continued along the south coast of Wessex, using their own warships "built many years before."

In response, Alfred expanded his naval plans and ordered the construction of ships twice the size of normal vessels, with up to sixty oars. These "long ships"—designed by Alfred himself, and not to Frisian or Danish models—moved more quickly, were more stable, and had higher decks. There is one recorded action of the king's new fleet, in the late summer of 896 after the great army's departure. This naval war began when six Viking ships attacked

the Isle of Wight. The king sent out nine longships, which blocked the Vikings in an unnamed estuary. Three of the Viking ships were beached and their crews went ashore, while the remaining three moved against the English ships. The English captured two of these and killed the crews—there is no longer talk of mercy or taking prisoners. The other ship escaped with only five surviving crew because the English ships ran aground. These new long ships must have been difficult to navigate for crews (which included Frisian sailors) accustomed to smaller vessels. The English ships grounded awkwardly, so that three were stuck on one side of the channel, and the rest on the other. The three isolated ships were vulnerable, having settled on the same side as the three remaining Viking crews, who attacked the English. A bloodbath ensued, with many on the English side killed, as well as 120 Vikings. The flood tide reached the Viking boats first so that they got away to sea. However, while one boat escaped to East Anglia, the crews of the other two boats were so badly wounded that they could not row past Sussex, but were cast ashore. Their men were taken to Winchester, from where King Alfred was directing operations. He ordered that they be hanged. Alfred was in no mood to treat with those whose broken oaths had led to four years of bloody war. During the summer of 896 at least twenty ships were destroyed on the south coast, and after that came an uncertain peace.

The *Chronicle*'s focus moves away from Alfred after 892, and in the detailed witness of Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicon*, Alfred's son Edward and "King Æthelred of Mercia" lead in the field against the Vikings. The English *Chronicle*'s two extended anecdotes about Alfred in this war—at Hertford and Winchester—show the king directing strategy, but not fighting. These stories present Alfred as the protector of his people, and emphasize his practical intellect over his prowess. The historical record then falls silent on Alfred

until his death, with the implication that many of the kingdom's affairs were in the hands of his son Edward and son-in-law Æthelred. In 896, Alfred was forty-seven years old. He was not a young man, but not elderly either. He had, however, endured decades of a disabling chronic illness that would have made a campaigning life in the saddle very painful. His success in destroying two attempted invasions will have taken a further physical toll, but it is improbable that Alfred would have considered the end of the latest campaign as a suitable moment for leisure. The kingdom's system of burhs had to be continued and expanded—one of the reasons the great army had successfully landed near Appledore in 892 was because the network was still under construction. The continuation of the strategy after Alfred's death in both Wessex and Mercia indicates that the program was ongoing. The fact that no army tried to come back also implies that defence was the king's major priority in the last years of his life. The king had made (and then remade) his will some years earlier in the 880s after his daughter Æthelflæd had married Æthelred of Mercia, who is a beneficiary. Alfred's daughters would also inherit property, which he reminds his male heirs they cannot take from them. If they want the estates, they should pay for them. Women's rights to property under Anglo-Saxon law were not always respected, but Alfred insists on them: "they succeed to my lands, which I may give on the female as well as on the male side, whichever I choose." Julia Crick has suggested that Alfred's strategy was designed to keep the estates within his part of the family, rather than allowing their alienation as "bookland" grants.³⁴

The king's will did not make everyone happy—his nephew Æthelwold, son of Alfred's brother Æthelred, rebelled on Alfred's death, disaffected because he was only given a few estates in the kingdom's east. Æthelwold fled to Northumbria, and allying himself with the Vikings, would

go to war against his cousin Edward. Much was foreseeable, not least because as the son of King Æthelred, Æthelwold's claim on a share of power was strong.³⁵ But Alfred's idea of England's future looked to the consolidation of his family's power, not its fragmentation. It is difficult to imagine Alfred relaxing his vigilance in his final years, though realizing that the ongoing problem posed by Danelaw Vikings would have to be solved by his successors. Alfred died on October 26, 899, and was buried at Winchester. His son, Edward the Elder, succeeded him as king of the Anglo-Saxons. This kingdom was larger and more secure than the one inherited by his father, and under Edward the kingdom would expand further still. In 937 two of Alfred's grandsons, King Æthelstan and his brother Edmund, would destroy a combined army of Vikings, Scots, and Britons at Brunanburh, creating a single nation shaped roughly as England is today.

Notes

²⁶ See Richard Abels, "King Alfred's Peace-Making Strategies with the Vikings," *Haskins Society Journal* 3 (1991): 23–34.

²⁷ See Dorothy Whitelock, "The Importance of the Battle of Edington" (1978), repr. in Whitelock, *From Bede to Alfred: Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Literature and History* (London: Variorum, 1980), no. 13.

²⁸ John Baker and Stuart Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon Civil Defence in the Viking Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), adopt a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to analyse this system of defence.

²⁹ Richard Abels, "The Costs and Consequences of Anglo-Saxon Civil Defence, 878–1066," in *Landscapes of Defence in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. John Baker, Stuart Brookes, and Andrew Reynolds, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* 28 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 195–222.

³⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon State* (London: Hambledon, 2000), p. 142.

³¹ See Graham Jones, "Ghostly Mentor, Teacher of Mysteries: Bartholomew, Guthlac and the Apostle's Cult in Early Medieval England," in *Medieval Monastic Education*, ed. George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 136–52.

³² See Sarah Foot, "The Making of Angelcynn: English Identity before the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 25–49. See also Patrick Wormald, "The Making of England," *History Today* (1995): 26–32.

³³ See Frederic Amory, "The Viking Hasting in Franco-Scandinavian Legend," in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, ed. Margot H. King and Wesley M. Stevens, vol. 2 (Collegeville: Hill Monastic Library, Saint John's Abbey and University, 1979), pp. 265–86.

³⁴ Julia Crick, "Women, Posthumous Benefaction and Family Strategy in Pre-Conquest England," *Journal of British Studies* 38 (1999): 399–422.

³⁵ See Patrick Wormald, "On *þa wæpnedhealfe*: Kingship and Royal Property from Æthelwulf to Edward the Elder," in *Edward the Elder, 899–924*, ed. N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 264–79.

Chapter 3

Thinking Alfred

As Alfred is laid to rest, we can look back at his endeavours outside the theatre of war and the legend they have generated. The troubled times in which Alfred ruled meant that he was always preparing for or fighting wars, but this doesn't mean that he only thought about violence. Alfred's love of learning is one of the most important aspects of the king's personality that Asser's biography presents to us. However, Asser was not writing for us, but to impress upon his Welsh contemporaries the qualities of the Saxon king to whom they had submitted. Undoubtedly such a man should also be schooled in the arts of peace.

Alfred's love of wisdom has become inseparable over the past eleven hundred years from a belief not only in the king's learning, but his authorship of translations from Latin into Old English. During the past century Alfred has lost some books once attributed to him, and recently the question has been asked whether the king made any translations at all. Alfred's education was neglected, but the story that Asser tells presents superficial inconsistencies complicated by later preconceptions concerning the king's supposed literary achievements. Alfred's approach to his children's education in the 880s offers insights into the progress of his own learning. Five of Alfred and Ealhswith's children survived beyond infancy. The eldest was

Æthelflæd, who became the Lady of the Mercians; Edward succeeded his father; the next daughter Æthelgifu became a nun at Shaftesbury; her younger sister, Ælfthryth, married Baldwin II of Flanders; the youngest son, Æthelweard (d. ca. 922), was chosen to receive a full education from about age five, which implicitly his siblings didn't have. Asser describes Æthelweard's schooling (chap. 75):

the youngest of all, as a result of divine wisdom and the remarkable foresight of the king, was given over to training in reading and writing under the attentive care of teachers, in company with all the nobly born children of virtually the entire area, and a good many of lesser birth as well. In this school, books in both languages—that is to say, in Latin and Saxon—were constantly read; they also devoted themselves to writing, to such an extent that even before they had the requisite strength for manly skills (hunting, that is, and other skills appropriate to noblemen), they were seen to be devoted and clever students of the liberal arts.

Alfred would make good for his son Æthelweard the lack that he himself had suffered as a child. While Asser was at court, two other children of Alfred were present—Edward and Ælfthryth—who received a different kind of education (Æthelflæd was already married when Asser arrived; Æthelgifu was probably in her convent). These older children were under the care of tutors and guardians (*nutriti*), who taught them good conduct and noble pursuits, but were not entirely deprived of the full liberal education (*liberali disciplina*) little Æthelweard was having: “they have attentively learned the Psalms, and books in English, and especially English poems, and they very frequently make use of books.”

Alfred's complaints about his own upbringing are clarified by Asser's account: as a child Alfred received late the education given to Edward and Ælfthryth. They learned to read English and their prayers, but the focus was equally on acquiring noble pursuits and conduct. The assumption

underlying Alfred's adult lament at his deprivation of a full liberal education in Latin is that as a younger son such an education could have been presumed. However, as Alfred complained to Asser, at the time "he could not satisfy his craving for what he desired most, namely the liberal arts; because, as he used to say, there were no good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons at that time" (chap. 25). This is not true of the reign of his father Æthelwulf, whose Frankish secretary Felix was associated with one of ninth-century France's greatest intellectuals, Lupus of Ferrières (*EHD* nos. 215–18). Alfred lamented that at the appropriate age and with time to devote to learning he didn't have teachers. Later, however, when teachers were available, he was too ill or too busy at war to benefit, though his yearning for study did not cease. Asser explains that in the 880s all of Alfred's children whom he encountered could read English and made frequent use of books (*frequentissime libris utuntur*), and his youngest son Æthelweard read and wrote in Latin and English. Furthermore, Alfred personally took part in the moral instruction and education in English literacy of the sons of the nobility being raised in the royal household (chap. 76).

The king was busy, but would still find time to read "aloud from books in English" and loved learning English poems off by heart. This was amidst the cares of his kingdom, as well as enjoying hunting and making his own designs for precious and useful objects. Alfred invented a clock that successively burned six candles, housed in ox-horn lanterns, marking the hours across a twenty-four-hour period (chap. 104). The "Alfred jewel" could be another of his designs. This small but splendid object in gold, enamel, and rock crystal bears an Old English inscription around its mounting: "Alfred commanded me to be made." The piece was found by an unnamed labourer digging for peat at Newton Park in the Somerset marshes in 1693, about

four miles from the site of the monastery at Athelney. The jewel dates from the late ninth century, and is probably an “astel,” or a pointer used when reading. The find invites the tantalizing yet unprovable possibility that it was given to the monastery by Alfred himself and later lost. Alfred founded two monasteries during his reign—at Athelney where he had reason to give thanks to God, and at Shaftesbury where his daughter Æthelgifu became a nun. Asser emphasizes Alfred’s piety, and often mentions his habit of secretly visiting churches. Alfred attended mass daily and listened to the diurnal round of church offices in which psalms, canticles, and hymns were sung. The king heard not only the daytime hours, but the night offices as well—an extraordinary act of devotion. Alfred was noted in his lifetime for his generosity to the needy, whether native or foreign; one eleventh-century (or later) legend has Alfred at Athelney sharing his food with a passing pilgrim, revealed to be Saint Cuthbert. Patrick Wormald points out that Asser exaggerates Alfred’s generosity to the Church—his will gives one-eighth of his money to “good causes,” not half as Asser claims, and the later chronicler of Abingdon Abbey would even compare Alfred to Judas for appropriating the monastery’s land.³⁶ There is no reason, however, to doubt Alfred’s piety, or the rapacity of medieval monks.

Alfred’s desire for learning did not abate over time (chap. 76). Wessex did not have the resources, so according to Asser the king “like a clever bee” decided to collect the riches of learning from abroad, “seeking outside what he did not possess within.” In his effort to lift the intellectual calibre of his court and kingdom Alfred first looked to Mercia, which enjoyed a higher reputation for learning than Wessex. Four Mercians were recruited in the early 880s: Werferth, bishop of Worcester; Plegmund, later archbishop of Canterbury; and two priests, Æthelstan and Werwulf.

Church services were in Latin, and during the 880s Alfred developed the habit of hearing the scriptures—implicitly in Latin—being read. The Mercian helpers would read in turn to the king “by day or by night, whenever he had the freedom” (chap. 77). Asser adds that Alfred did not yet understand anything they read “because he had not yet begun to read anything,” but as Alfred read English, this can only mean “anything in Latin.” Around this time the king requested that Werferth translate a book for him: the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great is a series of short stories about Italian saints. The collection includes the life of Saint Benedict, founder of western monasticism. A preface accompanying the translation has King Alfred state that he commanded the work so that he might “reflect in mind on heavenly things.” However, the language and style of the preface are the translator’s; even at court Werferth wrote using the king’s voice.³⁷ The king certainly ordered the translation made; he had travelled in Italy, and also founded monasteries. His daughter Æthelgifu would have been able to read the Old English *Dialogues* in her convent.

Werferth’s Latin was not of the highest standard. The syntax of the Old English follows Latin word order painfully and he makes fundamental errors.³⁸ Dissatisfaction with the level of Werferth’s learning could explain his sidelining from the intellectual circle, and the king’s search for talent further afield. Two scholars, both monk-priests, were brought from the continent: Grimbald of Saint-Bertin and John the Old Saxon. In addition to personal qualities, Grimbald was an excellent chanter, learned in ecclesiastical doctrine and the scriptures. Asser is not our only source concerning Grimbald’s recruitment. A letter addressed to Alfred in about 886, from Archbishop Fulk of Rheims, answers a now lost letter from the king, taking up Alfred’s request for Grimbald. Alfred has asked for the monk, a protégé of the archbishop, because of the parlous state

of the English Church, which “has fallen into ruins in many respects,” whether by “the great passage of time or the carelessness of prelates or the ignorance of those subject to them” (*EHD* no. 223). The king had sent Archbishop Fulk a pack of wolfhounds, but the archbishop wants more if he is to give up such a learned man, and urges Alfred to give Grimbald a bishopric, with the authority needed to effect reform. Grimbald did not become a bishop, but may have declined the see of Canterbury in 888; he was later involved with the foundation New Minster at Winchester. Asser’s account of Grimbald, which is about Alfred’s love of learning, does not fully harmonize with Fulk’s letter. Pope Formosus (891–96) would soon inform Alfred that he had contemplated excommunicating his bishops (*EHD* no. 227). Asser makes no mention of the dire state of the English Church for his Welsh readers, but casts Alfred’s recruitment as part of the king’s persona as a would-be man of letters.

John the Old Saxon—“a man of acute intelligence, immensely learned in all fields of literary endeavour, extremely ingenious in many other skills”—initially seems to have spent most of his time in England at the monastery at Athelney, which he was recruited to head in the absence of any suitable English candidate (chaps. 78, 94). The monastery was reached by boat or a causeway, protected by one of Alfred’s burhs (chap. 92). John was not the only foreigner there; there were monks of various nationalities, because no adult Englishman would embrace the monastic life, which for many years “had been totally lacking in that entire race” (chap. 93), both because of Viking attacks and a distaste for asceticism. Older monasteries continued, but were staffed by the secular clergy; these kept a different rule, and some of them married.³⁹ Alfred wanted to re-found English monastic life, but this meant importing monks. The king appointed John first, then some priests

and deacons, and when he couldn't get the monks he wanted, he imported a number from France. The king also commanded that children be educated at Athelney so that they could later be "raised to the monastic order"; one of these, seen at the monastery by Asser himself, was the son of Vikings. The monastery was not, however, the refuge of peace and learning that the king had hoped for. Two French monks became embittered against the abbot and bribed two slaves to murder John at his nightly prayers in the church, and then dump his body outside a brothel. The two attackers moved against John with stolen swords while he was kneeling at the altar (chap. 97). At this point, however, the plan unravelled. As well as being sharp of wit, John had "some experience in the martial arts." Sensing the attack coming on, the abbot resisted and called for help, but was badly wounded. The conspirators fled into the marsh, but were caught and tortured to death. Life could be tough in a medieval monastery. A curious aspect of Asser's account is that although he has visited Athelney, he implies (at the time of writing ca. 893) that he has either never met John the Old Saxon or does not know him well. John is implicitly not the source of the account of the attempted assassination, and the abbot's fighting skills are reported: "as I have heard about him from several sources." A short Latin acrostic poem praising Alfred is probably by John.

Asser was the last international scholar recruited. We are told that the king wanted Asser for his learning (chaps. 79–81), but like Grimbald, Plegmund, and John, he was soon involved in church administration. The king summoned Asser for an interview and asked him to become a member of his household (*familiaris*). While the loss of Asser might have hurt the community of Saint David's, it was realized that a close association with the Saxon king could help the monastery against the depredations of the

king of Dyfed (chaps. 79–80). After a delay caused by illness, Asser entered the king's household, bringing "the benefit of the learning of Saint David." Some administrative responsibility began after Asser's first period at court, when he was given control of two Somerset monasteries—Congresbury and Banwell—in addition to other personal gifts. The two houses were convenient for a man traveling between Wessex and Wales along the Bristol Channel. Some time later Asser was given the pastoral administration of the district around Exeter, including Cornwall and western parts of Wessex. This was a large responsibility, entrusting the care of the most Celtic part of Alfred's kingdom to the Welsh churchman, in a region that had suffered from Viking attacks. Asser's promotion to the see of Sherborne (which included Exeter), when it fell vacant on the death of Bishop Wulfsize (who died sometime between 892 and 900), suggests that Asser had an important role in the king's strategy of reconstruction and church reform. Over time these responsibilities would have drawn Asser away from court.

Asser reports that one of his tasks when he was at court was to read to the king (chaps. 76, 81), especially passages from sacred scripture. Alfred loved to hear the scriptures read, despite his inability to understand Latin. In 887 this dynamic suddenly changed (chap. 87):

It was also in this year that Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, first began through divine inspiration to read and to interpret simultaneously, all on one and the same day. But in order that the beginning of this process may be understood more clearly by those who are ignorant, I shall take pains to explain the reasons for this late start.

Modern scholarship is unsurprisingly sceptical of miracles in medieval biographies, though an exception is often made for this event. There is a reality behind Alfred's "miracle," though the apparent inconsistencies in Asser's brief

account must be ironed out. Asser describes the event as happening both in a single moment (*uno eodemque*) and as the result of a process begun earlier (*apertius inchoationis*). Asser is not claiming that King Alfred learned Latin in one day, but that this sudden moment of “getting” Latin was the result of a process. Despite centuries of optimistic interpretation, Asser is not describing a miracle at all. This passage has at times been understood to say that Alfred suddenly began “translating” Latin, a development that certainly would have required divine help. However, what Asser is saying, in a biography that has otherwise entirely eschewed the marvels characteristic of saints’ lives, is not that Alfred learned to read and translate Latin by miraculous intervention, but rather that the king was finally able to read and expound (*legere et interpretari*) the Latin scriptures in a way that demonstrated divine inspiration. There was no miracle when Alfred’s “divine inspiration” helped him win his mother’s poetry book (chap. 23).

The specific character of the king’s later “divine inspiration”—applying to biblical Latin—is brought out in Asser’s explanation of the beginning of this process (chap. 88):

One day when we were sitting together in the royal chamber discussing all sorts of topics (as we normally did), it happened that I was reading aloud some scriptural text (*testimonium*) to him from a certain book.

Alfred listened carefully and thought over the words, before showing Asser the little book that he had carried with him since his youth, containing the daily hours, psalms, and prayers. Alfred commanded Asser to copy the passage he had just read into this book of devotions. Asser was impressed by the king’s devotion and love of “divine wisdom.” But Alfred’s little book was full, and Asser, keen to develop the king’s understanding of Holy Scripture, offered to copy the passage into a new gathering of pages. This

first set of leaves would become a new book of scriptural quotations—three more were copied that same day. Alfred was building a type of book common in the period, a *florilegium*: “as the busy bee ... eagerly and relentlessly assembles many flowers of Holy Scripture.” The moment the first passage was copied, the king wished to read (*legere*) it and interpret (*interpretari*) it “in the Saxon tongue,” and to do the same with many other scriptural passages.⁴⁰ The process of King Alfred’s deeper study of scripture, reading in Latin and elaborating its meaning in English, began on Saint Martin’s Day (November 11) 887. The king’s handbook—or *Enchiridion*—grew to the size of a psalter, and was kept with him for spiritual comfort. It is a mistake to read Alfred’s sudden acquisition of a comprehensive knowledge of Latin into Asser’s account. This is untenable in a number of ways. First, it requires subscribing to a miracle; if so, then for rational scholars all that Asser has to say about the king’s education and Latinity becomes unreliable. Second, an exaggerated belief in Alfred’s Latinity paradoxically requires a misreading of Asser’s own Latin, which does not describe the king translating, let alone translating for others, but rather interpreting. Third, Asser’s story matches what we know about different levels of medieval literacy. From his childhood, Alfred carried around a Latin prayer book with psalms; many such books had English glosses, though we don’t know if Alfred’s psalms had English between the lines. Alfred’s devout familiarity across two decades with liturgical Latin could easily have produced a capacity for following the Latin scriptures, perhaps facilitated by a year and a half’s full exposure to spoken Vulgar Latin as a child. The ability to read closely and discuss biblical passages when aided by the greatest theological minds of Western Europe, and simultaneously order their copying into a private book, is literacy of a kind, but it does not suggest Alfred on his own could range widely in Latin books.

Works

The gathering of these churchmen in Alfred's kingdom culminated in the publication of the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Regula pastoralis* (*Pastoral Care*). This work's Preface is the most famous passage in Old English prose. Gregory was the pope who in 597 had sent missionaries to convert the pagan English to Christianity. That the second literary product of Alfred's circle, after Werferth's *Dialogues*, was another work by Gregory is no accident. The *Pastoral Care* is a spiritual rule for bishops, aimed at reforming the episcopate, whose leadership and teaching reforms the Church. The earliest manuscript of the full Old English text is, coincidentally, from Worcester, and its Preface is addressed to Bishop Werferth. In the Preface the king greets his bishops and laments the decline of learning and teaching in England from an earlier happy time when the English people were wise and prosperous. The Preface asserts a causal link between the current parlous state of the people and the neglect of wisdom, made worse by the Vikings' attacks. Once the English sent scholars and learning abroad, now they must bring them in. These sentiments echo some in Archbishop Fulk's letter to Alfred, and also Asser's *Life*. The Preface establishes its publication as a turning point for the English Church and people, and provides us with further insight into the king's interest in scripture (which could be called "the Law" in Old English):

Then I remembered how the law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and afterwards, when the Greeks learned it, then they translated it completely into their own language, and also all other books. And afterwards the Romans in the same way, when they had learned them, translated all of them through wise interpreters into their own language. And also all other Christian peoples translated some part of them into their own language.

These are not simply general comments on the idea of translation, but in the progression of the passage connect directly to what follows:

Therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also translate some books, which are most necessary for all people to know, into that language that we all can understand, and accomplish this, as with God's help we may very easily do if we have tranquility, so that all the youth of free men now in England who have the capability to apply themselves to it, should be set to learning, while they are not needed for any other occupation, until they are able to read English writing well. One may then instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and promote to a higher rank.

The simple logic of the passage, based on Alfred's "therefore," is that the king would like his pastoral leaders to help him begin the process of fully and properly translating scripture. He assumes that the bishops will understand implicitly what he means by the unexplained expression "books ... most necessary for all people to know," and Asser's articulation of the king's overriding interest in reading and interpreting scripture confirms this.⁴¹ Subsequent generations down to the present day have hoped to include as "most necessary" any Old English work attributable to King Alfred. However, the fact that at one time a book can be argued for passionately as "most necessary," yet later that same book can be discarded, shows that retrospectively reading meanings into the king's phrase is an arbitrary exercise at best. The *Pastoral Care* itself makes no claim to be necessary for anyone except bishops. Alfred wants the books of scripture translated to extend the kind of education available through the court school that his son Æthelweard attended to not only the nobility, but free people of lesser birth too; the idea of building on an elementary education with ecclesiastical pro-

motion was already in place at Athelney. Alfred's expression "eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna" (all the youth now among the free people of the English nation) gives no indication of the gender of those to be educated, though only men could expect promotion as clerics.

English texts were already meeting the requirements of the court school and the less rigorous education provided for other children. These might have included the Old English version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, once attributed to King Alfred but now thought to be Mercian in origin. What was lacking—a need experienced by Alfred personally—was scripture in English. Alfred makes no claim to be founding an English literary tradition, but rather argues that widespread literacy in English is a preexisting phenomenon underpinning the logic of the translation program:

Then when I remembered how knowledge of Latin had formerly decayed throughout England, *and yet many knew how to read English writing*, then I began among the other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to translate into English the book that is called in Latin *Pastoralis*, and in English "Shepherd-book," sometimes word for word, and sometimes sense for sense, just as I had learned it from Plegmund my archbishop and from Asser my bishop and from Grimbold my masspriest and from John my masspriest. When I had learned it I translated it into English, just as I had understood it, and as I could most meaningfully render it. (Emphasis added.)

The regal voice claims not only authorship of the Preface, but also of the translation following. How reliable is this claim? We have little other evidence to go on. The assertions in the Preface about the collapse of English learning are exaggerated, but such a rhetorical stance does not mean that all its claims are false. From what Asser tells us about the king's Latinity, it would be impossible that Alfred could have made such a translation without help,

and the Preface makes no such claim. In fact, it parallels Asser's account of how Alfred learned to read and interpret scripture. No doubt Alfred played a part, as did his helpers—among the best minds in Europe—though common sense would dictate that they took the lead at the Latin end.

It is not known exactly when the *Pastoral Care* was translated; dates between the late 880s and mid-890s have been suggested. The fact that the Preface calls Asser “my bishop” does not fix the date, because he was a bishop before moving to Sherborne.⁴² It would be astounding, given Asser's interest in all aspects of Alfred's literacy, if he deliberately or accidentally omitted mention of a project involving the very four scholars whose importance is discussed in his *Life*, finished in 893. It would also defy comprehension if the biographer who lauds Alfred's ability to interpret a short scriptural passage should fail to mention his leading role in translating a major patristic text—if this is what happened. With the invasion of the second great Viking army, literary life at court would have been disrupted after 892; Alfred himself was otherwise occupied. The year 893 might be the best candidate, but if so, then Alfred's role in the final work would be smaller than the Preface suggests. The translating “team” may never have been together on any one occasion, as Asser and John seem not even to have met by 893. In any case they had pastoral responsibilities away from court, as did Plegmund, whose cathedral was behind enemy lines in Kent during 892. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, not authored by the king but written close by and reflecting his interests, was published around 892. In either the late 880s or early 890s Alfred's *Laws* were also published—in English, also the language of Guthrum's treaty and the king's will. Alfred's voice in the *Laws* is strong, and his interests and emphases are apparent—Asser describes the king's common practice of adjudicating disputes for nobles and commoners

alike (chap. 106)—but he is not their author. The Mosaic Law is the foundation of Christian law, and Alfred's laws are prefaced with the Ten Commandments and related scriptural passages. The *Laws'* Preface explains in Alfred's voice how Jewish Law was modified for Christian nations from Apostolic times; the historical progression compares closely to the Preface to the *Pastoral Care*, where scripture is simply called "the Law." The relationship between the laws of church and state in the Preface to Alfred's law code also echoes the shared responsibilities of king and bishops in the *Pastoral Care* Preface. At this significant moment in English history, the king observes that he has incorporated older English laws by the early West Saxon king Ine ("my kinsman"), the Mercian Offa, and Æthelberht of Kent, the first Christian English king, converted by Gregory's missionaries. The breadth and depth of the *Laws* tie them to the *Chronicle's* historical project and the *Pastoral Care* Preface's reforms, all bearing an unmistakable Alfredian hallmark. Alfred's *Laws* were circulated only after receiving the assent of his councillors. The first law addresses a problem encountered repeatedly by the king: "First we enjoin what is most necessary, that each person carefully keep his oath and pledge." Loyalty and honesty are emphasized; severe punishments are reserved for treachery, especially to the king; but peaceful resolution of conflict is also encouraged. Most of all, it is a statement of budding national ideology and identity, as well as displaying royal power. The story of the English nation as it later developed could be crafted in various ways, and Alfred, with his many helpers, is one of the great historical figures who shaped that story in his own imagination and in that of later followers.

There has been much scholarly investment in an Alfredian literary canon, but recently the list of works by Alfred has grown short, and may grow shorter still. In 1971 R. H. C. Davis argued that the English books translated or commis-

sioned by Alfred constituted “propaganda” to persuade his subjects of the need for his works and administrative reforms, and that they should not be accepted at “face value.”⁴³ The term “propaganda” carries sinister overtones in modern culture, but it is clear that Asser’s *Life* and the *Chronicle* reflect the interests of Alfred’s political agenda. There can be no doubting, however, the sweeping claim to power implicit in one of the *Chronicle*’s genealogies, which explains Alfred’s line of descent from Scaef, an apocryphal fourth son of Noah born in the ark, and through him from Christ himself.⁴⁴ Confecting ancestry was an international competitive sport among medieval monarchs, and by tracing his pedigree to God, Alfred’s genealogists won the prize. The genealogy is patently false, but the reliability of other claims should also be treated cautiously. Davis assumed that both the Old English Bede and Orosius were closely associated with Alfred, and argued that they demonstrated “immediate relevance to his own times.” In the tenth century Ælfric of Eynsham also believed the Old English Bede to be Alfred’s, but no one accepts this today. The Old English Orosius, which mentions Alfred in its geographical introduction, is no longer considered his either. There can be no doubt that the king had something to do with the *Pastoral Care* translation, but how much it bears the imprint of his language is uncertain. A prose translation of the first fifty psalms in the Paris Psalter has also been attributed to Alfred; their language is appropriate to late ninth-century Wessex, but tying their composition to the king depends on the uncertain unity and reliability of an Alfredian corpus. The Old English version of Boethius’s *On the Consolation of Philosophy* makes a strong claim to Alfred’s authorship in a Preface attributing the work to him. One of the work’s recent editors, Malcolm Godden, has argued forcefully that neither the Boethius, nor any of the surviving Alfredian canon, can safely be attributed

to the king. The genuineness of Alfred's works has been defended by David Pratt, whose major study of the texts finds in them "highly effective props of kingship, intensively vested with his agency and power."⁴⁵ Time will tell whether such a reading is as unsustainable as Davis's.

The Boethius Preface describes a two-phase project in which Alfred first translated the Latin text into Old English prose, then into verse and prose, imitating the format of the original. However, the Preface presents problems. Its phrasing is derived from the *Pastoral Care* Preface, but oddly speaks of the king in the third person: "King Alfred was the translator of this book." Such expression represents attribution by a follower, who can only have been as certain of Alfred's authorship of the Boethius as Ælfric was mistakenly of the Bede. The Preface explains the second phase—versifying some of the prose—as something that has "now been done," introducing a confusing chronological contradiction into the attribution. The claim that Alfred himself composed the verse is also surprising. We know of the king's love of English poetry from Asser, who speaks about it often and in detail, without ever mentioning that the king was an accomplished poet—either Asser is failing to praise one of the king's skills, or the Preface is concoction. This suggestion that Alfred was a poet took on a full and enduring life in the imagination of the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, who tells the story of Alfred disguised as a minstrel infiltrating a Viking camp. The final problem for accepting that the Boethius is by Alfred is that it is a difficult philosophical work, and the Old English version incorporates copious material from the glossing tradition of the Carolingian schools. Either Asser forgot to mention this aspect of the king's learning, or Alfred attained it during the military campaigns of the 890s, or just before his death, or never at all.

The job of making the Boethius would have been beyond Asser's Alfred, though if the king's young son Æthelweard had completed his education in the liberal arts, he might have achieved such learning. In the meantime the king's circle of scholars had been disrupted. It is doubtful Alfred would have had sufficient learning to understand Boethius's philosophy, even if he could follow the Latin, and its Preface does not offer the requisite assistance. The same doubts must be expressed about the Old English version of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, attributed to Alfred in a twelfth-century manuscript.⁴⁶ In all likelihood Alfred surrendered his intellectual interests in 892 with the arrival of the new Viking armies, which preoccupied him directly until 896, and probably indirectly for some time after that. The idea of authorship in the early Middle Ages does not coincide with our modern understanding, which generally identifies a text with the person who wrote it. Medieval texts often circulated anonymously, and subsequent copiers often attributed them to historical figures, either deliberately or accidentally deceiving those who came after. For the modern reader, simply trusting medieval authorial attributions displays a laudable optimism.

Alfred's Afterlife

This study of Alfred began with a reflection on the origins of his legend in the late tenth century, less than one hundred years after his death. In the thousand years since, the legend has engulfed the man, who transcended his folk-hero persona to be transformed into a literary prodigy and philosopher king. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries "wise King Alfred" was popularly credited with leaving his heirs aphorisms known as the *Proverbs of Alfred*, which are repeatedly invoked in the Middle English poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*.⁴⁷ These are certainly not by Alfred,

but are presented as the king's wisdom passed on to his son. We have seen that already a century after his death Alfred had become a locus of English historical memory. In Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicon* the king's reputation has not departed too far from Asser's portrayal of Alfred: "a man full of justice, active in war, learned in speech, steeped in sacred literature above all things." Alfred's literary attributions were growing, but early fictionalizations developed from his reputation for piety, casting him as a suppliant in the tenth- and eleventh-century legends of Neot and Cuthbert. For the rest of the Anglo-Saxon period, Alfred was memorable rather than great. Paradoxically, the king's historical status grew rapidly in the wake of William the Conqueror's victory in 1066, especially with the publication in the 1120s of William of Malmesbury's *History of the English Kings*.⁴⁸ Writing at a time of renewed state formation, William does not find much to praise about Anglo-Saxon kings, with Alfred as the outstanding exception. William draws on a range of sources as well as his copious imagination, and creates the episode in which Alfred enters a Viking camp disguised as a minstrel. This story and that of the cakes would become the favourite images in Alfredian iconography from the seventeenth century onwards.⁴⁹

Another of William's enduring additions to the Alfred myth was his claim that Alfred had divided England into the administrative units of hundreds and tithings, as the basis of legal and financial administration; within decades Henry of Huntingdon had added the creation of shires to Alfred's administrative works. This claim cannot rest on Asser's description (chaps. 99–103) of the king's actual fiscal reforms, which guaranteed the paying of the army and craftsmen, and charitable disbursements, including for the running of his court school. The king's reputation for "justice" would bloom across the following centuries, though twelfth- and thirteenth-century historians were not

agreed on Alfred's preeminence. William's Norman contemporary Orderic Vitalis credited Alfred with being the first king of all England, which while it contains an echo of truth, is wrong; but once the claim had been made, it would come to overrule other contenders. About a century later, Roger of Wendover (d. 1236) drew on a range of historical and fanciful sources to create a synthesized Alfred, and focused on his victory at London as the moment when the manifold kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England gave way to one new state. Matthew Paris (d. 1259) accepted and developed Alfred's foundational role, and for the first time "famous" Alfred became "great"—*Rex Alfredus magnus*.⁵⁰ In the thirteenth century *Mirror for Justices* the claim is made that Alfred summoned parliaments twice a year; this originally obscure work took on importance for seventeenth-century constitutional reformers. By then Alfred had long been acknowledged as the founder of the University of Oxford, and was also the subject of a stalled canonization bid instigated by Henry VI in 1441. By the end of the Middle Ages, Alfred had seen off rivals such as King Egbert and Edward the Confessor to be accepted as the founder of the English nation and its constitution.

Through the great upheavals of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Alfred once again came to the fore at a time of national renewal and constitutional re-founding. In 1568, the antiquarian and legal historian William Lambarde published a collection of Anglo-Saxon laws in his *Archaionomia*, dedicated to Elizabeth I.⁵¹ Lambarde's work, which established the primacy of Alfred's *Laws*, was widely influential on constitutional and legal thinkers for many years. Lambarde's publication was part of a renewal of interest in the Anglo-Saxons generally, and Alfred in particular. In 1574, after editions of the medieval historians who had made Alfred great, Archbishop Matthew Parker published the first printed edition of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*,

into which he interpolated the story of the cakes. With more impact on popular perceptions of Alfred, John Foxe published an expanded version of his "Book of Martyrs" in 1570, emphasizing Alfred's virtues as a ruler: "Among the Saxon kynges hitherto in this history aforementioned; I finde few or none to be preferred (or almost compared) to this Alured, or Alfrede."⁵² This history in English, drawing on a range of sources, went through three editions in Foxe's lifetime, and more beyond. The sixteenth-century creation of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* as a national church had fostered a sense of English origins, as opposed to British, a contest of identity in which the historical Alfred of Wessex (however muddled) would win out over Arthur of Britain (becoming discredited as a myth). The appeal to the Alfredian past took on new energy with the accessions of James I and his son Charles I, who showed tendencies towards monarchic absolutism. The invocation of Alfred in the seventeenth century was a constituent element of what would later be known as the "Whig interpretation of history," insisting on the authority of the Common Law, trial by jury, and the rights of parliament. Sir Edward Coke (d. 1634), lord chief justice of the Common Pleas, brought the Alfredian tradition invented by medieval historians into the constitutional debate that preceded the Civil War and Commonwealth; this work was extended by Sir Henry Spelman (d. 1641). Spelman's son John—who died in 1643 during the siege of Oxford and was a close friend of Charles I—wrote a biography of Alfred the Great published posthumously in 1678.⁵³ The legal historian John Selden (d. 1654) was also deceived by medieval fabrications concerning Alfred's achievements, but his work lies at the foundation of the constitution nevertheless.

By the beginning of eighteenth century, King Alfred had a foot in both political camps. He was honoured in royalist Oxford as the founder of the University, and outside

it for founding the Whig constitution. With the accession of the House of Hanover in 1714, Alfred became a potent historical symbol used to impress on the Georges the venerability of the constitution over which they would preside as invited kings. This was accompanied by a rapid popularization of Alfred as an English historical figure. Paul de Rapin-Thoyras's *History of England*, first published in French between 1724 and 1727, and dedicated to George I, became a seminal work.⁵⁴ The *History* acknowledges its debt to Spelman's biography, and presents a modestly flattering view of Alfred. Rapin's *History* was quickly imitated and plagiarized, and his Alfred quickly gathered all the old legends as well as some new ones, including adventures in Africa and romance. In this vein *Alfred: A Masque* was performed before Frederick, prince of Wales—who had a strong interest in Alfred—at Cliveden, Buckinghamshire, on August 1, 1740.⁵⁵ The performance culminated in the first appearance of the ode "Rule Britannia," best known now in Sir Malcolm Sargent's popular setting. In the following decade the *History of England* by David Hume began to appear. In 1761 the last volume came out, covering the Anglo-Saxons. Alfred was appropriated into a Tory understanding of England's past, told by a Scot. Hume's treatment of Alfred is restrained, but his summary of the king's psychology extravagant:⁵⁶

The merit of this prince, both in private and public life, may with advantage be set in opposition to that of any monarch or citizen which the annals of any age or nation can present to us. He seems indeed to be the model of the perfect character, which, under the denomination of a sage or wise man, philosophers have been fond of delineating, rather as a fiction of their imagination, than in hopes of ever seeing it really existing.

Alfred still had a long way to run, and with English colonization his reputation went global. Fifteen years after

Hume's volume appeared, the new United States would break away from Britain, insisting on constitutional rights inherited from Alfred. The *Declaration of Independence* penned by Thomas Jefferson in 1776 legally grounds the break with Britain by advancing the Alfredian constitutional tradition, preferring "the free System of English Laws" to George III's "absolute rule." Alfred was very much on the mind of the Continental Congress, which in 1774 had commissioned an ad hoc fleet (numbering eleven ships) of converted merchantmen. One of these was the *Black Prince*, transformed into a twenty-six-gun warship, which became the fleet's first flagship after being renamed the *Alfred* (on which Lieutenant John Paul Jones served)—in a deliberate irony, Alfred commanded the first United States Navy.⁵⁷ The acute historical awareness (and to the Royal Navy, provocation) behind the name-change is likely to have belonged to Rhode Island governor Stephen Hopkins, who entertained John Adams and the rest of the Naval Committee with his deep knowledge of British history. Alfred didn't found the Royal Navy, but they thought he had. The appropriation of Alfred by the new nation reveals that by the late eighteenth century the early medieval king's historical association in cultural memory was not narrowly nationalistic, let alone monarchical, but included the kinds of values to which all free peoples could aspire. The use of the United States' constitution, built on these freedoms, as the basis of many others, from Australia to post-colonial India, has consolidated Alfred's global impact, however much the mixing of memory and myth have played a part. In many ways the early modern version of Alfred is more important to the modern world than the ninth-century reality.

Thomas Jefferson believed that American students of law should learn the Anglo-Saxon language because they would "imbibe with the language their free principles of government." Students at Jefferson's University of Virginia

would not, however, read Hume's *History*, which the college's founder banned.⁵⁸ They were more likely to read Voltaire's *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations* (1756), which offers Alfred due praise, but with a characteristic caution:⁵⁹

I question whether there ever was a man upon earth more deserving of the regard of posterity than Alfred the Great, who did such signal services to his country; on the supposition that all which is said of him is true (*supposé que tout ce qu'on raconte de lui soit véritable*).

The eighteenth-century Alfred was very much an internationalized figure of interest to intellectuals, but the expansion of British imperialism in the nineteenth century redefined his memory and would make him more narrowly English. The ultranationalist and imperialist cult of Alfred that developed in Britain during the nineteenth century had no room for Voltaire's Gallic caution. Alfred would become every schoolboy's model not only of the ideal king, but the ideal Englishman, and as the Victorian historian A. E. Freeman (following Hume) would have him, the "most perfect character in history."⁶⁰ One important book among the avalanche developing the king's cult was *Alfred the Great* (1857) by Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*. Hughes was a Christian Socialist, but Alfred's attachment to politically radical Anglo-Saxonism and democratic ideals was waning in favour of a disturbing racial Anglo-Saxonism. This yoked late nineteenth-century Anglo-American international economic hegemony to evolutionary racial theory and the idea of a superior Anglo-Saxon race, dragging Alfred into the mire. Through no fault of his own, the self-styled "king of the Anglo-Saxons" has found it difficult to recover in popular imagination.

The decline in Alfred's cultural currency across the twentieth century exhibits a reaction in proportion to the

excesses of Victorian Alfred-mania, both benign and sinister, but it is also the rejection of a chimera. However, the political freedom that Alfred came to represent across many centuries, making him the hero both of progressives and reactionaries, is no shibboleth. We can only agree with Voltaire that any rational assessment of Alfred as a person in history must rest on facts, not miracles or myths. In the practice of history we must also try to understand the distant moment in which this unusual man lived. Alfred's achievements in statecraft are easily taken for granted by citizens of confident nations with strong legal institutions, but maybe less so by those whose countries are dismembered by mindless violence or when the foundations of freedom seem less certain. Similarly, the king's ideas about access to education—unheard of in his time and for many centuries afterwards—are still controversial in some parts of our world. Alfred was a progressive thinker: he believed that girls should learn to read, that women had a role in government and should own property. These ideas were contested by those around him. Much about Alfred that was "known" to American revolutionaries was historical embellishment, but the founders of the first great democracy of the modern world understood that making history means knowing history, as Alfred himself did. Voltaire's scepticism was not directed at the ideals that had become attached to this remote historical figure, but at their attachment to him. Recovering from a Victorian reputation as the "most perfect" person ever would certainly be difficult, especially for a man also adopted by white supremacists. But a disabled youngest son, who lived homeless as a refugee, before re-founding and reforming his kingdom in the face of unrelenting violence, and a long-term hero of radicals and revolutionaries, might have a chance.

Notes

³⁶ Wormald, "On þa wæpnedhealfe," p. 277; F. M. Stenton, *The Early History of Abingdon Abbey* (Reading: University College, 1913), p. 31.

³⁷ Godden, "Alfredian Project," pp. 95–100.

³⁸ *Bischofs Werferth von Worcester, Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, ed. H. Hecht, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa 5 (Leipzig: Wigand, 1900), pp. 99–121.

³⁹ See Catherine Cubitt, "Images of St Peter: The Clergy and the Religious Life in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. Paul Cavill (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), pp. 41–54 at 46–48.

⁴⁰ Godden, "Stories from the Court," pp. 127–32, notes the history of misreading Asser's Latin (p. 130), but seems unaware that Edward Conybeare's translation, *Alfred in the Chroniclers* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1899; 2nd ed. 1914), p. 127, agrees with his own.

⁴¹ See my forthcoming "Which Books are 'Most Necessary' to Know? The Old English Pastoral Care Preface and the Genesis of the Alfredian Canon," *English Studies* 99 (2018).

⁴² Lapidge and Keynes, p. 49.

⁴³ R. H. C. Davis, "Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth," *History* 56 (1971): 169–82.

⁴⁴ Daniel Anlezark, "Sceaf, Japheth and the Origins of the Anglo-Saxons," *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002): 13–46.

⁴⁵ David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 338.

⁴⁶ *King Alfred's Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. Thomas A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 97.

⁴⁷ *The Proverbs of Alfred: An Emended Text*, ed. and trans. Olaf Arngart (Lund: Gleerup, 1978); *The Owl and the Nightingale: Text and Translation*, ed. Neil Cartlidge, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ *William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 180–97.

⁴⁹ The following discussion is indebted to Simon Keynes, "The Cult of King Alfred," *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999): 225–356.

⁵⁰ See Simon Keynes, "A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 36 (1986): 195–217 at 195.

⁵¹ See Rebecca Brackmann, *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-*

Saxon England: Laurence Nowell, William Lambarde, and the Study of Old English, *Studies in Renaissance Literature* 30 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2012), pp. 189–223.

⁵² John Foxe, *The First Volume of the Ecclesiasticall History Contaynyng the Actes and Monumentes of Thynges Passed in Euery Kynges Tyme in this Realme* (London: John Day, 1570; repr. 1576), p. 142.

⁵³ *Ælfredi Magni Anglorum regis invictissimi vita tribus libris comprehensa, a clarissimo Dno. Johanne Spelman* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1678); *The Life of Alfred the Great*, by Sir John Spelman Kt., ed. T. Hearne (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1709).

⁵⁴ Paul de Rapin Thoyras, *The History of England, as well Ecclesiastical as Civil*, vol. 1 (London: Knapton, 1728).

⁵⁵ James Thomson, David Mallet, and Thomas Arne, *Alfred: A Masque, Represented before their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, at Cliffden, on the First Day of August, 1740* (London: Millar, 1740).

⁵⁶ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*, vol. 1 (London, 1759–62), with Foreword by W. B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), p. 74.

⁵⁷ See George C. Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy—from the Revolution to the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), pp. 51, 53.

⁵⁸ Jefferson to John Adams (November 25, 1816): “This single book has done more to sap the free principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army”; *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adam*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p. 499.

⁵⁹ Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations: From the Reign of Charlemaign to the Age of Lewis XIV ... translated ... by Mr Nugent*, vol. 1 (London: Nourse, 1759), p. 161.

⁶⁰ Barbara Yorke, “Alfredism: The Use and Abuse of Alfred’s Reputation in Later Centuries,” in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 361–80.

Further Reading

Bately, Janet. "The Alfredian Canon Revisited: One Hundred Years On." In Reuter, pp. 107–20.

An articulation of the development of Alfredian attribution across the twentieth century by a leading authority on Alfred.

Blackburn, Mark. "Alfred's Coinage Reforms in Context." In Reuter, pp. 199–215.

An overview of an important aspect of Alfred's economic reforms, discussed in relation to its wider historical background.

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A comprehensive collection of essays on many aspects of Alfred's life, which generally assumes the reliability of literary attributions to the king.

Dumville, D. N. *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar*. Brewer: Woodbridge, 1992.

An important study that investigates the enduring impact of Alfred's program of renewal and reform into the late tenth century.

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An insightful study of Alfred as author that presents a range of insights into the literary works themselves and also questions about authorship.

Gifford, Edwin and Joyce. "Alfred's New Longships." In Reuter, pp. 281–89.

A detailed, and often technical, discussion of Alfred's new fleet.

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An epoch-defining lecture to the British Academy, challenging the consensus on the Alfredian canon and the evidence on which it is based.

———. "Did King Alfred Write Anything?" *Medium Ævum* 76 (2007): 1–23.

A detailed analysis of the evidence for Alfred's authorship in the context of the widespread early medieval practice of falsely attributing literary works to kings.

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A detailed and comprehensive study of the most beautiful object surviving from Alfred's reign, also discussing its meaning and purpose.

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A full discussion by a leading historian of the relationship between the two great kingdoms of ninth-century England.

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A study of the practice and conduct of warfare in the age of Alfred, paying close attention to primary sources.

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An important essay providing an overview of Alfred's European context, which helps to correct narrowly nationalistic interpretations of the king's historical significance.

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This essay, despite its date, still remains the starting point for all discussion of the literary achievements of Alfred's reign.

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Alfred began his reign as king of the West Saxons, and died king of the Anglo-Saxons. This major study looks at the history of Alfred's first kingdom.

