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# Alfred of Wessex a study in accidental greatness.

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ALFRED OF WESSEX  
A STUDY IN ACCIDENTAL GREATNESS

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Maureen Elizabeth Searing

December 2009

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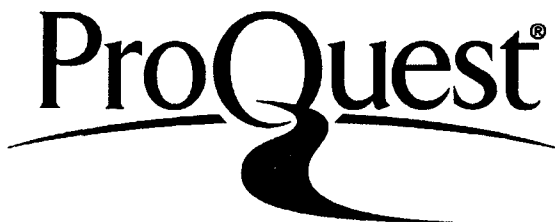
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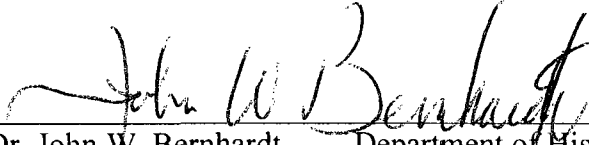
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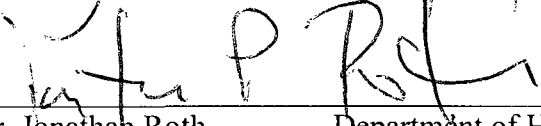
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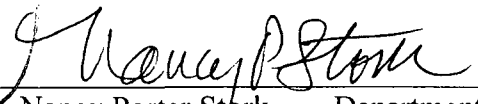
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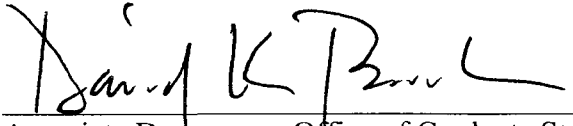
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## ABSTRACT

### ALFRED OF WESSEX A STUDY IN ACCIDENTAL GREATNESS

By Maureen Elizabeth Searing

This thesis examines the application of the epithet “great” to King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871-899). It sets a standard for greatness within the context of early medieval Christian kingship, applies it to Alfred, and then compares Alfred to Charlemagne and Charles the Bald. It traces the development of the cult of Alfred from his own lifetime to the early twentieth century. It examines the mythical achievements of Alfred and how they developed, then summarizes his actual accomplishments, and compares them to the standard for greatness developed in the thesis.

The thesis concludes that within the relatively narrow confines of Anglo-Saxon England, Alfred deserves the epithet “great.” Alfred envisioned a secure, Christian, and educated Wessex during his reign, then instituted a series of reforms to achieve his goals. He left a stronger Wessex to his successors, well on the way to a united England.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In memory of Walter John Gill and Mayo Lindstrom Bailey,  
whose presence is always felt.

I wish to acknowledge the patience and support of my family throughout this adventure. My special thanks go to my copy editor, Patricia Markee, who shared with me her tremendous knowledge of grammar and writing. My greatest debt is to my thesis committee: Professor Roth, my first teacher at San José State, and the most memorable; Professor Stork, who shared with me her knowledge of the Old English language and the Anglo-Saxons; and last, yet very much foremost, Professor Bernhardt, for his expertise, his advice, and perhaps most of all, his patience.

## Table of Contents

Abbreviations .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1      A Definition of “Greatness” .....	5
Chapter 2      Comparisons of Alfred of Wessex to Contemporaries .....	12
Chapter 3      The Development of the Cult of Alfred the Great .....	31
Chapter 4      Accomplishments Falsely Attributed to Alfred .....	58
Chapter 5      King Alfred’s Actual Accomplishments .....	87
Conclusion .....	105
Appendix      The Authenticity of Asser’s <i>Life of King Alfred</i> .....	110
Works Cited .....	117



## Abbreviations

ASC	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , trans. Dorothy Whitelock
ASC MS A	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A</i> , ed. Janet Margaret Bately
Asser	<i>De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi</i> , trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge
Bede	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum</i> , trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors
Einhard	<i>Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni</i> , trans. Paul Edward Dutton

## Introduction

In the English town of Wantage, a statue of King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871-899) was erected in 1877 to commemorate the millenary of King Alfred's pivotal victory over the Vikings at the Battle of Edington. Alfred's victory had come after spending the first several months of the year hiding out in the swamps of Athelney, re-grouping his forces, gathering allies, and, if legend is to be believed, burning cakes.<sup>1</sup> The statue itself depicts a pensive Alfred, the head of his battle axe on the ground, with the haft steadied by his right hand. He holds a scroll in his left hand. The statue represents both Alfred the Warrior and Alfred the Scholar and Law-giver, a view reinforced by its inscription:

Alfred found learning dead, and he restored it. Education neglected, and he revived it. The laws powerless, and he gave them force. The Church debased, and he raised it. The land ravaged by a fearful enemy, from which he delivered it. Alfred's name shall live as long as mankind respects the past.<sup>2</sup>

A second equally larger-than-life statue of Alfred stands in the city of Winchester on a massive granite pedestal, now gazing out over a row of parked cars and a shopping mall. The dedication of this memorial to Alfred was both an acknowledgement of his accomplishments and a tribute to the city that considered itself the capital of Alfred's England. The general fanfare surrounding its unveiling in 1901 and the perceived importance of Alfred to the birth of Imperial England notwithstanding, the inscription simply describes Alfred as the "founder of the kingdom and nation." A newer plaque on the base of the Winchester statue reads:

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, "The Importance of the Battle of Edington," *From Bede to Alfred: Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Literature and History* (London: Variorum, 1980), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Harlow, Essex, UK: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), 4.

Alfred, king of the West Saxons (AD 871-899) drove the Danish invaders from Wessex. He created fortified centres, of which Winchester, the largest, was his capital. During his reign, the streets in use today were first established. Alfred was the most esteemed of English kings. He encouraged the revival of learning and monastic life, and laid the foundation for a single kingdom of England. This statue by Hamo Thornycroft, was erected in 1901.

Besides giving the correct year of Alfred's death, the new plaque gives a much clearer and more correct statement of Alfred's contributions to the English nation than the original plaque or the exaggerated statement on the Wantage plaque.

The celebration of the millenary of Alfred's death (mistakenly held in 1901) was the culmination of the Victorian cult of Alfred the Great. Writings of that period credit him with uniting England, being the Father of the Royal Navy, defeating the Viking menace, establishing a lasting defensive network, restoring literacy, creating an educational system, and in general personifying the ideal of Christian kingship as it had been understood in the ninth century (or at least what late nineteenth century scholars *thought* it had been). In his biography of Alfred the Great, Richard Abels gives an excellent summary of the origins of the Victorian cult of King Alfred. A nationalistic need to establish roots reaching back to an ancient ancestral hero led to a fascination with all things German arising from the Germanic roots of the Anglo-Saxon people. The fascination continued with a celebration of the German ties to the British Royal Houses of Hanover, then Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. With the onset of World War I, not surprisingly, this enthusiastic embrace of the Germans subsided significantly.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 3-7.

Alfred of Wessex evokes interest because, at first glance, he appeared to have it all: his long reign as king of the West Saxons gave him time to achieve renown as a warrior, law-giver, and scholar. Did he really, however, accomplish as much as had been credited to him? Could a thousand years of a historiographic record of greatness have been exaggerated? Can all of his attributed accomplishments still be laid at his feet? How thick was the accretion of accolades and credits that started in the medieval period but quickly gained momentum in the early sixteenth century, culminating in the nationwide millenary celebrations of his death? One might, and indeed should, find it odd that a king of a small region of a backward part of Europe was proclaimed so loudly as “great,” who received only brief mention in recent histories of England. I intend to show that while he *was* successful and can be legitimately termed “great,” his greatness had less to do with his accomplishments, and more to do with English nationalism, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This thesis will explore the use of the epithet “great” for Alfred, first by providing a working definition of the term in a historiographical sense and then by detailing how Alfred acquired it and how his cult developed. It will then provide comparisons with the Carolingian rulers Charlemagne (r. 768-814) and Charles the Bald (r. 840-877): the closest near-contemporary medieval rulers, one of whom was designated “great,” and one who was not. Moreover, in the process it will evaluate the most significant accomplishments of King Alfred anew, to discern whether or not through them he truly “earned” his title. Finally, I will conclude it with a final assessment, based upon the definition of “great” developed in the thesis, of whether or not Alfred’s greatness can still

be defended, and whether it is suitable in the context of all of Western Europe, or only of England.

## Chapter 1 – A Definition of “Greatness”

Setting out on a discussion of when history or historians designate an individual historical character as “great” presents many difficulties, mostly due to the problems inherent in providing a working definition of greatness and then applying that definition to early medieval Christian kingship. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “great” as being “extraordinary in ability, genius, or achievement.” The dictionary also assigns the title to those that are “the most famous person of the name, and . . . among the great men of history.”<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the second definition, there is very little competition in the royal lineage of England for the name of Alfred. King Æthelred II (r. 978-1016) named his eighth son “Alfred,” after naming the first seven after other previous West Saxon kings, clearly indicating King Alfred was not seen as a hero at that time.<sup>5</sup> The name then disappeared for over seven hundred years, until the modern revival of the cult of Alfred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The name only barely reappears, however, emerging as the ninth son (b. 1780) of George III.<sup>6</sup> Its final appearance among English rulers is over sixty years later, as the second son (b. 1844) of Queen Victoria, and again as the only son (b. 1874) of that Alfred. The Anglo-Saxon names of Edward and Edmund, on the other hand, appear in almost every generation of the English royal family continuing to the present day offspring of Queen Elizabeth II. This clearly leads to a

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), *sub verbo* “great.”

<sup>5</sup> Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans. *Alfred the Great: Asser's “Life of King Alfred” and Other Contemporary Sources* (London: Penguin Books, 1983) 46.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Yorke, “Alfredism: The Use and Abuse of King Alfred’s Reputation in Later Centuries.” *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter, Series editor Nicholas Brooks (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 362.

failure of the first part of the second definition of “the most famous person of the name,” as none of *these* Alfreds succeeded to a kingship. We are left to work with “among the great men of history” or “extraordinary in ability, genius, or achievement,” which are broad definitions indeed and must be narrowed in order to arrive at a standard of greatness for an early medieval king.

Only a handful of rulers and just one English king have been designated “great.” The title “great” is a subjective evaluation and sometimes attributed for political gain—a retroactive elevation of an ancestor to give stature to his successors and their state. This seems to be the case, at least in part, with Alfred of Wessex. Our challenge is to create an objective and measurable standard of greatness for Alfred and then hold him up to it. Early medieval kings had a very clear idea of what proper kingship entailed – mostly based on the advice of their clerics. The Church and the kings had a mutually beneficial relationship in that the king protected the Church and her property, and the Church sanctioned kingship. Neither institution had reached the point at which one was strong enough to seriously threaten the other, a situation we find later in twelfth-century England with Henry II (r. 1154-1189) and Thomas Becket. The kings received a great deal of advice, through various Christian writings, especially the so-called “mirrors of princes” (*speculus principis*). These mirrors contained detailed information on what a king’s duties were to his subjects, his nobles, and his clergy. Gregory the Great, in a letter to Æthelbert of Kent (r. 560-616), felt that a king’s responsibility is to ensure peace,

prosperity and national salvation” for his people.<sup>7</sup> Even Bede, who wrote mostly of the Church in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, mentions one of Gregory’s letters to Æthelbert in which the king is admonished to look first and foremost to the spiritual health of his subjects by converting them to the Christian faith and by providing himself as a model of Christian virtues.<sup>8</sup> Bede also holds up King Edwin of Northumbria (r. 616-633) as a fine example of Christian kingship by relating a “proverb” in which his kingdom is described as being so safe that a woman could carry her newborn across the entire island of England without fear. He also credits Edwin with ordering brass pots to be hung on posts at springs near the highways for all to use – and nobody misappropriated them.<sup>9</sup>

In a discussion of Carolingian kingship that can certainly be applied to the Anglo-Saxons, Wallace-Hadrill quotes Ermold the Black’s opinion that a king should “love his subjects ... look after the poor ... be wise, just, and pious ... and not hunt too much.”<sup>10</sup> The admonition regarding hunting did not seem to be followed, however, given Asser’s report that Alfred loved to hunt and was quite skilled at it.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Ermold’s admonition was to prevent a king from focusing too much on recreational activities, at the expense of seeing to the business of ruling his people.

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 75-6.

<sup>8</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 1:32, p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, 11:16, p. 193.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, The Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970 (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 136.

<sup>11</sup> Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, chs. 22, 76.



Modern interpretations of early medieval kingship follow similar lines. Writing of Pippin III's deposition of an ineffectual Merovingian king, Rosamond McKitterick defines a deserving ruler to be "a warlord, a defender of the faith and a governor of his people."<sup>12</sup> Henry Myers has his medieval kings "confronted with the main tasks of providing justice, defending the realm, and advancing the faith."<sup>13</sup> The eminent Anglo-Saxon scholar Simon Keynes plays upon the nineteenth century beliefs in the perfection of Alfred as "England's Darling"<sup>14</sup> by simply charging him with upholding "truth, justice and the Anglo-Saxon way."<sup>15</sup> The description is perhaps somewhat terse for our uses, but not entirely inaccurate.

A recent biographer of Alfred comes closest to defining successful kingship succinctly when he states that Alfred "did whatever was necessary to save his kingdom, please his God, and advance his bloodline."<sup>16</sup> This comes as close as possible to a job description for a successful king. We must go farther, however, to find "greatness." We must have a king who *strengthened* his kingdom, *furthered* the word of his God and, well, *still* succeeded in advancing his bloodline somewhere along the way, at least without a great deal of internecine conflict—all without doing anything truly awful enough to negate the aforementioned good works.

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<sup>12</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms Under the Carolingians, 751-987* (London: Longman, 1983), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Allen Myers, *Medieval Kingship* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Austin, *England's Darling* (London, 1896).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Keynes, "The Cult of King Alfred the Great," *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999), p. 225. Keynes is rightfully entitled to place the phrase in the public domain even if tongue-in-cheek, but credit should be given in passing to Jerry Siegal and Joe Shuster for first using a similar term in charging *their* "Superman" with fighting a "never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the *American way*" (c. 1938).

<sup>16</sup> Abels *Alfred the Great*, 7.

Alfred did indeed save his kingdom, but only barely, which is simply not good enough. There must be some lasting result or tangible legacy left in place to ensure that the kingdom was safer upon the end of his reign than it was at the beginning. Saving a kingdom must include securing it from both external and internal enemies. The external enemies were clearly the Vikings, with their habit of raiding, destroying, oath-breaking, and, occasionally, conspiring with the local Anglo-Saxon leaders. The threat intensified when the Vikings began to pursue conquest of English lands. Internal threats included restless heirs, illiterate clerics, and lawlessness. Our “great” king must leave behind not only an effective system of defense but some sort of legal structure to maintain the King’s Peace within the realm.

Pleasing one’s God by furthering God’s word might seem to us a much less concrete goal than defensive fortifications or levies of soldiers, but no less measurable and no less real to the Anglo-Saxons. Institutional improvements made to the Church and its programs must be both observable and directly related to the maintenance and spread of Christianity within and possibly even without the kingdom. Wallace-Hadrill opens his scholarly study of early medieval kingship by pointing out the gap between “what kings did and what others *thought* they should be doing.”<sup>17</sup> He further states that kingship in the ninth century, as it had been transformed through the preceding centuries, was an office whose ideal duties and rights were defined by churchmen.<sup>18</sup> To many of these churchmen, especially those in the ninth century whose land and property had been

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<sup>17</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, vii. Emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 151.

destroyed by Vikings or seized by kings seeking resources to oppose the Vikings, the role of the king concerning the Church was “to restore, to protect, and *not* to interfere.”<sup>19</sup> The current British monarch is indeed still styled “Defender of the Faith,” highlighting the rulers’ role in protecting and promoting the Church.

Advancing one’s bloodline may seem a fairly straightforward undertaking, yet there is no mention in the sources that Alfred’s grandfather (Egbert) had any brothers or that Egbert had more than one son (Æthelwulf). Æthelwulf in turn barely succeeded in having a son survive long enough to take over the kingdom for more than a few years, much less produce a suitable heir. Battle, disease, and accidents took their toll on young princes. Alfred’s biographer, Asser, mentions obstacles in Alfred’s way in the form of a penance Alfred sought for straying from a chaste life as a young man and the mysterious ailment that afflicted him on his wedding night. Biological imperatives aside, a king must not only produce an heir, but a suitable one, raised in the principles of Christian kingship. Primogeniture was not yet the accepted rule of succession. The final choice of the next king was left to the *witan*, who would look to the available *aethelings*. The tradition of hereditary kingship among the Anglo-Saxons had been in place for centuries, though, and could not be simply dismissed in the absence of a suitable heir. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* supports hereditary succession by documenting the lineage and therefore the *bona fides* of Alfred’s father, Æthelwulf. His lineage is traced back fourteen generations to Woden and from there back to Adam.<sup>20</sup> Alfred’s succession is

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 125. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Whitelock and David Douglas, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961), *sub anno* 858.

noted in the Chronicle, but not his lineage. Asser rectifies this by providing Alfred's lineage in his *Life of Alfred*.<sup>21</sup>

We have set a tall order indeed for Alfred. By the late eighteenth century, his myth had so far outgrown reality that he could simply do no wrong – a bias that affected Anglo-Saxon historiography for over two hundred years. In the nineteenth century, Charles Plummer could not believe twelfth century reports that Alfred had taken lands by force from Abingdon, finding it “hard to believe that Alfred can have been guilty of deliberate wrong.”<sup>22</sup> The challenge now is to separate Alfred's actual accomplishments from the many layers of legend, conjecture, poorly-supported fact, and outright fabrication. Before approaching that goal in Chapters Four and Five, we must at least look at two of Alfred's contemporaries and see how they measure up against Alfred.

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<sup>21</sup> Asser, ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Plummer and John Earle, eds. and trans., *Two of the Saxon Chronicle Parallels, With Supplementary Extracts from the Others*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-99), ii, 113.

## Chapter 2 – Comparisons of Alfred of Wessex to Contemporaries

Even though history does not provide us with a convenient candidate to place in opposition to Alfred's attributed "greatness," it would nonetheless be instructive to look at when Alfred was first called "great" and to examine the context of that attribution. To provide a measure of greatness against which to hold Alfred, one can compare him to his not-quite-contemporary Charlemagne (r. 768-814), then to his continental contemporary, Charles the Bald (r. 840-877), who, like Alfred, fought off Viking attacks, but did *not* receive the same sobriquet as Alfred or Charlemagne.

### *1. Alfred and Charlemagne*

The memory and myth of Alfred of Wessex survived long after the House of Wessex succumbed to the Normans, although his anointing as "great" came much later.<sup>23</sup> Simon Keynes credits Matthew of Paris with the earliest known occurrence of the title "Alfredus Magnus," in his *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani* (c. 1250).<sup>24</sup> Alfred's newly-acquired epithet did not appear again, however, for yet another three hundred years, resurfacing as "Alphredus Magnus" in the works of John Bale in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>25</sup> By the time the Modern English translation of Sir John Spelman's *The Life of King Alfred the Great* was published in 1709, Alfred the Great, along with the stunning

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<sup>23</sup> The Modern English "great" descends from the similar application of the Medieval Latin *magnus*. *OED*, *sub verbo* "great."

<sup>24</sup> "Rex Alfredus magnus. Iste regnavit xxix annis, & mensibus vi. Hic meritis exigentibus magnus dicebatur." Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," p. 232, note 34, and plate VIIc.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

array of accomplishments attributed to him, was firmly established in English national historiography.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, Charlemagne's contemporaries labeled him "great" immediately upon his death, possibly even before. Even a cursory examination of the cult of Charlemagne reveals his widespread and nearly unanimous placement in the historical record as "Karolus Magnus." A small sign in one of the public areas of Aachen Cathedral indicates that Charlemagne was originally styled "magnus" because of his great size. Indeed, analysis of the skeletal remains reputed to be his put him over six feet in height.<sup>27</sup> One modern source asserts that the clerics in Charlemagne's entourage gave him the title of "Carolus Magnus" and that the title appears in letters and chronicles during his reign.<sup>28</sup> Still another source states that he was not known as "Charlemagne" until after his death, citing the inscription on his tomb ("Karoli Magni").<sup>29</sup> Despite these differences as to precisely *when* Charlemagne first became known as "great," this naming was nonetheless both immediate and unanimous as was his quickly-developing secular medieval cult. The cult of Charlemagne as a saint spread across Western Europe after his canonization by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Bullough, *The Age of Charlemagne* (London: Elek Books Limited, 1965), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Heer, *Charlemagne and his World* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 9. Heer does not provide a citation for his belief that Charles was referred to as "great" during Charles' lifetime. In the various annals he is generally referred to as "lord king Charles" with an occasional "glorious," "gracious," "pious," or "noble."

<sup>29</sup> Timothy L. Biel, *The Importance of Charlemagne* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1997), 10. Einhard gives the inscription as "...KAROLI MAGNI ATQUE ORTHODOXI IMPERATORIS..." Thorpe translates this as "Charles the Great, the Christian Emperor" while Bullough gives the more correct "Charles, the great and orthodox Emperor." Lewis Thorpe, trans. *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 84.

Pope Alexander in 1165 at the direction of Frederick I. A liturgical feast in honor of St. Charlemagne was instituted at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

The cult of saints in the Christian church was first attested in the second century, when it was believed that a martyr could intercede on behalf of a living believer by speaking directly to God.<sup>31</sup> These early notions of sainthood centered on the earthly remains of martyrs, as was first demonstrated by the people of Smyrna, who returned to the tomb of Polycarp (died c. 156) each year on the anniversary of his martyrdom.<sup>32</sup> Sainthood was later extended to those who had led an exceptionally ascetic or monastic life and included the belief that intercession to God by the saints could be achieved by praying directly *to* the saints, rather than *for* them.<sup>33</sup> The path to sanctity was thus generally either through martyrdom or monasticism, but sometimes by supporting or spreading Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

The veneration of saints was primarily liturgical and physical in form. The liturgical form consisted of the observance of saints' feast days, reading from a saint's *Life*, or some sort of procession of the saint's body. The physical form involved maintenance of relics: body fragments or items that had come in physical contact with the saint, such as burial wrappings. These items provided the physical manifestations of a perceived link between heaven and earth.<sup>35</sup> Within the Catholic Church, local bishops

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<sup>30</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), viii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Ridyard, *The Royal Saints*, 235.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), xvi-xvii.

could confer sainthood up until the early Middle Ages. By the late twelfth century, however, only the Pope could confer sainthood.

The Frankish nobility embraced the cult of saints, using the phenomenon to reinforce their “theocratic flavour of government” and to impart a certain level of social control by retaining power over the establishment of saints and the maintenance of their relics.<sup>36</sup> The link between rulers and sainthood strengthened the already existing Roman and Germanic connections between holiness, charisma, and noble blood.<sup>37</sup> In the eighth century, the Carolingians began strengthening their ties to the Church and to the papacy, partly by co-opting the cult of saints as an additional source of power.<sup>38</sup> Charlemagne’s further strengthening of the cult of relics paved the way for the veneration of his own relics sometime after his death, in spite of his not fitting the paradigm of sanctity through martyrdom or monasticism.

Einhard records that upon Charlemagne’s death he was “carried into the church and interred while everyone there wept,” but Einhard makes no mention of veneration of the body.<sup>39</sup> Despite Charlemagne’s appearance in a calendar of saints in the ninth century,<sup>40</sup> it does not appear that there was any formal veneration of him in the centuries immediately following his death. Charlemagne was not officially venerated until the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa needed a saint to lend credibility to his kingship. Being

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Fouracre, “The Origins of the Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints,” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143.

<sup>37</sup> Noble and Head, “Soldiers of Christ,” xxxiv.

<sup>38</sup> Fouracre, “Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints,” 165.

<sup>39</sup> *Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. G. Waitz in MGH SS (Hanover: Hahn, 1911; repr. 1965). Reprinted in Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1998, repr. 2005) #2, p. 15, §31.

<sup>40</sup> Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. David S. Bachrach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 136. Becher does not give a source for this statement.



associated with Charlemagne's canonization provided a huge boost to the reputation of Frederick and to bringing the Frankish hero closer to his Germanic roots.<sup>41</sup> In 1215, Emperor Frederick II had Charlemagne's bones placed in a silver and gold casket, which also greatly boosted Charlemagne's image as a saint.

A number of kings and emperors freely used the aura of Charlemagne's sainthood and of his palace and church at Aachen to lend strength and validity to their reigns. Otto I went to Aachen for his crowning in 936. Later kings supported the veneration of Charlemagne, which in turn built up their own reputations by way of their association with his aura, although not all of them were crowned at Aachen. Because of Charlemagne's Frankish roots, later French and Germans both regarded him as their model, patron, and even something of a "national" hero. Even Napoleon paid a visit to Aachen and the tomb of Charlemagne in 1804. The Germans had started to wane in their support of Charlemagne by the nineteenth century, however, as he they saw him both as the butcher of Saxons and as failing to uphold "German liberties."<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, contemporary sources hardly remarked upon Alfred's death. The northern versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle simply state "In this year King Alfred died on 26 October [899] and he had held that kingdom 28 years and half a year."<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, the Winchester manuscript ("A" recension), produced in close association with Alfred's court, goes a bit further, describing Alfred as "king over all the English people except that part which was under Danish control."<sup>44</sup> Surviving texts of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> Whitelock, *ASC*, xiv. Manuscripts D (Worcester) and E (Peterborough) are the "northern" recensions.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., *sub anno* 900 (*recte* 899).

Asser's biography of Alfred do not cover the last sixteen years of his life, depriving us of what would most assuredly have been quite a glowing eulogy. Nothing further in the way of eulogies exist for him until Æthelweard wrote in his *Chronicles* c. 980 that Alfred was, among other things, "an unshakeable pillar of the people of the west."<sup>45</sup>

Like the Carolingians, the Anglo-Saxons had a thriving trade in saints' cults, royal and otherwise. In his comprehensive *Dictionary of Saints* David Farmer lists over nine hundred saints who either originated in England or were venerated in England.<sup>46</sup> Of these, over two hundred could be identified as Anglo-Saxon. Forty-seven of these were royalty, including fourteen kings. Of the fourteen, half were martyred, three abdicated and retired to a monastic life, and four were venerated for living a good and holy life.<sup>47</sup> Alfred was neither a martyr nor a monastic, and we have only weak support from Asser to qualify Alfred for living a "good and holy life." It should not be surprising then that no veneration of Alfred occurred after his death, nor were reports of miracles associated with his tomb. Thus, unlike Charlemagne, Alfred was never canonized – probably due to the lack of a succeeding king as sponsor. Edward the Confessor, however, was canonized in 1161, with the support of King Henry II, just a few years before the official canonization of Charlemagne. In 1441, King Henry VI tried to have Alfred canonized as "the first monarch of the famous kingdom of England," along with Osmund of Salisbury. Pope Eugenius IV approved the canonization of Osmund, but apparently the legacy of

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<sup>45</sup> *The Chronicles of Æthelweard*, trans. Alister Campbell (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1962), 51.

<sup>46</sup> Farmer, *Dictionary of Saints*, 1978 edition. Later editions are more geographically comprehensive, with over 1500 entries.

<sup>47</sup> Ethelbald of Kent (d. 616), Edgar the Peacable (d. 975), Edward the Confessor (d. 1066), and David of Scotland (d. 1153), who was the son of Margaret, an Anglo-Saxon princess descended from Alfred.

Alfred could not compete with that of the Confessor as a symbol of the “identity and continuity of the English monarchy.”<sup>48</sup>

Alfred was entombed, along with his wife and his oldest son, Edward the Elder, in the New Minster in Winchester until 1110, when the Minster was torn down to avoid crowding the new Winchester Cathedral. Their bodies were then moved, with much ceremony, to a new burial place in Hyde Abbey. In 1538, when Hyde Abbey was razed during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the three tombs were apparently buried under the rubble.<sup>49</sup> Some of the rubble from the site was carted away and used for other buildings in the city. Alfred now had no tomb to which future kings could pay homage and no relics on hand to strengthen or lend legitimacy to a future king’s reign. In 1788, the site was cleared and excavated to make room for a jail. Despite Hanoverian support for Alfred and their common Anglo-Saxon heritage, the coffins were simply melted down for their lead, and the royal bones reburied or scattered on the site; no sign of them has been found since. In 1999, Kenneth Qualmann of the Winchester Museums Service conducted a scientific excavation that revealed the three grave-cuts as well as part of the foundation of Hyde Abbey.<sup>50</sup> Only inscribed stone slabs mark the gravesites in the Hyde Abbey Garden today.<sup>51</sup> Charlemagne’s remains, by contrast, were accorded a higher status by his sainthood: His relics are currently housed in their elaborate reliquaries in the *Schatzkammer* of the current cathedral at Aachen.

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<sup>48</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 237.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Klingelhöfer, “Cluniac Architectural Influences at Hyde Abbey Church, Winchester,” *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003), 190.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Aidan Dodson, *The Royal Tombs of Great Britain: An Illustrated History* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 2004), pp. 37 and 198.

Alfred's cult therefore focused on that of a popular, heroic, Christian scholar-king, whereas Charlemagne's cult was that of both hero and saint. Charlemagne's image was enhanced in later centuries by his status as a saint, which included the relics and tomb that Alfred no longer had. Given Alfred's weak and rather tardy designation as "great," he must be put on the losing side of a comparison with Charlemagne. He may, though, be more deserving of greatness when compared to Charlemagne on other aspects of their reigns. A cautionary note must be inserted here. In spite of the vast amount of scholarship today on all aspects of Charlemagne and his reign, the nature and scope of this paper permits only the barest mention of Charlemagne's accomplishments and then only some of those that can be directly compared to Alfred's.<sup>52</sup>

Charlemagne's "greatness" was in large part due to his reputation as Emperor. When Charlemagne's father Pippin III died in 768, Charlemagne did not appear to be destined to be the Frankish emperor. The Carolingian kingdom was divided between Charlemagne and his younger brother Carloman in keeping with Frankish practice. After the death of Carloman in 771 and the conquests of the Aquitanians, Saxons, Avars, Italians, and others, Charlemagne did indeed have an empire, and by 800, he had a Roman imperial coronation with papal support. Again following Frankish tradition, in 806 Charlemagne planned to leave his kingdom divided between his sons Charles the Younger, Pippin (formerly called Carloman), and Louis (later "the Pious").<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> Major works on Charlemagne and his accomplishments are Rosamond McKitterick's *Charlemagne and Frankish Kingdoms*, and Paul Dutton's *Carolingian Civilization*.

<sup>53</sup> *Charlemagne's Division of His Kingdom*, trans. D. C. Munro in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. 6.5: *Laws of Charles the Great* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899), pp. 27-33; revised. Reprinted in Paul Edward Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), #23, p. 146.

partitioning never happened, though. Both Charles the Younger and Pippin died before Charlemagne, leaving Louis as the sole heir. He was duly crowned emperor with his father in attendance in 813 during an assembly at Aachen.<sup>54</sup> The empire, however, did not stay united for long. By 830, Louis's sons were already fighting with their father and amongst themselves. Upon the death of Louis the Pious in 840, the realm was split into the kingdoms that Louis had carefully laid out in 817<sup>55</sup> and amended in 838;<sup>56</sup> he expected his sons, the Emperor Lothar and the kings Charles the Bald and Louis the German, to rule. When Lothar died in 855, his territory was divided between his three sons. Except briefly under Charles the Fat (r. 881-887), the Frankish kingdoms were never united again.

Alfred's England followed a far different course than that of his continental neighbors. While Louis the Pious was dividing his realm, Alfred's grandfather Egbert (r. 802-839) was upsetting the Mercian supremacy over England<sup>57</sup> and adding Kent, Surrey, Sussex, and Essex to his lands.<sup>58</sup> Alfred's father Æthelwulf (r. 839-858) added Berkshire and Cornwall to the kingdom. When Alfred's reign began in 871, he had inherited a

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<sup>54</sup> Ermeld the Black, poem regarding the Diet Of Aachen, from *MGH Poet.*, vol. 2, ed. E. Dimmler (Berlin: 1884), pp. 24-6. Trans. Paul Edward Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), #24, pp. 152-4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ordinatio Imperii* of 817, trans. B. Pullan in *Sources of the History of Medieval Europe from the Mid-Eighth to the Mid-Thirteenth Century* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), pp. 38-42; reprinted in Paul Edward Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), #28, pp. 199-203.

<sup>56</sup> *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, eds. F. Grat, J. Vielliard, and S. Clemencet (Paris, 1964), trans. Janet Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin: Ninth Century Histories*, vol. 1 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991). Louis' division of his kingdom of 817 stood undisturbed until the birth of a fourth son, Charles (later "the Bald"), in 823. When Charles reached his majority in 838, Louis had already provided for him. See annals for 837 and 838. The division was further complicated by the death of the second son, Pippin, in late 838, whose share was then allotted to the young Charles. The last two years of Louis' reign were marked by more quarrels between the sons and the father. As soon as Louis died in 840, his oldest son, Emperor Lothar, attacked both of his brothers, Louis the German and Charles the Bald. See annals for 840 and 841.

<sup>57</sup> Marked by the victory of the West Saxons at the Battle of Ellendune in 825.

<sup>58</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 30-1. These four kingdoms are sometimes referred to as Greater Kent.

West Saxon hegemony that lasted until the Norman Conquest—twenty-six years of Danish rule notwithstanding.<sup>59</sup> When the Vikings invaded northern England in 869, they killed King Edmund of East Anglia, then drove out King Burgred of Mercia in 874, leaving Alfred as the sole remaining English king still able to defend England from the invading Danes. After Alfred's victory at Edington in 878, Mercia was divided between Alfred, who added the southwest half to his kingdom, and Guthrum, whose northeast portion, along with Northumbria and East Anglia, became the Danelaw, ruled from York. The consolidation of England under the West Saxon kings continued under Alfred's son and grandsons, until the Northumbrians drove out and killed the last Scandinavian king of York, Erik Bloodaxe of Norway, in 954.<sup>60</sup>

The consolidation of English lands was the trend in England during the ninth and tenth centuries. It was aided by the Anglo-Saxon tradition of succession by one son or brother, confirmed by the *witan*, as opposed to the Frankish tradition of dividing the kingdom *between* sons. Even with the detailed division of the realm between the sons of Louis the Pious, they still fought. Alfred's only competition came from the sons of his brother, Æthelred (r. 866-871), who were, presumably because of their youth, passed over for the kingship upon the death of their father during a time of war with the Vikings.

While both Alfred and Charlemagne could claim to have doubled the size of their kingdoms by a generous estimate, Charlemagne's kingdom was still roughly ten times larger than Alfred's. Charlemagne fought constantly to expand and hold his territories together, and, to his credit, mostly succeeded at that monumental task. Alfred on the

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Hunter Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England: 55 B.C.-A.D. 871* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963), 219. Canute I and Harold Harefoot ruled 1016 to 1042.

<sup>60</sup> John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 70.

other hand simply attempted to preserve Wessex and hold England for the English. He succeeded, but on a much smaller scale.

In his biography of Charlemagne, Einhard emphasizes his hero's large size and physical stamina, and details his love of outdoor activities. This, along with a seemingly endless series of border conflicts, paints a picture of Charlemagne as a robust and aggressive king.<sup>61</sup> In contrast to Einhard, Alfred's biographer, Asser, writes generously of Alfred's ongoing defensive battles with the Vikings, but intersperses the narrative with tales of Alfred's mysterious illnesses.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Alfred does not match Charlemagne with respect to their warrior-king images. A much different picture arises, however, when one views their legacies. Alfred's Anglo-Saxon kingdom stayed together through the orderly successions of his son, Edward the Elder (r. 899-924) and Edward's three sons (who reigned successively from 924 to 955), continued through the reconquest of the Danelaw, and remained united at the time of the Norman Conquest. Charlemagne's empire, characterized by the subjugation of foreign peoples and held together in large part by the physical stamina and force of will of one man with a powerful presence, not surprisingly, began to break up within a generation after the death of Charlemagne.

Alfred's accomplishments as a scholar-king have truly earned him his reputation as a great king. He could read and write not only in his native Old English, but also in Latin. He personally translated a number of Christian writings from Latin into the vernacular.<sup>63</sup> Additional works were produced or translated at his court or under his

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<sup>61</sup> Einhard. See ch. 22 for his physical appearance and activities, and chapters 5 to 15 for his wars.

<sup>62</sup> Asser. See chapters 25, 74, 76, and 91 for Alfred's illnesses.

<sup>63</sup> The accepted canon of Alfredian translations consists of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and the first fifty Psalms.

direction. Charlemagne could only speak his native Germanic language, plus some Latin. Though an avid pupil and an apt listener, he never succeeded in learning to write.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to Alfred's prodigious output, Janet Nelson finds that "scarcely a single work—scarcely more than a couple letters, perhaps—can be credited to the authorship of a single Carolingian [ruler]."<sup>65</sup> Alfred's scholarly accomplishments were much more extensive and more widely known, although both kings brought scholars into their respective courts to assist with retaining older writings and educating the kings and their households.

The aim of this paper is not to pursue a comparison between Alfred and Charlemagne at great length, but to ascertain whether Alfred is deserving of his title of "great." As a warrior-king, Charlemagne is truly deserving of his "*le magne*" sobriquet, while Alfred is decidedly less so. As a scholar-king, however, Alfred has truly succeeded and earned the title of "great," despite the overwhelming presence of Charlemagne and all of his contributions to the Carolingian Renaissance.

## 2. *Alfred and Charles the Bald*

Comparing King Alfred to Charles the Bald of West Francia is a lesser challenge than comparing him to Charlemagne, as he and Charles the Bald have much more in common. They both strove to defend their realms from enemies within and without; both had to

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<sup>64</sup> Einhard, ch. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Janet L. Nelson "The Political Ideas of Alfred of Wessex," in *Kings and Kingship in Medieval Europe*, *Kings College Medieval Studies* 10, ed. A. Duggan (London, 1993). Reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 126. Nelson refers to two letters to Pope Hadrian II, possibly written by Charles the Bald, rather than Hincmar of Rheims. In Nelson's earlier work *Charles the Bald*, (London: Longman, 1992) she identifies the two letters as *Patrologia Latina*, J.P. Migne, ed., Paris, 1841-64 (PL 124) cols 876-96 and cols 881-896. She describes the second letter as the "first and only text that can be plausibly ascribed to Charles himself," p. 236.



secure their own political positions, counter external attacks, form working relationships with their respective Church representatives, and promote scholarship in their kingdoms. Our sources for the reign of Alfred are better than those for almost any other Anglo-Saxon king, yet they are limited by their biases toward Alfred. For Charles the Bald we have a number of sources from different perspectives, creating a more detailed and balanced story.

Charles the Bald found himself under attack by his older half-brother Lothar as soon as Charles came into his kingship on the death of Louis the Pious in 840. He was only seventeen years old: Lothar and his brother Louis the German were a full generation older than Charles. The fighting continued until an alliance between Charles and Louis the German led a decisive defeat of Lothar at the battle of Fontenoy in 841, forcing Lothar to come to terms with them as related in the Strasburg Oaths of 842.<sup>66</sup> Even after the brothers finalized the terms with the Treaty of Verdun in 843, Charles had to struggle to maintain control of his kingdom during the first decade of his reign. Because of his youth, Charles had begun his kingship without a power base of loyal lords similar to the ones his brothers already had spent years acquiring.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the agreement of 843, Lothar continued his attempts to destabilize Charles' kingdom. The situation certainly did not improve when, in 846, one of Charles' vassals kidnapped and married one of Lothar's daughters. The three brothers met again this time at Meerssen, once again agreeing to respect each other's *regna* (and daughters).<sup>68</sup> Lothar's death in 855 took some pressure off Charles, until the advent of what is known

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<sup>66</sup> Janet Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, Medieval World Series (London: Longman, 1992), 120-2.

<sup>67</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, 173-4.

<sup>68</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 147-9.

as Charles' Crisis of 858. Louis the German invaded West Francia while Charles was besieging a Viking force at Oissel. Charles was forced to pay Danegeld to the Vikings, thereby freeing himself to face Louis, who then withdrew.<sup>69</sup> Janet Nelson refers to the year 859 as Charles' "Restoration": after twenty years of fighting and political maneuvering, he was finally secure in his kingdom.<sup>70</sup> He then went on the attack. Taking advantage of the death of Lothar's son Lothar II in 869 and the illness of Louis the German, Charles took control of Lotharingia.<sup>71</sup> When Lothar's other son Louis II died in 875, Charles marched to Rome and had himself crowned and anointed Emperor.<sup>72</sup> Charles died two years later, having spent most of his reign simply trying to hold onto his kingdom.

Alfred was the last of the five sons of King Æthelwulf to succeed to kingship, so his political security was much less of an issue during his reign. Alfred and his last surviving brother Æthelred had met in Swinbeorg in early 871 to settle the West Saxon succession.<sup>73</sup> Of all the brothers, only Æthelred had sons: two boys who were too young to take over the leadership of the kingdom when their father died.<sup>74</sup> Alfred's nephews apparently did not accept their disinheritance as they grew older. They complained effectively enough that Alfred convened a meeting of the *witan* to answer their charges. The *witan* upheld the disposition of property that had been made by Æthelwulf: their

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<sup>69</sup> Haywood, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 191.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>72</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, 180.

<sup>73</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 133.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

decision is recorded in Alfred's will.<sup>75</sup> When Alfred died in 899, he was succeeded by his older son Edward the Elder.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes no mention of any conflicting claims by either of Alfred's nephews or by his younger son.<sup>76</sup> Nelson does surmise, though, that Alfred secured the support of his lords for Edward's succession with lands in Kent that Alfred acquired when their lords were killed by the Vikings.<sup>77</sup> One of the nephews, Æthelwold, did not simply fade away, however. He appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 900. He defied the new king Edward by seizing two manors and barricading himself and his followers inside one of them. When Edward led an army after him, Æthelwold fled under cover of night and joined the Vikings in Northumbria.<sup>78</sup> When Æthelwold and his new allies returned to raid Wessex in 904, Edward's army fought them and killed Æthelwold along with the Danish king Eorhic.<sup>79</sup>

Viking attacks almost certainly concerned Alfred more than political challenges. Alfred's battles with the Vikings defined the first decade of his reign. His three oldest brothers had ruled in the shadow of the Viking attacks occurring along the coast of England in the mid-ninth century.<sup>80</sup> Alfred and the fourth brother, King Æthelred I, were the only two brothers living when the Viking Great Army landed in East Anglia in 865. After a number of incursions to the north, the Great Army headed south in 867, where

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>76</sup> *ASC, sub anno 899.*

<sup>77</sup> Janet Nelson, "'A King Across the Sea': Alfred in Continental Perspective," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 36 (Cambridge, 1986). Reprinted in Nelson, *Rulers and Ruling Families*, 59.

<sup>78</sup> *ASC, sub anno 900.*

<sup>79</sup> *ASC, sub anno 904.*

<sup>80</sup> Alfred's oldest brother, Æthelstan, subking of Kent, died before their father and was thus never king of Wessex, as were the next four brothers (including Alfred).

they were turned back by a combined Mercian and West Saxon army that included Alfred and King Æthelred.<sup>81</sup> The Great Army ravaged Wessex in 870, until Alfred, who had succeeded to the kingship upon his brother's death a few months earlier, forced a draw at Wilton in 871.<sup>82</sup> After only a few years respite, while the Vikings focused on northern England, the Vikings attacked again in 875. This time, Alfred's army was able to drive them back into Mercia without paying out Danegeld or sacrificing hostages.<sup>83</sup>

The part of the Viking army under King Guthrum returned to Wessex early in 878, and occupied part of western Wessex unopposed. Unable to raise an army, Alfred fled to the marshes of Somerset with only his family and household retainers. From there, he sent out emissaries to re-establish communication with his loyal ealdormen and thegns.<sup>84</sup> Later that year, Alfred collected his allied forces and defeated the Vikings at the battle of Edington. He forced the Viking king Guthrum to come to terms, which resulted in the establishment of the Danelaw in northeastern England. The next major Viking raid on Wessex was not until 893.<sup>85</sup> By then, Alfred had fortified his kingdom by transforming the West Saxon *fyrð* into a standing army and by creating a network of fortified *burhs*.<sup>86</sup> With these two improvements, together with their newly-built West Saxon warships, Alfred and his older son, Edward, managed to defeat the Vikings on land by 894 and off the coast by 896.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 62.

<sup>82</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 140.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>85</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 66.

<sup>86</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 194-5.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-6.

The Viking threat to Charles the Bald was much less serious than it was to Alfred. To Charles, the Viking depredations were serious, but did not threaten the existence of his entire kingdom—there were simply not enough Vikings to conquer and hold such a large territory. The long coastlines and numerous navigable rivers of Francia allowed the Vikings to raid deep into Frankish territory, but Charles had far more resources in silver and men at his disposal. The Vikings were quick, though, to exploit the political instability that beset the Frankish kingdoms, especially after the death of Louis the Pious. They raided more frequently then and were able to establish year-round bases in Francia.<sup>88</sup> Janet Nelson gives many examples of the Vikings invading during the various conflicts between Frankish factions and during periods of general turmoil.<sup>89</sup> Charles was able to stop many of the raids once he completed his fortified bridges on the Seine river system, thereby keeping many of the Vikings out of the Frankish heartlands.<sup>90</sup> Some of the Vikings had simply left Francia for England by that time.<sup>91</sup>

Charles the Bald could neither have gained control over his kingdom, nor defended it from political rivals and Vikings without the support of his bishops. They lent legitimacy to his rule, provided military support, and made payments in support of the crown. In turn, Charles protected the bishops and set them up as regional magnates.<sup>92</sup> Alfred, too, worked with the church representatives in his kingdom and corresponded

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<sup>88</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 56.

<sup>89</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*. See p. 125 for the year 842, p. 144 for 844, p. 243 for 876, and p. 256 for 879.

<sup>90</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 62.

<sup>91</sup> To a certain extent, the Vikings alternated between invading England and Francia. The success of the Great Army in England in 865, combined with the strengthened resistance by Charles the Bald, drew the Vikings from Francia to England. Ref. Haywood, p. 60. Alfred's victory at Edington in 878 drove the Vikings back to Francia, where they took advantage of the political turmoil caused by the deaths of three kings in five years. A famine in Francia in 892 sent the Vikings back to England again. Ref. Abels 285-7.

<sup>92</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 57-8.

with those on the continent. Compared to the Carolingians, though, he was genuinely “short of bishops.”<sup>93</sup> The Anglo-Saxons had not yet developed the close ties between Church and king that characterized the Carolingians; this gave Alfred more freedom to mobilize forces to protect his kingdom and to seize the Church lands left exposed by the Vikings.<sup>94</sup> In the long term, this worked to Alfred’s distinct advantage, especially when comparing his kingship to Charles the Bald’s.

Alfred’s childhood education is something of a mystery. Asser relates that Alfred did not learn to read until the age of twelve, and yet received the gift of a beautiful book of Saxon poems at around the age of five, which he memorized before any of his older brothers.<sup>95</sup> The story is most likely apocryphal,<sup>96</sup> but Alfred’s love of learning and the literacy he achieved later in life, at least, are well attested by his writings and translations. His scholarly achievements in the form of personal writings and translations have already been discussed, and were unparalleled among Anglo-Saxon kings both before and after him.

Charles the Bald’s education is much better documented than Alfred’s. He was tutored by the poet Walafrid Strabo of Fulda from the ages of six to fifteen.<sup>97</sup> Although Charles is considered to be a better scholar than his Carolingian predecessors, he never quite succeeded in establishing a “*schola palatine*,” as did his grandfather Charlemagne at Aachen.<sup>98</sup> He did manage to establish his liturgical center at Compiègne and his burial

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<sup>93</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 149.

<sup>94</sup> Nelson, “A King Across the Sea,” 65.

<sup>95</sup> Asser, chs 22 and 23.

<sup>96</sup> For problems of dating, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, n. 48, p. 239 and Asser, ch. 22.

<sup>97</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 82.

<sup>98</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, 131-2.

place and cult center at St. Denis.<sup>99</sup> Like Alfred, he had the advantage of an unusually long reign, yet he spent a much larger portion of his reign simply surviving, and had less time to spend on actually improving it.

Both Charles and Alfred faced different challenges during their reigns, but still held themselves, in the most part, to the standards of Christian kingship for which they had been raised. Charles the Bald has been treated somewhat unfairly by past historians, generally by being depicted as presiding over the beginning of the end of the Carolingians. This is not entirely fair, as he *did* manage to keep his kingdom together and out of Viking hands while supporting the Carolingian political institutions begun under his grandfather as part of the Carolingian Renaissance. With Alfred, we must separate legacy from legend. His legend will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four. His legacy was a treaty with the Vikings that lasted fifteen years, a system of fortified *burhs* to defend his kingdom, and a body of Christian works translated into the vernacular for his subjects. By our criteria of greatness, Charles was at least a successful king, although he was not nearly of the same historic stature as his grandfather Charlemagne. Charles certainly holds his own against Alfred, by most measures, but does not surpass him to a large enough extent to be deserving of the epithet “great,” even if it had not already been in use by his grandfather Charlemagne. The best we can say about Alfred, then, based on this comparison, is that he is “greater” than Charles the Bald, which is hardly a resounding testament to Alfred’s claim to “greatness.”

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<sup>99</sup> Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, 235, 247.

### Chapter 3 – The Development of the Cult of Alfred the Great

Humans have participated in various manifestations of cults throughout history. One finds the religious cults of the prehistoric and classical periods, saints' cults of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and fanatical religious cults and popular personality cults in the modern era. All demonstrate a fascination with a given religious or heroic individual through the veneration of (some might say obsession with) those individuals and the relics, objects, locales, or events associated with them. The cult of Alfred was a popular personality cult, especially as it entered the Victorian Era. Though Alfred's cult can be traced back to his own lifetime, and his aura was already being exploited by the tenth century, from the eighteenth century through the twentieth centuries, his reputation grew from being simply one of a number of well-known and capable English kings to that of "England's Darling" and "founder of the kingdom and nation."

#### *1. The Development of Alfred's Cult During His Lifetime*

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provides the earliest contemporary account of Alfred's reign and thus constitutes the foundation of his cult. Seven different recensions of the *Chronicle* have been identified, along with two fragments;<sup>100</sup> each with its own history and provenance but with a late ninth century "common stock" ancestor that is no longer extant.<sup>101</sup> The "A" recension, also called the Parker Manuscript, is the oldest surviving manuscript and is closely associated with Winchester in the time of Alfred. The extant

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<sup>100</sup> Whitelock, *ASC*, xi.

<sup>101</sup> Janet Margaret Bately, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 3, *MS A*. General editors David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd., 1986), vii.



recensions of the *Chronicle* are similar up to the annal for 891, indicating that year as the point when the original was copied and circulated.<sup>102</sup> In her 1961 translation of the *Chronicle*, Whitelock gives the possibility of the “common stock” *Chronicle* originating in Winchester in 892,<sup>103</sup> while Bately in her 1986 edition has more confidence in a Winchester origin but acknowledges the continuing debate.<sup>104</sup> Not surprisingly, the Parker manuscript thus provides more of a history about the rise of Wessex than of England as a whole.<sup>105</sup> The compiler of the manuscript was clearly demonstrating the legitimacy of the West-Saxon house of Cerdic, culminating in the reigns of Ecgbert (802-839), Æthelwulf (839-858), and of course Alfred (871-899).<sup>106</sup> The preface to the *Chronicle* gives Alfred’s lineage going back to the god Woden.<sup>107</sup> In one all-encompassing genealogy, the annals describing the accession of Æthelwulf provide Alfred with both Judeo-Christian *and* pagan roots by including his descent from Adam via Woden.<sup>108</sup> The case for the *Chronicle* as Alfredian propaganda is further supported by its description of Alfred’s royal anointing by Pope Leo in Rome in 853.<sup>109</sup> Alfred’s anointing episode and a possible second trip to Rome at the age of six clearly attempt to add legitimacy to his reign by suggesting the similarity of these events to the papal

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<sup>102</sup> Whitelock, *ASC*, xxi.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>104</sup> Bately, *ASC MS A*; xiv, xxv.

<sup>105</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 16.

<sup>106</sup> Anton Scharer, “The Writing of History at King Alfred’s Court,” *Early Medieval Europe*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1996), 180-1.

<sup>107</sup> *ASC*, Preface.

<sup>108</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 858.

<sup>109</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 853.

anointing of Charlemagne's sons in 781, Louis II in 850, and Charles the Bald in 875.<sup>110</sup> The *Chronicle* provides histories of the major English kingdoms until Ecgbert of Wessex conquered Mercia (*sub anno* 828/829), at which point it becomes largely a history of the West Saxons and their fight against the Vikings, portraying that conflict as a war between Alfred's Christian warriors and the heathen Vikings.<sup>111</sup> Annals by their nature are copied over, promulgated, and most importantly, continued. By this means, the story of Alfred was sure to be preserved. The myth was already forming: Alfred the great warrior—descended from kings and gods, anointed by Christ's envoy on Earth, victorious over the Vikings—was already being depicted as such in his own lifetime.

Asser, a Welsh monk and possibly even a bishop,<sup>112</sup> first came to King Alfred's court in 886. He had met Alfred in 885 and agreed to stay for only half of each year, so as not to neglect his home of St. David's in Wales.<sup>113</sup> Asser wrote his biography of Alfred in 893, soon after the *Chronicle* was produced. At the core of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is a Latin translation of the *Chronicle* covering the years 849 (Alfred's birth) to 887. Asser's biography of Alfred, however, also contains personal stories about the young Alfred, which enliven the dry narrative of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Asser structures the first part of his work around large sections of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, along with some of his own additions, presumably based upon information provided by

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<sup>110</sup> Susan Irvine, "The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the Idea of Rome in Alfredian Literature," *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 67.

<sup>111</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 49.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Alfred or his family.<sup>114</sup> While the *Chronicle* gives us “Alfred the Warrior King,” Asser provides us with “Alfred as the Sufferer of God’s Ills” as well as “Alfred the Scholar and Lawgiver.” In spite of its extensive use by medieval English historians, the *Life* seems to have been written for a Welsh audience, perhaps to familiarize the Welsh with their new English overlords.<sup>115</sup> Even so, Asser’s *Life* remains problematic. Its authenticity has been called into question since at least the nineteenth century, and the debate over this issue continues today.<sup>116</sup> Not until the frenzy surrounding the modern cult died down in the early twentieth century did scholars look much more critically at the *Life*. William Stevenson’s 1904 publication of the *Life* is still considered the definitive edition.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Asser’s *Life* with its glowing praise of Alfred as the personification of Christian kingship fueled the cult of King Alfred.

Asser did not explicitly state his goal in writing his *Life of King Alfred* but he clearly intended to reinforce the image of Alfred as the “chosen and elect.”<sup>118</sup> Anton Scharer sees strong evidence that Asser may even have intended the *Life* to serve as a “mirror for princes.”<sup>119</sup> Asser describes the activities of subking Æthelbald who rebelled against his father, king Æthelwulf (ch. 12), and who, upon the death of his father, married his own stepmother (ch. 17), which was “contrary to the prohibition of God.” Asser relates the story of the “tyrant” Queen Eadburh who poisoned her husband the king and

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

<sup>116</sup> I summarize the debate surrounding the authenticity of the *Life* in the Appendix to this paper.

<sup>117</sup> William Henry Stevenson, ed. *Asser’s “Life of King Alfred:” Together with the “Annals of St. Neot’s” Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904). New impression with article “Recent Work on Asser’s Life of Alfred” by Dorothy Whitelock, 1959.

<sup>118</sup> Scharer, “The Writing of History,” 186.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 192-5. Scharer details the similarities between Sedulius Scottus’ “eight columns of the kingdom of the just king” that Sedulius borrowed from Cathwulf to put into his own *Liber de Rectoribus*. See Scharer note 100, p. 205.

his young protégé (chs. 13-15), told to Asser by his lord “Alfred the truth-teller” (ch. 13). These anecdotes exemplify how *not* to rule and are a prelude to later descriptions of Alfred as the model ruler.

Asser’s stories of Alfred’s youth portray Alfred as the favored son and concern themselves mostly with his education and longing for greater learning (chs. 21-25), along with the first mention of a mysterious ailment that plagued Alfred beginning in his youth. Following a block of annals going to the year 884, Asser returns to his own stories of Alfred at Alfred’s wedding feast in 868 (ch. 74). The account quickly descends into a detailed, yet confused and disjointed, description of Alfred’s mysterious illnesses. According to Asser, Alfred had contracted hemorrhoids as a youth after praying to God and various saints for some sort of affliction to curb his “carnal desires,” thereby “strengthening his mind in the commandments of God” (ch. 74). The resulting affliction apparently became unbearable, so he prayed for something that involved less torment but was not outwardly visible. He was then divinely healed of all pain, at least temporarily. He was stricken again at his wedding feast, though, with a “sudden and immense pain which was unknown to all physicians” (ch. 74). Asser reports that Alfred suffered from this new ailment day and night, up to the time Asser wrote his *Life* (Alfred was then forty-five years of age).

What, then, can be made of this? Gillian Craig suggests Alfred suffered from Crohn’s disease, but certainly not as severely as Asser states or Alfred would not have

been able to function as well as he did, as attested by other sources.<sup>120</sup> F. I. Jackson counters that Alfred was simply afflicted with severe and recurrent bouts of hemorrhoids.<sup>121</sup> Actual pathology notwithstanding, Asser clearly intends *his* king to suffer at God's hands; his triumph over his suffering showed him to be God's chosen king. Asser, in his zeal to better portray Alfred's triumph over adversity, exaggerated the severity of Alfred's illness.<sup>122</sup> This explains the apparent contradiction between Alfred's mention of his illness and his ability to function despite it,<sup>123</sup> and Asser's depiction of what Galbraith calls a "neurotic invalid."<sup>124</sup>

After detailing Alfred's physical afflictions, Asser immediately moves to Alfred's scholarly achievements. He depicts the education of Alfred's children, the governance of his kingdom, his thirst for knowledge, and his requests for scholars (including Asser) from outside of England (chs. 75-79). Asser describes his first stay at Alfred's court, reading aloud to him from books they had on hand (ch. 81), then continues with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* translation for the years 886 and 887 (chs. 82-86). Asser devotes the rest of the work to various anecdotes that highlight Alfred's suitability for kingship. We learn that Alfred miraculously learns to read in a single day (chs. 87-89), founds a monastery and a convent (chs. 93-98), and sets up an orderly division of his time and revenue (chs. 99-102). He initiates various reforms by resolving to help the poor,

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<sup>120</sup> Gillian Craig, "Alfred the Great: A Diagnosis," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, vol. 84 (May 1991), 303-5.

<sup>121</sup> F. I. Jackson, Letter to the Editor, re: Gillian Craig article, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, vol. 85 (January 1992), 58.

<sup>122</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life*, cxxx.

<sup>123</sup> Alfred of Wessex, preface to prose version of his Old English translation of Boethius' *de Consolatione Philosophiae*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 131.

<sup>124</sup> Vivian Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History* (London: C.A. Watts & Co., Ltd., 1964), 113.

evaluates all judgments made in his absence in “almost the whole of his country” for fairness,<sup>125</sup> and insists that his counts, officials, and ministers learn to read or face dismissal (chs. 105-106).

Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* ends abruptly with no conclusion or epilogue of any sort. Asser left Alfred’s court around 892, yet even though he outlived Alfred by ten years, there is no record of his ever finishing the *Life* by recording Alfred’s later victories over the Vikings, his translation work, or even his death.<sup>126</sup> It is possible that Asser intended to finish the *Life* and never did or that an incomplete manuscript survives. Indeed, the only copy known in modern times was a manuscript dated to around 1000 that was subsequently destroyed in the Cottonian Library fire of 1731.<sup>127</sup>

Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* inspired a large portion of the cult of Alfred, yet its survival seems almost accidental given its parochial outlook and disjointed narrative. Keynes and Lapidge describe Asser’s home of St. David’s as a “cultural backwater” and Asser as exhibiting “stylistic pretensions but no mastery of prose style,” and as not being exceptionally learned.<sup>128</sup> In fact, Asser is quite provincial compared to Charlemagne’s Alcuin or Charles the Bald’s Hincmar of Rheims. Nonetheless, Asser’s *Life* did survive, though it was not disseminated nearly as widely as Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*.<sup>129</sup> That work was preserved by such authors as Byrhtferth of Ramsey, Florence of Worcester, and the unknown authors of the *Encomium Emmae* and the *Annals of St.*

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<sup>125</sup> Asser, ch. 106a.

<sup>126</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 56.

<sup>127</sup> Stevenson, *Asser’s Life*, xxxii.

<sup>128</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 53-4.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*Neots*.<sup>130</sup> In setting out to glorify his king, Asser provided the medieval world with a very *personal* Alfred: however flawed, exaggerated, and even at times incorrect the portrait may be, it appealed to writers and historians looking for a heroic English king. They, in turn, provided their own additions to the Alfred legend, all going back to the original King Alfred persona created by Alfred himself and his own court.

The earliest surviving writings by Alfred himself are his will and law code. His will (c.880) is distinguished mostly by being one of only two surviving wills of Anglo-Saxon kings.<sup>131</sup> The will provides for Alfred's nephews (the two sons of Æthelbald) to a far lesser extent than his own children, which may account for the rebellion of his nephew Æthelwold against the latter's cousin King Edward the Elder in 900, soon after the death of King Alfred.<sup>132</sup> Alfred's law code (c.890) survives in two complete manuscripts and four fragments, suggesting its fairly wide dissemination during the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>133</sup> The law code is notable as much for its survival as for its content. It specifically asserts Alfred's role as "shepherd and guardian" of the English people, thus allowing him to express his own "political and ideological aspirations."<sup>134</sup> The law code in general is a very public expression of a king's royal power.<sup>135</sup> The promulgation and preservation of Alfred's law code adds "Wise King Alfred" to Alfred's cult persona and provides a window into Anglo-Saxon Christian kingship.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 34.

Alfred preserved and even furthered his reputation by including his own prefaces to his Old English translations (from the Latin) of Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and the first fifty Psalms. Alfred's prose preface to the *Regula Pastoralis* is perhaps the most quoted of his writings. Because of what he perceives as a general decay of learning in England and a distressing decline of Latin literacy among his clergy, he resolves to translate into English "certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know" and to send copies to all of his bishoprics.<sup>137</sup> In the preface to the prose version of his Old English *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Alfred claims to have completed the translation in spite of "various and multifarious worldly distractions which frequently occupied him in mind or in body."<sup>138</sup> Here we have Alfred the sufferer triumphing, presumably with God's help (in Alfred's view, at least), over all tribulations that come his way. In the preface to Alfred's Old English translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, we see yet another aspect of Alfred's kingship. He uses the metaphor of "staves and props and tie-shafts. . . the finest timbers I could carry"<sup>139</sup> for the writings of the Holy Fathers, with the house subsequently built from them being his translations and the wisdom gained from them.<sup>140</sup>

The ultimate goal of Alfred's program of translation was to restore wisdom—not just knowledge—to his people, with his goals of literacy, culture, and education formed

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<sup>137</sup> Alfred of Wessex, prose preface to his Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 124.

<sup>138</sup> Alfred of Wessex, preface to prose version of his Old English translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 131. This appears to be the only contemporary mention of Alfred's illnesses outside of Asser's *Life*.

<sup>139</sup> Alfred of Wessex, preface to his Old English translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 138.

<sup>140</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 235.



along the way.<sup>141</sup> To the modern reader, such ambitions may seem a necessary part of modern rulership: all leaders should provide for the education of their subjects. As a note of caution, however, Janet Nelson points out that for an early medieval ruler, such activities are very much the exception: “an astonishing fact, almost unprecedented—and unparalleled for centuries to come.”<sup>142</sup> Janet Bately must look forward seven hundred years from the ninth century to the Elizabethan Age to find an English parallel to Alfred’s domination of literary prose in ninth century England.<sup>143</sup> We make the observations however, with the clarity of hindsight. We have very few objective Anglo-Saxon sources contemporary to Alfred. We have only sources from within his court or close to it, such as Wulfsgie’s preface to Werferth’s Old English translation of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, describing Alfred as the “greatest treasure-giver of all time.”<sup>144</sup> We also have John the Old Saxon’s acrostic poems exhorting Alfred to “bend his mind to heavenly affairs. . . and run confidently through the fields of foreign learning.”<sup>145</sup>

## 2. Medieval Contributions to the Cult of Alfred

A succession of writers continued Alfred’s reputation and the beginnings of his myth through the medieval period. Some simply borrowed from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or Asser’s *Life*, while others added entirely new material. Ealdorman Æthelweard’s treatment of Alfred in the fourth book of his chronicle (c. 980) generally follows that of

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<sup>141</sup> Janet Margaret Bately, *The Literary Prose of King Alfred’s Reign: Translation or Transformation?* An Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of English Language and Medieval Literature delivered at University of London King’s College on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1980 (London: University of London King’s College, 1980), 7.

<sup>142</sup> Nelson, “Political Ideas,” 140.

<sup>143</sup> Bately, *Literary Prose*, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*; 188.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

the *Chronicle* until 891, at which point he provides original material and uses a lost version of the *Chronicle*.<sup>146</sup> Æthelweard eulogizes Alfred as “an unshakeable pillar of the people of the west, a man full of justice, active in war, learned in speech, steeped in sacred literature”<sup>147</sup> Interestingly, some evidence indicates that the unknown version of the *Chronicle* that Æthelweard used seems to suppress mention of Alfred during his own lifetime in favor of his son and heir, Edward the Elder, giving the possibility that a later writer sought to promote Edward after he became king.<sup>148</sup>

Ælfric kept Alfred’s memory alive in the preface to his *Catholic Homilies* (c. 990) by stating that the clergy “did not know nor possess the evangelical teaching among their books, except for those men alone who knew Latin, and except for those books which King Alfred wisely translated from Latin into English, which are obtainable.”<sup>149</sup> He furthers Alfred’s reputation by mentioning him in an appendix to his Old English Book of Judges (c. 1005) as “victorious through God,” along with kings Æthelstan and Edgar, and as one who “often fought against the Danes, until he won the victory and protected his people.”<sup>150</sup>

The most widely retold events of the Alfredian legend allegedly took place while he hid in the swamps of Athelney early in 878. The most famous is that of Alfred burning the “cakes” at the swineherd’s cottage.<sup>151</sup> The story first appeared in the *Vita*

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<sup>146</sup> Campbell, *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, xviii.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix-xxxii.

<sup>149</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, trans., *Extracts from the Old English Works of Abbot Ælfric*. Dorothy Whitelock, ed. *English Historical Documents, Volume I, c. 500 – 1042* (London, Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1979), 924.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 928.

<sup>151</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 21-2. It is not clear why the Latin *panis* is sometimes translated as “cakes” instead of as “bread.”

*Prima St. Neoti*. It relates how Alfred, deep in thought, allowed some loaves of bread to burn and bore his scolding by the swineherd's wife with humility. In the twelfth century, the story appeared in the *Annals of St. Neots*, along with the rest of the *Vita Prima St. Neoti*.<sup>152</sup> Matthew Parker in turn erroneously interpolated the story into his edition of Asser's *Life of Alfred* in 1574, believing the Neots text to be Asser's work.<sup>153</sup> The image of Alfred burning bread appears in a number of popular depictions of Alfred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fixing the image permanently into English memory.<sup>154</sup>

In the second story, St. Cuthbert appears to Alfred in the guise of a pilgrim, asking for food. After sharing Alfred's last loaf of bread, he disappears. That night, he re-appears to Alfred in a dream, offering advice on defeating the Vikings. This story first appeared in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto (HSC)*.<sup>155</sup> Although not compiled until the eleventh century, the *HSC* describes the visits of the West Saxon kings Æthelstan (in 933) and Edmund (in 945) to St. Cuthbert's shrine to acknowledge Cuthbert's aid to King Alfred in 878.<sup>156</sup> The *Vita Prima St. Neoti* includes a story very similar to Alfred's encounter with Cuthbert, with the substitution of St. Neot for St. Cuthbert.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, 199. When the story was incorporated into the *Annals of St. Neots*, the swineherd (*subulcus*) became a cow- or neatherd (*vaccarium*). Perhaps a cowherd is more heroic than a swineherd? For the Latin, see Michael Lapidge, "Vita Prima Sancti Neoti et Translatio," in David Dumville and Michael Lapidge, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 17 (Cambridge, 1985), pp. xciii-xcvi (§12). See also "Fani Sancti Neoti" in Stevenson, *Asser's Life*, 136 (*sub anno* 878, lines 17 and 19).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>154</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," plates IXb, Xb, XIb, and XIIIa.

<sup>155</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 22. See also p. 211, note 11.

<sup>156</sup> *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, trans. Ted Johnson-South, *Anglo-Saxon Texts* 3, series editors Andy Orchard and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 1.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5, note 9.

The third story, that of Alfred disguising himself as a minstrel to spy on the Danish camp, first appears in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*.<sup>158</sup> In a variation of the second story, Cuthbert also appears to Alfred in a dream while his companions are out fishing, this time telling him that "through the merits of her native saints. . . God now looks upon [England] with an eye of mercy."<sup>159</sup> Cuthbert then uses an extraordinary catch of fish to predict victory over the Danes, which does indeed happen. Soon after, Alfred disguises himself as a minstrel and spends three days in the tent of the Danish king, learning the enemy's secrets. After pointing out the laziness of the Danes, Alfred leads his allies to victory over them at the Battle of Edington, resulting in a treaty with the Danish King Guthrum.<sup>160</sup> Ted Johnson-South, in his study of the *Vita Prima St. Neoti* and the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* and their relationship to King Alfred's myth, concludes that the miracle stories could have come from a lost text that originated at the royal court at Winchester in the tenth century, representing cooperation between Church and king using King Alfred's aura.<sup>161</sup> Whether the tales of West Saxon kings' links to St. Cuthbert and St. Neot are apocryphal or not does not affect the outcome: the relationship between the kings and the saints' communities was mutually beneficial.

William of Malmesbury greatly contributed to the Alfred myths in the twelfth century. Besides retelling a St. Cuthbert miracle story and the story of Alfred disguised

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<sup>158</sup> Keynes, *Alfred the Great*, 230.

<sup>159</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, completed by R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, vol. I: Text and Translation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), §121, p.183.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., §121, p. 183-5.

<sup>161</sup> Ted Johnson-South, "Competition for King Alfred's Aura in the Last Century of Anglo-Saxon England," *Albion* 23, 4 (Winter 1991), 621.

as a minstrel, he repeats Asser's description of Alfred's health problems.<sup>162</sup> William also credits Alfred with instituting the system of hundreds and tithings to England, along with a system of legal surety for individuals accused of crimes.<sup>163</sup> This last represents the projection of the twelfth-century frankpledge system backward into Alfred's ninth-century reign.<sup>164</sup> The rest of William's material on Alfred comes from Asser's *Life*, supplemented by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Alfred's prose preface to the *Regula Pastoralis*.<sup>165</sup> William provides a list of works translated by Alfred, which incorrectly lists Bede's *Gesta Anglorum* and Orosius' *Historiarum Adversus Paganos* among the Alfredian canon of translations.<sup>166</sup> For the final twelfth-century contribution to Alfred's growing list of achievements, Simon Keynes gives credit to Orderic Vitalis for holding up Alfred as the first king over all of England.<sup>167</sup>

The final piece of the medieval Alfred myth comes from a statement by the monk Ranulph Higden in the fourteenth century: Alfred founded Oxford University at the prompting of Neot, and Alfred's annual revenue to support a school for youth (which Asser mentions) was in fact meant for Oxford.<sup>168</sup> A more detailed and perhaps more fanciful version of the story is found in the *Liber Abbatiae* of Hyde Abbey, Winchester in the early fifteenth century.<sup>169</sup> Since the publication of Higden's work, supporters of Oxford exploited the association of Alfred with Oxford University in an attempt to show

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<sup>162</sup> William of Malmesbury, §121, p.189. He states Alfred was afflicted by "piles or some internal complaint."

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., §122, p. 189.

<sup>164</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 230.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>166</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, "William of Malmesbury on the Works of Alfred," *From Bede to Alfred* (London: Variorum, 1980), 85.

<sup>167</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 231.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 236.

that the University of Oxford was older than the University of Cambridge. Besides setting off a debate that would continue for several hundred years, the dispute benefited Alfred by focusing on him the combined intellectual fervor of both the Oxonian and Cantabrigian scholarly communities.

Once firmly established in English historiography, Anglo-Norman historians propagated the new, improved story of Alfred through the medieval period. The original impetus for perpetuating his legend, and of the Anglo-Saxons in general, was to provide continuity from pre- to post-Conquest England. This gave credibility and legitimacy to William the Conqueror's invasion of England and downplayed the extent of change that came with the new regime.<sup>170</sup>

Alfred's reputation suffered some competition as the number of stories of King Arthur greatly increased from the twelfth century through the seventeenth centuries. King Arthur's reputation weakened only in the face of modern scholarship into the accuracy and historicity of the Arthurian legends.<sup>171</sup> Alfred's lack of reputation as a genuine saint could not compete with that of Edward the Confessor's as the Confessor "better symbolized the identity and continuity of English monarchy. . . represented by his activities as law-maker. . . his cult-centre, [his] regalia, or by. . . his coat of arms."<sup>172</sup> While Alfred was not the most renowned king throughout the medieval period, the preservation of his writings and biography during this period provided a starting-point for scholars of the sixteenth century and later.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 237.

### 3. Early Modern Contributions to the Cult

Under the relative stability of the long reign of Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), Bishop Matthew Parker established a collection of manuscripts preserving “the antient [sic] Monuments of the learned Men of our Nation.”<sup>173</sup> Parker published Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* (with burning cakes, but no Oxford), along with Alfred’s will and his prefaces to the Pastoral Care, providing translations into both Latin and modern English.<sup>174</sup> The epithet “great” had by then become part of English historiography, and was reintroduced into the works of John Bale as “Alphredus Magnus” in 1548.<sup>175</sup> The publication in 1634 of Robert Powell’s biography of Alfred subtitled “The First Instituter of Subordinate Government in this Kingdome and Refounder of the University of Oxford” fostered Alfred’s growing reputation as well as fueled the Oxford/Cambridge foundation dispute.<sup>176</sup> The Oxford community tried to further their case by claiming the university had been in Oxford long before Alfred, and was only *refounded* by him.

Simon Keynes credits John Spelman with the first modern biography of Alfred, published in English in 1709.<sup>177</sup> In Book I, Spelman details Alfred’s fights with the Danes, who Spelman describes as the fourth of “five great Plagues or Scourges” with which England had been afflicted; he assigns the fifth scourge to the Normans.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>176</sup> A.D. Harvey, “Alfred in the Neatherd’s Cottage: History Painting and Epic Poetry in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Philological Quarterly* Jan. 1, 2001, 2.

<sup>177</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 254.

<sup>178</sup> John Spelman, *The Life of Ælfred the Great: From the Original Manuscript in the Bodleian Library: With Considerable Additions and Several Historical Remarks by the Publisher Thomas Hearne* (London: 1709), §3. Originally written in English in 1643, published posthumously in Latin in 1678, then re-published in English in 1709. These are the same five plagues described by Henry, Archdeacon of

Spelman succeeds in putting all of the components of the Alfredian portrait into his work: Founder of the Monarchy (§20), Uniter of England (§21), and Victor over the Danes (§12). He also manages to include burning cakes, Cuthbert's visitations, and minstrel disguises (§68 to §80). In a new addition to the Alfred persona, he refers to a lost biography of *Saint* Alfred, attributed to Neot (§24). Spelman devotes Book II to Alfred's laws and government. He conjectures that if the complete laws of Alfred could be found, they would surely show that Alfred was the first to divide the country into shires (§6) and the first to create Common Law (§18). He is also convinced that a survey book of Alfred's inspired William the Conqueror's Domesday Book, which should therefore be considered merely a second edition of Alfred's book (§30)! Half of Book III details the dispute concerning the founding of Oxford (§20 to §64), with the conclusion that Alfred did indeed found Oxford during his reign, but that William Camden should not have included in his 1603 edition of Asser's *Life of Alfred* the disputed passage about Oxford existing *before* Alfred.

Spelman enthusiastically credits Alfred with accomplishments that could not be proven, but belonged to Alfred simply because everything else seemed to belong to him. Spelman's attitude exemplified the growing tendency to simply attribute *all* that was great and good to Alfred. Once Spelman and others had firmly established Alfred as the greatest king ever, he could then be used as a model for future kings. Seventeenth-century attempts to use Alfred as a "mirror" for the Stuart kings had met with little success, however, but efforts of historical writers in the eighteenth century were

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Huntingdon, in his *Historia Anglorum*; ed. and trans. Diana Greenway, Oxford Medieval Texts, gen. eds. D.E. Greenway, B.F. Harvey, M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Book I, §4, p. 15.



rewarded, due to the Saxon heritage shared by the Anglo-Saxons and the Hanoverian kings.<sup>179</sup>

Radical thinkers of the eighteenth century used Alfred to symbolize the supposed democratic forms of government of the Anglo-Saxon period, which were held up in opposition to the perceived post-Norman tyranny.<sup>180</sup> Alfredian historiography reached what can only be described as a fever-pitch in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with “Alfrediana”<sup>181</sup> appearing in many forms, including musical plays (“masques”), epic poems, popular histories, sculpture, and painting. Simon Keynes provides an in-depth, detailed exposition of the development of the cult of Alfred in his 1999 article, showing how “Alfredophilia, and latterly Alfredomania, found expression not only in religious, legal, political and historical writing, but also in much else besides” and detailing how “the various manifestations of creative Alfrediana from the late sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries provided a foundation for the public acts of commemoration which helped in 1849, 1878, and 1901 to transform Alfred from an obsession into an industry.”<sup>182</sup>

#### *4. The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*

The “love of all things Germanic” that characterized the reign of Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901) greatly strengthened the cult of King Alfred in the nineteenth century.<sup>183</sup>

Victoria’s German ancestry and especially that of her Hanoverian royal uncles (George

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<sup>179</sup> Barbara Yorke, “The Most Perfect Man in History,” *History Today* vol. 49 issue 10 (October 1999), 3.

<sup>180</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 48.

<sup>181</sup> Keynes uses the term throughout his article, “The Cult of King Alfred the Great.”

<sup>182</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 225.

<sup>183</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 48.

IV and William IV) and grandfather (George III) were readily connected to the country's Anglo-Saxon past. The Victorian Era neatly encompassed the entire millenary of Alfred's lifetime. In 1849, Martin Tupper organized a millennial celebration of Alfred's birth in his birthplace of Wantage, characterized by the attendance of a great many townspeople, but apparently snubbed by the "great and the good" of the land.<sup>184</sup> By this time, Alfred was as much a sentimental, popular hero as a subject of serious academic study. He no longer served as simply a "mirror for princes," but also "an exemplar for people at all levels of society and above all, for children."<sup>185</sup> The 1877 celebration at Wantage was much more successful than the 1849 event. Edward, Prince of Wales, was in attendance to unveil a statue of Alfred holding a scroll to his chest with his left hand, while resting his right hand on the haft of his battle-axe.<sup>186</sup> A second statue, erected at Winchester in 1901 to mark the millenary of Alfred's death, has Alfred holding his sword aloft hilt-upwards, in the manner of a cross, while his left hand rests on the shield at his side. Alfred the Warrior-Scholar now became a permanent public figure. Summing up the English national pride in Alfred, Edward Freeman pronounced Alfred to be "the most perfect character in history."<sup>187</sup> As a sign (or perhaps a symptom) of the "Alfredomania" mentioned by Keynes above, Alfred even had a daffodil named after him—first unveiled in England in 1899—that is still described as "big and showy."<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 343.

<sup>185</sup> Yorke, "The Most Perfect Man in History," 5.

<sup>186</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 346.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>188</sup> Bob Stiffler, "The 'King Alfred' Daffodil Has Many Contenders," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, VA), 19 October 2003. King Alfred daffodils can still be seen on "Daffodil Hill" in Amador County, California, north of the town of Volcano, where over three hundred varieties of daffodils have been planted since 1887: Joanne Corman, "Find Your Thrill on Daffodil Hill," *Via Magazine*, March/April 2007, 21.

The historical writing of the late nineteenth century reflected the English conviction that Alfred could simply do no wrong. In his volume coinciding with the events at Wantage in 1849, J. A. Giles provided an essay on the “History and Political State of Europe in the Ninth Century.”<sup>189</sup> He praises Charlemagne as the bridge between the “two wild and gloomy regions” of barbarism and feudalism, yet points to his reign as being an “instance of brilliant but transitory supremacy”<sup>190</sup> presumably to be put in opposition to Alfred’s legacy of nation-building permanence. He repeatedly compares Charlemagne’s successors negatively to the Anglo-Saxons, in one case pointing out that the Anglo-Saxons’ ability to resist the invading Danes was due to the “union of the three brothers [Æthelberht, Æthelred, and Alfred] after the death of Æthelwulf, and more especially to Alfred’s magnanimous postponement of his own pretensions” as compared to the “total want of moral principle, unnatural animosities, and disregard of the most solemn treaties and family compacts” of the Frankish princes.<sup>191</sup> While there is a great deal of truth to the description of the discord among the grandsons of Charlemagne, Giles is far too generous in his praise of Alfred.

In his 1881 biography of Alfred, Thomas Hughes begins an early chapter with the assertion that England in Alfred’s time was already divided into shires, hundreds, and tithings and that a soldier of Alfred’s time could easily have conversed with the local peasantry of a thousand years later.<sup>192</sup> Referring to the Athelney interlude and

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<sup>189</sup> J. A. Giles “History and Political State of Europe in the Ninth Century,” *Memorials of Alfred: Essays on the History and Antiquities of England During the Ninth Century, the Age of Alfred* (repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969). Originally published 1863.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-8.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881).

presumably responding to allegations that Alfred was seen to have abandoned his people, Hughes points out that “no one can be familiar with the authentic records of [Alfred’s] words and works and believe that he could ever have alienated his people by arrogance, or impatience, or superciliousness.”<sup>193</sup> He accepts as truth the story of the cakes, simply because it was recorded as a result of a conversation between Asser and the “truth-loving King.”<sup>194</sup> He does take Spelman to task for putting a speech into Alfred’s mouth before the battle of Edington, relying only on a single, apparently questionable authority.<sup>195</sup> As for Alfred’s naval prowess, Hughes credits him with a “genius for mechanics,” which was applied to the “great reconstruction” of the Anglo-Saxon fleet.<sup>196</sup> He states, quite anachronistically, that Alfred began his legal reforms with the “severance of the executive and judicial functions.”<sup>197</sup> Hughes *is* willing to acknowledge, though, that perhaps Alfred did *not* found a university at Oxford.<sup>198</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Saxon historical studies were based upon the assumptions of contemporary scholars which in turn were based upon texts contemporary to Alfred, such as the partisan *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser’s problematic *Life of King Alfred*. There was very little questioning of the material, mostly, it seems, because the English *wanted* to believe in and accept Alfred’s importance to England, rather than question the validity of his reputation and the evidence from which it derived.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 217.

F. Pollack and F. W. Maitland published *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* in 1895, which marked what Keynes felt was the end of the “uncritical adulation of Alfred.”<sup>199</sup> We see this change in attitude in a collection of essays published by Alfred Bowker in 1899.<sup>200</sup> Frederick Harrison, in his essay “Alfred as King,” starts out in what had by then become the traditional way by stating that “of all the names in history there is only our English Alfred whose record is without stain and without weakness.”<sup>201</sup> Harrison immediately emends his assessment, though, by asserting that

Every schoolboy knows that Alfred was not formally King of all England; nor did he introduce trial by jury, or electoral institutions; he did not found the University of Oxford; nor write all the pieces which are attributed to his pen; he was perhaps too practical a man to let his own supper get burnt on the hearth; and too wary a general to go about masquerading with a harp in the enemy’s camp.<sup>202</sup>

Even Charles Plummer, who felt Alfred could do no wrong (see above, p. 9, n. 22), dispenses with a number of time-honored Alfredian debates and admits to being “disheartened” to have “all these old confusions and myths trotted out once more at this time of day as if they were genuine history.”<sup>203</sup> Plummer’s cynicism and a certain amount of arrogance that pervaded his lectures are actually somewhat refreshing, after the sometimes heavy, sometimes flowery work of his predecessors.

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<sup>199</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 348.

<sup>200</sup> Alfred Bowker, *Alfred the Great: Containing Chapters on his Life and Times* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1899).

<sup>201</sup> Frederick Harrison, “Alfred as King” in Bowker, *Alfred*, 42.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>203</sup> Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great: Being the Ford Lectures for 1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 68.

### 5. *Treatment of the Cult in Recent Historiography*

The hysteria over Alfred mostly subsided in the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with the death of Empress Victoria (styled as such after 1877) in 1901 and the breakup of the British Empire,<sup>204</sup> perhaps because “the Christian heroism that Alfred embodied for the Victorians—patriotic, honest, stubbornly resolute but tinged with humility—has gone out of fashion in our more cynical and knowing age.”<sup>205</sup> The earliest of the twentieth-century writers were still heavily influenced by the Victorian writers, though. Edward Cheyney remained unabashed in his admiration for Alfred, crediting him with “the reorganization of the West Saxon monarchy, while slavishly following Asser’s description of Alfred’s childhood.”<sup>206</sup> Frederick Harrison (see quote, previous page) would have been appalled at Cheyney’s breathless assertion that “in all the records of [Alfred] that exist there is not a single statement that puts a blemish upon his great and good character [and] everything that is known about him shows him as singularly lovable.”<sup>207</sup> Cheyney does calm down in his other English history textbook, simply having Alfred impressing “the recognition of his fine nature and strong character deeply on the men of his time and the memory of all subsequent times.”<sup>208</sup> In her otherwise scholarly work, Beatrice Lees follows the typically glowing Victorian view of Alfred’s

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<sup>204</sup> India, Australia, and Canada were independent by 1950. The British colonies in Africa mostly gained independence in the 1960s. Gerald A. Danzer, *World History: An Atlas and Study Guide* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1998), 120.

<sup>205</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 5.

<sup>206</sup> Edward Potts Cheyney, *A Short History of England* (Boston: Ginn and Company, revised edition 1918. Originally pub. 1904), 64-5.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>208</sup> Edward Potts Cheyney, *An Introduction to the Industrial and Social History of England* (New York: The Macmillan Company, revised edition, 1920. Originally pub. 1901), 13.

childhood.<sup>209</sup> She then returns to her scholarship by acknowledging that the “legendary Alfred skulks...through woods and fields, to be scolded by peasants and comforted by saints in an exile which lasts for three years. The *historic* Alfred passed some four months [at Athelney] in consolidating his forces.”<sup>210</sup> During the 1920s and 30s, after the enthusiasm of the Victorian period diminished, Alfredian studies likewise subsided. In 1943, Frank Stenton firmly placed Alfred back into the realm of serious scholarship with the publication of his history of Anglo-Saxon England, giving credit to Alfred for his *proven* military and scholarly accomplishments, without mention of the legends and false attributions that had become attached to him over the preceding centuries.<sup>211</sup>

Keynes described Alfred, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, as receiving the “ultimate accolade” when the full-length feature film *Alfred the Great* was released in 1969.<sup>212</sup> Even such fine actors as Ian McKellan and Michael York could not save this film. It features nearly constant melodrama, highlighting Alfred’s personal conflicts between celibacy and lust, humility (hiding at Athelney) and pride (rushing to fight at Chippenham and being defeated), and forgiveness and anger (his wife consorts with the Danish King Guthrum for four years). When the story does not slavishly follow Asser’s *Life of Alfred*, it deviates wildly from the historical record: Asser is in Alfred’s company already in 867 (versus 886); Alfred spends four years at Athelney with a band of outlaws instead of a few months with his loyal retainers; after Alfred defeats Guthrum in 878, the

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<sup>209</sup> Barbara Lees, *Alfred the Great: The Truth Teller; Maker of England; 848-899* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915), 71-9.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. Emphasis added.

<sup>211</sup> Frank Merry Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943. Rev. ed. 1971), 269-276.

<sup>212</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 351.

narrator simply declares “here England was united.”<sup>213</sup> The historical Alfred fares much better in his second feature-length film, *King Alfred the Great*.<sup>214</sup> It opens with the statement that Alfred’s story is one of “triumph over constant adversity that led to the foundation of the English state.” It is narrated by quotes from Asser, moderated (and thankfully corrected) by comments from later scholarship, and closes with the pronouncement that Alfred had “become all things to all men.” The film is a documentary portrait rather than the melodramatic, fictionalized depiction of the 1969 film.

Alfred made two film appearances in 2006. In his few minutes of footage in “The Dark Ages,” he is shown middle-aged, with gray hair and beard in the 870s, when he would have been only in his mid-twenties.<sup>215</sup> Otherwise it offers a fairly accurate depiction of the historical Alfred, albeit one that rightfully gives him a distant second billing to Charlemagne. In “Monarchy” we see one of the few depictions of a clean-shaven Alfred, with David Starkey narrating what we are assured is “not another picture-book story of kings and queens; instead a real grown-up history of how a monarch created a nation.”<sup>216</sup> True to Starkey’s word, the film provides an accurate, scholarly portrayal of Alfred’s reign.

The eleventh centenary of Alfred’s death was observed in 1999 in a much more subdued fashion than his millenary was. The publishers of the journal *Anglo-Saxon*

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<sup>213</sup> *Alfred the Great*, directed by Clive Donner, 122 min., 1969. DVD.

<sup>214</sup> *King Alfred the Great*, Great Kings of England series, written by Simon Kirk, directed by Jeremy Freeston, 50 min., Cromwell Films Ltd, 1994. DVD.

<sup>215</sup> *The Dark Ages*, Presented by the History Channel, 94 min., 2006. DVD.

<sup>216</sup> *Monarchy, Episode 1: The Early Kings*, 160 min., Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2006. DVD.



*England* devoted that year's volume to Alfred and his reign.<sup>217</sup> Two academic conferences were held in the fall of 1999, with the collected papers published together in one volume.<sup>218</sup> An exhibit at the Museum of London was entitled, perhaps even too appropriately, "Alfred the Great: London's Forgotten King."<sup>219</sup>

A recently published popular history of Alfred points out that a BBC poll conducted in 2001 to name the "greatest Briton" yielded Alfred as the only king to make it into the top twenty.<sup>220</sup> The rankings do not profess to be objective or even scientific. Alfred (#14) shares the top twenty not only with Churchill (#1), Darwin (#4), Shakespeare (#5), and Newton (#6), but also with Princess Diana (#3), John Lennon (#8) and Paul McCartney (#19).

Among other recent popular publications are a series of adventure novels set in King Alfred's time, narrated by a fictional Northumbrian boy who is adopted into the family of a Danish Viking.<sup>221</sup> The boy reaches adulthood during the Viking wars and ends up in Alfred's household. The books are fairly well-written, historically accurate, and clearly targeted to a teenage audience. At the very least, the persona of Alfred will be kept alive for another generation.

In a decidedly unscientific poll conducted by this writer over the past couple of years, a number of American acquaintances were asked what they knew of King Alfred

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<sup>217</sup> *Anglo-Saxon England* vol. 28 (1999), eds. Michael Lapidge, Malcolm Godden, Simon Keynes.

<sup>218</sup> Timothy Reuter, ed., *Alfred the Great: Papers From the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*. Studies in Early Medieval Britain. Series editor Nicholas Brooks. London: Ashgate Publishing, Limited, 2003.

<sup>219</sup> Advertisement printed at the end of Barbara Yorke's article, "The Most Perfect Man in History."

<sup>220</sup> David Horspool, *King Alfred: Burnt Cakes and Other Legends* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), dust jacket flap.

<sup>221</sup> Bernard Cromwell, "The Saxon Chronicles" series of four books (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004 to 2009).

the Great. Not a single person surveyed had heard of him. The results were slightly less disheartening when the same question was put to non-American English-speakers. The two English thought he was perhaps one of the earlier kings and confessed that their school studies had only gone back to the Stuarts. Surprisingly, it was the South African and the Scots who had heard of Alfred, with answers along the line of “Ah yes, the chap who burned the cakes!” Alfred seems indeed to be a “forgotten king.” It appears that the cult of Alfred the Great can now safely be consigned to the study of history.

King Alfred himself is responsible for setting his cult in motion during his own lifetime. His sponsorship of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, his recruitment of Asser to write his biography, and his own writings and translations ensured that the memory of Wessex and Alfred would not fade with time. Alfred’s story was preserved in historical writings of the tenth through the fifteenth centuries, supplemented by various stories or texts erroneously attributed to Alfred or Asser. During this period, the Alfred story was not so much a legend to be promulgated or exploited for its own sake as it was simply a piece of English history to be included in successive histories. The trend toward accretion of Alfredian stories continued up to the sixteenth century, but there was as yet no concerted effort to promote or exploit Alfred as the English national hero he later became. During the eighteenth century, however, Alfred became a marketable phenomenon. By the twentieth century, Alfred’s reputation had been exploited by a series of institutions and historical movements. He was a ready-made hero-king, available for adoption by a variety of causes. He remained so until the Victorian cult succumbed to modern scholarship and a new generation of scholars produced the “genuine” Alfred.

## Chapter 4 – Accomplishments Falsely Attributed to Alfred

Twentieth-century historians have long since removed a number of accomplishments from the long list of achievements assigned to Alfred over the centuries: Alfred has miraculous encounters with saints, he saves and unites all of England, invents representative government, founds the oldest university in the English-speaking world and creates the Royal Navy. Besides being apocryphal, all of these now-discredited accomplishments have in common a response to a current conflict or period of economic or political uncertainty.

### *1. Alfred and the Saints*

Monks and clerics wrote most of the annals and histories in the early medieval period when Alfred's miracle stories were recorded. They attributed inexplicable events to God or to a saint. Miracle stories enhanced the reputation of a saint and the churches or monasteries in possession of their relics, leading to the stories being copied over, embellished, and included in a succession of written works. When the writers incorporated royalty into their miracle stories, both the royal court and the saint's community benefited. The stories of Alfred's miraculous visits by St. Cuthbert and St. Neot increased the stature of Alfred and his successors, while the writers of the respective saint's lives and their monasteries in turn benefited from their association with a royal patron.

Bertram Colgrave identifies seven miracle stories attributed to St. Cuthbert by the beginning of the twelfth century, along with more stories added later, bringing the total to

twenty-one.<sup>222</sup> The first of these stories concerns Alfred, and takes place while he is in hiding in the swamps of Athelney following his defeat at Chippenham. In this story, Alfred shares his last loaf of bread with a pilgrim (Cuthbert in disguise) while Alfred's companions are out fishing. The fishermen return with a miraculous catch, and later that night Cuthbert appears to Alfred in a dream, saying the catch of fish is a token of his promise to help the king defeat the Vikings. A similar story, this time involving St. Neot, first appears in the *Vita Prima Sancti Neoti et Translatio*.<sup>223</sup> In the St. Neot story, the saint also visits Alfred in a dream, promising to help defeat the Vikings, but there is no miraculous fish-catch.<sup>224</sup> The St. Neot version includes the famous story of Alfred burning bread in a swineherd's cottage. Also in the *Vita Neoti*, Alfred visits Neot twice in Cornwall during Neot's lifetime, where he chastens Alfred for his "evil ways" and promises "God's mercy" if he changes.<sup>225</sup>

Tenth and eleventh century writers knew of Alfred's stay in Athelney through Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC)*. The best-known apocryphal stories of Alfred came from this period, but do not appear in Asser's *Life* or the *ASC*. Two common themes in the propaganda of kingship are triumphing over adversity and bearing hardship stoically, along with pious associations with saints. The

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<sup>222</sup> Bertram Colgrave, "The Post-Bedan Miracles and Translations of St. Cuthbert," *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, eds. Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins (Cambridge University Press, 1950), 308. The first four stories all appear in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. All twenty-one are attached to the thirteenth-century *Vita Sancti Cuthberti prosaica auctore Bede*.

<sup>223</sup> Dumville and Lapidge, *Vita Neoti*, §13. For a partial translation, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 197-8.

<sup>224</sup> Johnson-South, "King Alfred's Aura," *Albion* 23, 4 (Winter 1991), 614.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 613-4. Alfred's visits to St. Neot are also described in Asser's *Life*, ch. 74.

depiction of Alfred going from dire straits at Athelney to winning a crucial victory at Edington is a “subject begging for a miracle story.”<sup>226</sup>

The Alfred stories involving St. Neot and St. Cuthbert contain both plausible and miraculous components. It is plausible that Alfred visited Neot during his lifetime and that Alfred may indeed have burned some bread at Athelney. It is also plausible that Alfred shared his last loaf of bread with a passing pilgrim. It is interesting, however, that the miraculous portions of the stories, that is, of Alfred’s visions of the saints, are so similar. It is likely that both vision stories, as initially written down in the *Vita Neoti* and the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (HSC), were already in oral circulation by the eleventh or even the tenth century, with the Neot version possibly adapted from the Cuthbert version.<sup>227</sup> The plausible portions of the stories were probably created by the respective writers, or at least written down from oral tradition.<sup>228</sup>

It is telling that the miracle stories involving Alfred do not appear in the tenth-century sources that describe Alfred’s reign (*Æthelweard’s Chronicles* and *Ælfric’s* writings), but first appear in eleventh-century sources. What prompted the promulgation of the Alfredian miracle stories over a hundred years *after* the death of Alfred? Ted Johnson-South builds an intriguing case for a West-Saxon royal influence on both cults, beginning in the tenth century. How else can we explain the tie of a common story between the lesser-known Cornish Saint Neot and the powerful Northumbrian

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<sup>226</sup> Luisella Simpson, “The King Alfred/St. Cuthbert Episode in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*: Its Significance for Mid-Tenth-Century English History,” *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to A.D. 1200*, eds. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989), 407.

<sup>227</sup> Dumville and Lapidge, *Vita Neoti*, cv.

<sup>228</sup> See Keynes Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 198 for the Neot story. The wandering pilgrim story in HSC was likely one of many in its compilation. See Ted Johnson-South, trans., HSC, 5.

community of Cuthbert?<sup>229</sup> The West Saxon kings were the one entity that would have gained from the influence of their royal house on the saints: the community of St. Neot's by its forced translation from Cornwall to East Anglia and into the West Saxon sphere of influence and the community of St. Cuthbert by the well-documented (in the *HSC*) patronage of West Saxon kings from Alfred to Edmund (r. 939-946).<sup>230</sup>

The first half of the tenth century was a time of great upheaval in northern England. The English were in the process of reclaiming the northeastern half of England (the Danelaw) from the Danes while other Vikings were attacking southwestern England. Even the Scots took their turn at invading England in 937.<sup>231</sup> For the community of St. Cuthbert, the increasing power of the house of Wessex provided a line of kings able to offer protection from the instability around them.<sup>232</sup> By the time Edgar (r. 959-975) took the throne, England had been restored to the English. It fell to Edgar to renew a kingdom disrupted by nearly two hundred years of Viking depredation.

The monastic revival in tenth century England was both a recovery from Viking attacks and secular domination<sup>233</sup> and a reflection of the Cluniac monastic reform spreading from the continent to England.<sup>234</sup> Edgar's transfer of certain local powers from

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<sup>229</sup> Johnson-South, "King Alfred's Aura," 613.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 619.

<sup>231</sup> Christopher Brooke, *From Alfred to Henry III: 871-1272*, The Norton Library History of England, gen eds. Christopher Brooke, Denis Mack Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 52. The English under Æthelstan defeated an army led by kings of Ireland, Scotland, and Strathclyde at Brunanburh. Brooke provides an excellent overview of English history of this period. For a general stage-by-stage portrayal of the recovery of the Danelaw by the English, see Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 68-71.

<sup>232</sup> Gerald Bonner, "St. Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street," *St. Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community*, 389.

<sup>233</sup> Eric John, "The King and the Monks in the Tenth-Century Reformation," in '*Orbis Britanniae*' and other Studies, Studies in Early English History IV, series ed. H.P.R. Finberg (Leicester University Press, 1966), 154.

<sup>234</sup> Brooke, *Alfred to Henry III*, 56.

ealdormen to abbots or bishops necessitated the formation of close ties between monasteries and royalty.<sup>235</sup> This new dependency on royal favor had the monks expressing their gratitude in prayer and liturgy, with “the high doctrine of kingly dignity promoted by the monks.”<sup>236</sup> The stories of Alfred and the saints likely came out of this political milieu.

The author of the *HSC* was clearly motivated to document and protect the property rights of the community of St. Cuthbert, beginning with the Danish settlements in Northumbria in the late tenth century and continuing through the political upheavals of the reign of Edward the Confessor and the Norman Conquest.<sup>237</sup> Craster dated the initial written compilation of the *HSC* to sometime after 1031, which corresponds to the period of instability following the relative calm of the reign of King Cnut I (r. 1016-1035).<sup>238</sup> The inclusion in the *HSC* of the stories of misfortunes befalling those who interfered with property of St. Cuthbert’s community, in addition to stories of good fortune for those “who honour him with gifts and devotion” indicate a clear purpose for the creation and continuation of the *HSC*, along with its Alfredian miracle story.<sup>239</sup> Simpson rightly points out that linking Alfred and Cuthbert in order to uphold the rights of English kings in Northumbria is much more a political issue than a hagiographical one.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Eric John, “The King and the Monks,” 175.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>237</sup> Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.550 to c.1307* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 77 and 88.

<sup>238</sup> Johnson-South, *HSC*. See pp. 27-36 for his proposed stemmata compared to Craster’s and his arguments for and against the various models.

<sup>239</sup> Colgrave, “Post-Bedan Miracles,” 308.

<sup>240</sup> Simpson, “The Alfred/Cuthbert Episode,” 410.

The propagation of the Alfredian stories involving St. Neot took a much different path than that of St. Cuthbert's, and a much less well-known one. The Neot stories had the advantage of a closer initial association with Alfred. Asser describes two visits to Neot by King Alfred during Neot's lifetime, while the *Vita Neoti* actually claims Alfred was a brother of Neot<sup>241</sup> and includes Latin versions of several annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from King Alfred's reign.<sup>242</sup> The *Vita Neoti* was incorporated into the *Annals of St. Neot* in the twelfth century and into John Wallingford's *Chronicle* in the thirteenth century.<sup>243</sup> Bishop Matthew Parker provided the greatest boost to the perpetuation of the stories when he erroneously assumed them to be part of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and published the bread-burning story in his 1574 edition of Asser's *Life*.<sup>244</sup> Even if the story of Alfred's vision of St. Neot became less well-known over time, the story of the burning loaves is now firmly affixed to the Alfredian legend.

Two different saints' stories were thus initiated in similar fashion, promulgated in very different ways, and yet both benefited from West Saxon royal patronage, just as the West Saxon kings benefited from association with the saints. The writings of a powerful monastic community carried along the Cuthbertine stories in order to defend the monastery's extensive land holdings. The patronage—some might say interference—of the English royal house preserved the lesser-known Neotian stories, by preventing their return to the obscurity of Cornwall after their forced translation to East Anglia.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Dumville and Lapidge, *Vita Neoti*, lxxxiv.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., cvii. Annals 878, 885, and 899 are included.

<sup>243</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 200.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., *Alfred the Great*, 201.

<sup>245</sup> Johnson-South, "King Alfred's Aura," 617.



## 2. The Consolidation of England

The unification of England under the Anglo-Saxons took place over a span of five hundred years. Henry of Huntingdon described Anglo-Saxon England in the year 449 as “the Heptarchy” of the kingdoms of Kent, Sussex, Wessex, Essex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria.<sup>246</sup> Shifting borders and alliances characterized what little is known of the next century or more. Beginning in 597, the spread of Christianity brought written records that documented the Northumbrian rise to power in the late seventh century.<sup>247</sup> King Offa (r. 756-796) established Mercian supremacy, but Mercian power declined after his death.<sup>248</sup> By the time King Egberht of Wessex (r. 802-839) died he had absorbed Kent, Sussex, and Essex into his kingdom<sup>249</sup> and was described as ruling “imperially as far as the Humber [River],” preceding Alfred, who “brought all parts of the kingdom under his domain.”<sup>250</sup> This is clearly an exaggeration, as Egberht’s West Saxon territories were all south of the Thames River, with most of the area between the Thames in the south and the Humber in the north belonging to the English kings of Mercia and East Anglia.<sup>251</sup> After the Vikings had killed or driven off the kings of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia, Alfred was the last Anglo-Saxon king in power in England.<sup>252</sup>

Acquiring a kingdom by default is hardly a claim to greatness. Even the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the supposed propaganda tool of the West Saxon court, gave Alfred

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<sup>246</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, lx, 17. His depiction is overly-simplistic, as it combines the separate kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia into Northumbria.

<sup>247</sup> James Campbell, Eric John, Patrick Wormald, *The Anglo-Saxons*, gen. ed. James Campbell (London: Penguin Books, 1991; first published 1982), 33.

<sup>248</sup> Janet Nelson, “Anglo-Saxon England,” *The Oxford Illustrated history of England*, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, §30, p. 265.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, §23, p. 107.

<sup>251</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 31. See also Abels map 2, p. 350.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 116 to 144.

only a qualified claim to England. The annal for 886, describing Alfred's re-taking London from the Danes, relates that "all the English people that were *not* under subjection to the Danes submitted to him."<sup>253</sup> In his *Life of King Alfred*, Asser repeats annal 886 from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, yet repeatedly styles Alfred "king of the Anglo-Saxons without any qualification," even inserting the title when copying entries from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that simply have "King Alfred."<sup>254</sup> Æthelweard embellishes his own report on Alfred: "all the men and especially the people of the Saxons, excepting the barbarian people and those held captive in their power, received the man as their savior."<sup>255</sup> Even after Alfred had consolidated all non-Danish lands under his rule, he left the Danelaw for his heirs to contend with. His son, Edward the Elder, drove the Vikings out of Mercia and East Anglia by 919. When Edward's son Æthelstan regained York in 927, he truly became the first king of all England. The Kingdom of York (the southern portion of Northumbria) changed hands between the English and the Danes several times before it was finally back in English hands under King Eadred in 954.<sup>256</sup>

In the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, St. Cuthbert appears to Alfred in a vision, predicts his victory at Edington, and declares that "God has delivered. . . all this land, and [established] hereditary rule for you and your sons and the sons of your sons. Be just, for

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<sup>253</sup> *ASC sub anno 887 (recte 886)*. Similar words are found *sub anno 901 (recte 899)*. MS A only. Emphasis added.

<sup>254</sup> Asser, chs 1, 64, 67, 71, 73, 83, and 87. The *ASC* for the years 882, 885, and 886 have "Aelfred cyning" or "Ælfred cyning." Janet Bately, *ASC MS A*.

<sup>255</sup> Campbell, *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, 46.

<sup>256</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 68-71.

you are chosen King of all Britain.”<sup>257</sup> Simpson interprets this pronouncement as less divinely-inspired than would seem at first glance. She credits the creation of the Alfred/Cuthbert legend and its inclusion in the *HSC* with the “desire to uphold the rights of the English kings in Northumbria” toward the political and military goal of a united English realm ruled by the West Saxon dynasty.<sup>258</sup> Orderic Vitalis credits Alfred with “holding sway over the whole of England,” likely following Asser.<sup>259</sup> Matthew Paris repeats in 1250 the description of Alfred as the first ruler of England.<sup>260</sup> Spelman titles Book I of his *Life of Ælfred the Great* (written c. 1640) “Ælfred the Great, First Founder of the English Monarchy.” The title is repeated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1901, the Victorians proclaim Alfred to be Father of England as well as of the British Empire.<sup>261</sup>

Alfred’s growing reputation as the founder of England provided a focal point for English nationalism, which in turn further contributed to Alfred’s own reputation. Keynes credits Alfred only with making a conscious effort to create a unified English nation.<sup>262</sup> Timothy Reuter saw the history of England as a single entity, beginning with Alfred’s stabilization of the “core kingdom” of Wessex.<sup>263</sup> He warns of a tendency among scholars, though, to see a unified kingdom of England as the result of

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<sup>257</sup> Johnson-South, trans., *HSC*, §16, pp 55-57.

<sup>258</sup> Simpson, “Alfred/Cuthbert Episode,” 410.

<sup>259</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, vol. II: *Books III and IV*, Oxford Medieval Texts, gen eds. D.E. Greenway, B.F. Harvey, M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, repr. 1983), Book IV, p. 241.

<sup>260</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 231.

<sup>261</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 4.

<sup>262</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 355.

<sup>263</sup> Timothy Reuter, “The Making of England and Germany, 850-1050: Points of Comparison and Difference,” *Medieval Europeans: Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 56.

“geographical determinism” or “manifest destiny” or to assume a unified nation would inevitably have grown out of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the fifth century.<sup>264</sup> Matthew Innes provides a closer look at the progress of political consolidation in England. After the death of King Offa in 796, Mercian power was waning, and in Northumbria violent factional rivalry weakened the previously centralized kingdom.<sup>265</sup> Since the northern kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria were both weakening *before* the Viking invasions, and Wessex had been consolidating the southern kingdoms prior to the invasions, Alfred was in a position to take advantage of the political consolidation of England already underway.

Alfred’s court, including Asser, parlayed Alfred’s success into the creation of an image of Alfred as the model Christian king, solemnly taking the reigns of his unified England.<sup>266</sup> Alfred’s eventual success, however, was neither easy nor inevitable. He had to buy peace from the Vikings initially, and only his victory at Edington in 878 stopped the Viking advance and kept Alfred from the same fate as the northern Anglo-Saxon kings. The victory in 878 was perhaps only possible due to a breaking up of the Viking confederation that was already well underway by then.<sup>267</sup> Whitelock feels that Wessex was near collapse after its defeat at Chippenham earlier in 878 and that Alfred’s victory at Edington saved England from becoming another Scandinavian country.<sup>268</sup> Innes credits Alfred’s success less to his heroic character and more to the distance of the West

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>265</sup> Matthew Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300-900* (London: Routledge, 2007), 340-1.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>268</sup> Whitelock, “Battle of Edington,” pp. 11, 14.

Saxon heartlands from the initial Viking attacks and Alfred's ability to capitalize on good luck and inherently strong West Saxon political structures.<sup>269</sup>

The plaque affixed to the statue of Alfred at its unveiling in Winchester during the millenary festivities in 1901 dedicates the statue "To the Founder of the Kingdom and Nation." A new plaque, mounted below the granite base of the statue sometime after the 1960s credits Alfred only with laying "the foundation for a single kingdom of England." The first plaque reflects the somewhat exaggerated accomplishments touted by the Victorian cult of Alfred, while the new plaque gives a more measured statement of his achievements. Alfred clearly took advantage of an opportunity, and benefited from good luck along the way, but he also displayed leadership ability of his own. He can be credited with continuing the trend of English unification, but certainly can not claim full credit for it, much less founding the West Saxon ruling dynasty.

### 3. *The Creation of Shires, Hundreds and Tithings*

William of Malmesbury first credited King Alfred with instituting the division of the English into hundreds and tithings.<sup>270</sup> William had every Englishman assigned to a "tithing" of ten men, with ten tithings then making up a "hundred." Each man was held responsible for the behavior, good or bad, of the other men in his tithing and hundred.<sup>271</sup> Anglo-Norman chroniclers such as William used the tremendous volume of available Alfredian literature to assist them in demonstrating the continuity from Anglo-Saxon to Norman rule, and to reduce the perception of drastic change resulting from the Norman

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<sup>269</sup> Innes, *Early Medieval Western Europe*, 376.

<sup>270</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 230.

<sup>271</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, §122, p. 189.

Conquest.<sup>272</sup> Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, was the first to credit the Anglo-Saxons with dividing England into counties or shires.<sup>273</sup> The division of the West Saxon shires, in an earlier form, at least, began in the eighth century and possibly earlier, with Alfred simply inheriting an existing system.<sup>274</sup> The system of hundreds and tithings actually emerged in the tenth century, *after* Alfred's reign.<sup>275</sup> By the fourteenth century, the supposed administrative accomplishments of Alfred had been conflated into the depiction of Alfred as the sole institutor of shires, hundreds, and tithings.

Opponents of the English monarchy in the seventeenth century focused on King Alfred as the organizer of England.<sup>276</sup> Antiquaries and lawyers responded to the "rampant absolutism" of James I (r. 1603-1625) and Charles I (r. 1625-1649) by reaching back to the Anglo-Saxon past and finding a system of subordinate government organized, by Alfred of course, into local rule by shires, hundreds, and tithings.<sup>277</sup> Seventeenth-century Whigs and radicals invoked the image of the Norman Yoke to illustrate the Anglo-Saxon freedoms lost with the Conquest. The supposed ancient Anglo-Saxon freedoms, including representative government, were supplanted by the "alien" Norman king.<sup>278</sup> The rediscovery of the thirteenth-century *Mirror of Justices* contributed to Alfred's reputation for upholding pre-Conquest English laws and liberties.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 229.

<sup>273</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, i.4, p. 17. See also editor's notes, p. lx.

<sup>274</sup> Nicholas Brooks, "Alfredian Government: The West Saxon Inheritance," *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter; Studies in Early Medieval Britain. Series editor Nicholas Brooks (London: Ashgate Publishing, Limited, 2003), 153-7.

<sup>275</sup> David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd, 1989), 135.

<sup>276</sup> Yorke, "Alfredism," 364.

<sup>277</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 246-250.

<sup>278</sup> Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke," *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), 57.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

William Stubbs, writing in the late nineteenth century gives a detailed and much more complex account of the origins of shires, hundreds and tithings. He describes the various original uses of the term “shire” (Old English *scire*) continuing to the division by King Edgar (r. 959-875) of all of England into shires, some of whose borders were still in use at the time of Stubbs’ writing.<sup>280</sup> He assigns the creation of the English hundreds, the hundred-court, and tithings to King Edgar, also.<sup>281</sup> His only mention of Alfred is to point out that Alfred did *not* create these institutions, but he concedes that Alfred may have adopted an earlier version of the hundred-court.<sup>282</sup>

#### 4. *The Origination of English Constitutional Government*

The image of Alfred as the creator of the English governmental institutions of constitution, Parliament, and Common Law also arose from his mention in the re-discovered *Mirror of Justices*. He appears in the tract as originating a constitution, convening parliaments twice a year, and, in one year alone, hanging forty-four judges for giving false judgments.<sup>283</sup> These accomplishments were also used, to a far greater extent, by the seventeenth-century radicals who rose up in response to the abuses and ineptitude of the Stuart kings.

The defense of the so-called ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties and the right to a representative government became a rallying cry for the radicals and Parliamentarians

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<sup>280</sup> William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England: In Its Origin and Development*, vol 1, sixth edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1897), 122-4.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 91, 104.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>283</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 249.

during the English Civil Wars of 1642 to 1651.<sup>284</sup> Alfred's Law Code was well-known by then, as well as Asser's biography of Alfred, in addition to mentions of Alfred in other medieval historical writings. The English scholars of the seventeenth century traced their Saxon roots to the "Germans" of Tacitus' *Germania*, and focused on the perceived political freedoms of the ancient Germanic tribes, as they had been inherited by Alfred, complete with constitutional, representative government.<sup>285</sup>

By the eighteenth century, prominent Whigs glorified Alfred as upholding the democratic forms of government dating back to the fifth century that were subsequently destroyed by Norman tyranny.<sup>286</sup> The so-called Whig interpretation of history that arose by the middle of the seventeenth century also emphasized the significance of the continuity of "ancient Anglo-Saxon" practices into modern England.<sup>287</sup> Alfred was once again held up as an exemplar for kings, this time for the Hanoverian Kings and princes, especially Prince Frederick (d. 1751).<sup>288</sup>

Alfred as founder of the constitution was again invoked at the 1795 trial of Henry Yorke for "inciting [the public] to unconstitutional action."<sup>289</sup> In his defense, he claimed he had always defended "that magnanimous government which we derived from our

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<sup>284</sup> Hill, "The Norman Yoke." An excellent summary of the Civil Wars and the events precipitating them can be found in Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford History of Britain* (Oxford University Press, revised edition, 2001), pp. 348-372.

<sup>285</sup> Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 32.

<sup>286</sup> Hill, "The Norman Yoke," 95.

<sup>287</sup> Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 111.

<sup>288</sup> Keynes, "The Cult Alfred," 275.

<sup>289</sup> Hill, "The Norman Yoke," 103.



Saxon fathers, and from the prodigious mind of the immortal Alfred.”<sup>290</sup> The pseudonym “Alfred” was even used in 1803 and 1804 by authors of anti-French recruiting pamphlets.<sup>291</sup> His name was invoked again by Thomas Evans, another radical speaking out against feudal tyranny, who declared that Alfred was the savior of “the three great eras from which to date the liberty of the world, that of Moses, that of the Christian, and that of Alfred.”<sup>292</sup>

The rampant adoration of Alfred and his so-called ancient Anglo-Saxon constitution was finally mitigated by the more serious scholarship of the late nineteenth century. Even so, scholars critical of the idealized Anglo-Saxon past in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries were few.<sup>293</sup> There is, of course, no single written English constitution such as the United States has. Britain has a *de facto*, unwritten constitution: a set of laws, Parliamentary Acts, and the Common Law, most of which Alfred did not originate. Stubbs regards an assembly of bishops, barons, and township representatives at St. Albans (in the absence of King John) on August 4, 1213 to be the first meeting of an English national council.<sup>294</sup> Magna Carta, of course, followed in 1215. The 1213 council and subsequent councils came to be known as “parliaments” by the 1250s, with the term possibly in use as early as the late twelfth century.<sup>295</sup> After the

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<sup>290</sup> *The Trial of Henry Yorke for Conspiracy* (1795), 84, 128. Cited in Christopher Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” 104.

<sup>291</sup> Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” note 5, p. 104.

<sup>292</sup> Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire* (second edition, 1816), pp. iii, 8. Cited in Christopher Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” 107.

<sup>293</sup> Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” 113. Hill specifically refers to the work of Granville Sharp (1769) and John Wade (1833).

<sup>294</sup> Stubbs, *The Constitutional History*, 565-6.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 611.

Provisions of Oxford in 1258, parliaments were held fairly regularly.<sup>296</sup> Alfred, therefore, was several hundred years too early to claim credit for originating Parliament, Common Law, or trial by jury—all of which are clearly post-Conquest institutions. In a recent study of Alfred's governance, Nicholas Brooks concludes that, while Alfred certainly continued existing governmental and political divisions, a case cannot be made as either a reformer, much less a founder of, modern English government.<sup>297</sup>

### 5. *The Founding of Oxford*

The University of Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world, providing a center of teaching since at least the early twelfth century.<sup>298</sup> Such a distinguished institution is certainly in need of an illustrious founder, and King Alfred was readily available to fill that role. Ranulf of Higden, in his *Polychronicon* of the mid-fourteenth century, asserts that Oxford was founded by King Alfred in the ninth century at the suggestion of St. Neot.<sup>299</sup> According to Asser, Alfred allocated one eighth of his annual tax revenue to “the school which he had most carefully assembled from many nobles of his own nation and also from boys who were not of noble birth.”<sup>300</sup> Higden then made the obvious (to himself, at least) connections between Alfred's scholarly accomplishments, the fame of Oxford, and Alfred's growing reputation as “originator of

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<sup>296</sup> George Holmes, *The Later Middle Ages: 1272-1485*, The Norton Library History of England, general editors Christopher Brooke and Denis Mack Smith (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 82.

<sup>297</sup> Brooks, “Alfredian Government,” 173.

<sup>298</sup> [www.ox.ac.uk/about\\_the\\_university/introducing\\_oxford/a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_university/index.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/introducing_oxford/a_brief_history_of_the_university/index.html)

<sup>299</sup> John Taylor, *The “Universal Chronicle” of Ranulf Higden* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 45.

<sup>300</sup> Asser, ch. 102.

all that was good in England.”<sup>301</sup> The fellows of Oxford’s University College put the connection between Alfred and Oxford to the test only a few years later, when they invoked royal patronage in order to secure title to property they claimed in Oxford.<sup>302</sup> More details of the supposed establishment of Oxford by Alfred, including the installation of Asser as regent in grammar and rhetoric, were enthusiastically provided in the fifteenth century by Thomas Rudbourne in his *Liber Abbatiae* of Hyde Abbey and by John Rous in his *Historia Regum Angliae*.<sup>303</sup> A rival claim by supporters of Cambridge University that a reference by Bede to Grantchester proved that *their* university was founded by Sigeberht of East Anglia in the seventh century and therefore pre-dated Oxford led to the equally astonishing claim by the Oxford camp that Alfred had actually *relocated* scholars from an ancient school at “Greeklade” (Cricklade), thereby once again restoring the proper antiquity of Oxford.<sup>304</sup>

The debate continued through the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. William Camden included in his 1602 edition of Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* a passage describing Alfred’s intervention in a dispute at Oxford, thereby confirming the existence of an *already* ancient school there. Since Camden’s text almost exactly followed that of Parker’s 1574 edition with the exception of the Oxford passage, Cambridge supporters declared Camden’s interpolation to be a forgery, while the Oxford side declared that

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<sup>301</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 236. Keynes refers further to J. Parker’s *The Early History of Oxford 727-1000*, Oxford Historical Society 3 (Oxford, 1885).

<sup>302</sup> Arthur Oswald, “University College,” in H. E. Salter, ed. *The Victoria History of the County of Oxford*. Vol. 3: *The University of Oxford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 63.

<sup>303</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 237.

<sup>304</sup> Yorke, “Alfredism,” 363. Bede simply has Sigeberht establishing a school. Bede, Book III, ch. XVIII.

Parker (a Cambridge man) had suppressed the Oxford text in *his* earlier edition.<sup>305</sup> Henry Savile the Elder had provided the offending passage regarding Oxford to Camden, with the claim that he had copied it from a manuscript of Asser's *Life* dating to the late fourteenth century.<sup>306</sup> The fourteenth-century manuscript of Asser might well have been produced in response to Higden's Alfredian Oxford founding in his *Polychronicon*.<sup>307</sup>

John Spelman (d. 1643), in his *Life of Ælfred the Great*, credits Alfred only with the original founding of Oxford.<sup>308</sup> He mentions Camden's Oxford interpolation in Asser, but disputes any notion that Oxford was founded *prior* to Alfred and subsequently *refounded* by Alfred, and yet details the controversy surrounding the Savile document that allegedly supported Camden's claim to the antiquity of Oxford, but could no longer be found.<sup>309</sup> Keynes points out that Spelman, a Cambridge man, was perhaps too casual in dismissing the prior Oxford claim yet not critical enough in supporting Cambridge's claim to a seventh century founding by Sigebert.<sup>310</sup> Obadiah Walker, Master of University College, was instrumental in having Spelman's unpublished *Life* translated into Latin, dedicated with much ceremony to King Charles II, and published at Oxford in 1678, providing a clear affirmation of Oxford's loyalty to the monarchy besides a further convenient exploitation of Alfred's ties to Oxford.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Stevenson, ed. *Asser's Life*, Stevenson provides an excellent account of the dispute in his Introduction, §§ 8-10, pp. xxiii-xxx.

<sup>306</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," p. 244 and n. 95, p. 245.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>308</sup> Spelman, *The Life of Ælfred the Great*, Book II, §§69-70, pp. 144-7. Spelman's original English version was not published during his lifetime.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, §§20-64, pp. 171-95.

<sup>310</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 255.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-5.

In 1727, a panel of judges settling a dispute over “visitatorial authority” and therefore who the proper Master of University College should be, upheld the fourteenth century claim to an Alfredian founding, thereby confirming royal patronage of Oxford.<sup>312</sup> William Smith, having previously made an extensive study of the University College archives, published his *Annals of University College* in 1728, too late to fulfill his intention of “exploding the Aluredian myth” of the founding of Oxford prior to the 1727 trial.<sup>313</sup> Oswald considers Smith’s efforts to have been successful in the long run, saying Smith’s conclusions that Alfred did *not* found Oxford were “inescapable, though such iconoclasm was highly unpopular.”<sup>314</sup> Scholars were no longer interested in proving which of the two universities, Oxford or Cambridge, were more ancient, but only in providing a supportable date for their respective foundations.

David Hume’s *History of England* repeats Alfred’s foundation of Oxford for the eighteenth-century audience, stating that “Alfred. . . founded, at least repaired, the University of Oxford.”<sup>315</sup> An updated, abridged version of Hume, though, finds “no satisfactory evidence” for an Alfredian foundation or restoration of Oxford.<sup>316</sup> Giles’ notes in his “Harmony of the Chroniclers,” published in the same year as the updated Hume, clearly give the opinion that the Oxford addition to Asser is an interpolation.<sup>317</sup> Not surprisingly, the subdued 1872 celebration of the millenary of the now discredited

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<sup>312</sup> Oswald, “University College,” 69.

<sup>313</sup> “Alured” is a variant of the name “Alfred,” and is occasionally seen in Alfredian literature.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>315</sup> David Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Cæsar, to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Thomas Davis, 1844. Originally published 1761), 64.

<sup>316</sup> David Hume, *A History of England from the Earliest Times to the Revolution in 1688*, abridged version (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1863), 45.

<sup>317</sup> J. A. Giles, “Harmony of the Chroniclers During the Life of King Alfred—A. D. 849-901,” in *Memorials of King Alfred*, ed. J. A. Giles (London, 1863; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 94.

Alfredian founding of University College seemed to indicate the school's legendary founding was no longer a truth in any need of a vigorous defense.<sup>318</sup> Thomas Hughes expresses doubt about an Alfredian founding of Oxford, simply stating that "there is no proof that Oxford existed as a place of education before Alfred's time, nor is it certain that he founded schools there."<sup>319</sup>

In 1901, Charles Plummer, himself an Oxford scholar, removed all pretext of his university's alleged Alfredian founding by quoting Frederic Maitland's remark that "the earliest form of inter-university sports seems to have been a competition in lying."<sup>320</sup> In his lecture "The Sources," he includes the alleged founding of Oxford by Alfred in the "mythical realm" where he also finds Alfred burning cakes, inventing tithings, hundreds and shires, ruling all of Britain, and inventing trial by jury.<sup>321</sup> He states without reservation or regret that "we may not, here in Oxford, claim Alfred as our founder; but surely our hearts may be uplifted at the thought, that in all that we do here in the cause of true learning and genuine education, we are carrying on the work which Alfred left us to do."<sup>322</sup> By the time Stevenson published his edition of Asser's *Life* in 1904, the Camden passage had been discredited: Stevenson clearly identifies it as a later interpolation.<sup>323</sup>

The myth of an Alfredian founding of Oxford gained more attention, more controversy, and more notoriety than any of the other myths that grew up around Alfred's reputation. The dispute concerning the relative antiquity of Oxford over Cambridge

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<sup>318</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 325.

<sup>319</sup> Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, 217.

<sup>320</sup> Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great: Being the Ford Lectures for 1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 23-4. Plummer does not give a citation for Maitland's remark.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-3.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>323</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life*, pp. 70 and 325.

occupied a great number of scholars and instigated an even greater number of articles, lectures, and lengthy footnotes. But what good, if any, came of all this effort? While Savile's motives, or at least his scholarship, are indeed suspect, we can perhaps accuse Camden only of being overzealous in his desire to provide all available texts in his edition of Asser, and can at least credit him with igniting an interest in Alfred and Asser specifically, and in Anglo-Saxon scholarship in general that can only be commended.<sup>324</sup> I must agree with Simon Keynes, however, that this particular rivalry is "best left to the rugby field at Twickenham or a certain stretch of the River Thames."<sup>325</sup>

The University of Oxford actually began as a collection of students and masters early in the twelfth century.<sup>326</sup> Cambridge University was actually founded sometime after 1209, when the local townspeople of Oxford hanged two clerks for murder during a "town and gown" dispute. A community of Oxford scholars subsequently decamped to Cambridge and formed a university there.<sup>327</sup> This view is echoed by historians of the County of Cambridge, giving Roger of Wendover (d. 1236) as their source.<sup>328</sup> Cambridge University itself gives its founding at 1209, when groups of scholars "congregated" at the ancient Roman trading post of Cambridge.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Keynes, "The Cult of Alfred," 245.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>326</sup> Strickland Gibson, "The University of Oxford," in H. E. Salter, ed., *The Victoria History of the County of Oxford*. Vol. 3: *The University of Oxford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 1. Salter begins his history by dismissing "mythical accounts of its origin."

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>328</sup> J. P. C. Roach, "The University of Cambridge," in *The Victoria History of the Counties of England*, series ed. R. B. Pugh; *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, ed. J. P. C. Roach. Vol. 3, *The City and University of Cambridge* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 151.

<sup>329</sup> [www.800.cam.ac.uk/page/5/history.htm](http://www.800.cam.ac.uk/page/5/history.htm).

## 6. *The Creation of the Royal Navy*

The Victorian English celebrated the millenary of Alfred's death in 1901, with a nationalistic fervor dampened only by the recent death of Queen Victoria. The four-day celebration was followed a month later by the launching of the *HMS King Alfred* at Portsmouth naval shipyard.<sup>330</sup> The Royal Navy was the pride of Britain in the nineteenth century, defending, symbolizing and therefore justifying the British Empire. The Victorian English historians, true to tradition, laid the credit for an undertaking as illustrious as the founding of a national navy squarely at the feet of King Alfred the Great. Alfred Bowker, Mayor of Winchester, began the drive in 1897 to host the Alfred Millenary in his town. He enlisted Walter Besant, "novelist, popular historian and champion of the working class," to give a lecture on King Alfred.<sup>331</sup> Besant's comments included the assertion that "now so much is Alfred the founder [of our Empire] that *every* ship in our navy might have his name."<sup>332</sup>

As with other Alfredian myths, this one also begs closer inspection. Naval warfare in the Anglo-Saxon period was primitive at best, perhaps no more than "confused scuffling at the water's edge" by rival fighting men in their boats.<sup>333</sup> There was no resemblance whatsoever to the clear lines of command, dedicated personnel, and infrastructure that characterize a modern navy.<sup>334</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes numerous incursions of Viking ships, but only makes the barest mention of Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>330</sup> Joanne Parker, *'England's Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 148.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>333</sup> Susan Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare, 1000-1500*, Warfare and History, gen. ed. Jeremy Black (London: Routledge, 2002), 24.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



naval activity.<sup>335</sup> These encounters were all at best skirmishes involving locally conscripted merchant or fishing vessels.

Alfred was heir to a mature ship-building tradition that had existed from the seventh to the late ninth century.<sup>336</sup> According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred introduced a new ship design in 896: he needed an “interceptor” ship to meet raiders at sea *before* they could land, not just a troop-carrying ship.<sup>337</sup> Alfred’s ships were in fact simply a bigger, and therefore heavier, version of existing designs.<sup>338</sup> The first test of the new ships built to Alfred’s design resulted in an English victory, even if the battle itself was something of a debacle (see below). Contemporary sources are perhaps the best judge of Alfred’s naval prowess or lack thereof: subsequent generations in fact looked to Alfred’s great-grandson Edgar the Pacific (r. 959-975) as the “origin of English naval aspirations.”<sup>339</sup>

Alfred can be credited with founding a national navy only by quite a stretch of the definition of “navy.” The main task of a navy, especially during war, is to safeguard a nation’s shipping and to deny its enemy the use of its seas, including the necessary support functions of logistics, strategy, and tactics.<sup>340</sup> The need to defend slow, clumsy merchant ships led to the development of long, narrow fighting galleys, staffed by

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<sup>335</sup> *ASC sub anno* 851, 882, 875, 885, and 895. The Wessex incursions began in 836 and continued beyond Alfred’s reign.

<sup>336</sup> Edwin and Joyce Gifford, “Alfred’s New Longships,” in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 281-3.

<sup>337</sup> Michael J. Swanton, “King Alfred’s Ships: Text and Context,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999), 9-10.

<sup>338</sup> Gifford, “Alfred’s Longships,” 284.

<sup>339</sup> Swanton, “King Alfred’s Ships,” 21-2.

<sup>340</sup> E. B. Potter, ed., Chester W. Nimitz, assoc. ed., *Sea Power, a Naval History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), 2.

fighting men.<sup>341</sup> An insular maritime state such as England could achieve prosperity through overseas trade, but required a standing navy to protect its commercial vessels.<sup>342</sup> Coletta and Wheeler further require a “national” navy to be a permanent institution, paid for and owned by a nation or its ruler.<sup>343</sup> Alfred’s newly-constructed ships of 896 might possibly be described as a standing navy, but there is no evidence that he provided an infrastructure to support and maintain his new “navy.”

Contemporary accounts of Alfred’s actual accomplishments regarding his navy credit him with only a few sea-going skirmishes. The first Vikings appeared in England in 789, landing in Portland and killing the king’s reeve who had come down to the harbor to meet them and presumably to inquire as to their intentions.<sup>344</sup> Dire portents such as “immense whirlwinds and flashes of lightning and fiery dragons” accompanied the destruction of the church at Lindisfarne by Vikings in 793, which was followed the next year by a raid on the monastery at Jarrow.<sup>345</sup> After the initial hysteria accompanying the first landing of the Vikings, the chronicles for the next four decades concern themselves mostly with the deaths of bishops, kings and the occasional pope, and mention of fighting between various English kings. The Viking raids resumed in earnest in 835 with a raid on Sheppey, followed in 836 by thirty five Viking ships landing at Carhampton and defeating the army of the English king Egbert of Wessex.<sup>346</sup> The English defenders met

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<sup>341</sup> E. B. Potter, *Sea Power*, 2.

<sup>342</sup> Clark G. Reynolds, *Navies in History* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>343</sup> Paolo E. Coletta and Gerald E. Wheeler, *An Outline of World Naval History Since the Sixteenth Century* (Annapolis, Maryland: United States Naval Academy Press, 1956), 5.

<sup>344</sup> *ASC sub anno* 789. See esp. notes 4 and 5.

<sup>345</sup> *ASC sub anno* 793, 794.

<sup>346</sup> *ASC sub anno* 836.

the Vikings raiders predominantly on land, with little mention of Anglo-Saxon naval excursions challenging them at sea.

The annal for 851 mentions that King Æthelstan of Kent “fought in ships and slew a great army at Sandwich.”<sup>347</sup> The key phrase “fought in ships,” however, appears in neither the Winchester manuscript (MS A) of the *Chronicle*, nor in Asser’s translation of the *Chronicle*.<sup>348</sup> Since MS A is the oldest manuscript extant and contemporary with Alfred, it provides weak evidence indeed for any type of Anglo-Saxon naval organization prior to Alfred’s reign. In 875 Alfred “went out to sea with a naval force” and in 882 he “went out with ships to sea.”<sup>349</sup> In both instances, he fought against the Danes and captured at least one of their ships. In 885 Alfred “sent a naval force. . . into East Anglia,” again fighting the Danes and capturing ships.<sup>350</sup>

Asser makes no mention of Alfred and his naval adventures of 875 and 882 beyond his translation of the annals for those years and only slightly embellishes the description of a naval encounter with the Danes in his translation of the annal for 885.<sup>351</sup> Richard Abels points out, in noting that three of the four naval battles recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the ninth century involved Alfred, that naval battles at that time were rare and usually resembled more of a floating land battle with fighting taking place when two opposing ships came together and one crew boarded the other’s ship.<sup>352</sup> Swanton cautions against equating ship-borne forces with naval tactics: transporting

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<sup>347</sup> *ASC sub anno* 851.

<sup>348</sup> *ASC*, note 1, p. 43.

<sup>349</sup> *ASC sub anno* 875, 882.

<sup>350</sup> *ASC sub anno* 885.

<sup>351</sup> Asser ch. 48 (annal for 875), ch. 64 (annal for 882), and ch. 67 (annal for 885).

<sup>352</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 172,

soldiers by ship to the scene of a land engagement is not the same as anticipating an enemy landing and engaging invaders off-shore, as Alfred eventually did.<sup>353</sup>

Perhaps inspired by these victories, and enjoying a respite from warfare while his son Edward led the English army to victory from 893 onward,<sup>354</sup> Alfred designed a new class of warship that was “swifter and steadier and also higher than the others” of the Frisian and Danes.<sup>355</sup> The first ships built to Alfred’s new design were tested off the southern coast of England in 896. Alfred’s men and ships claimed the victory over the Danes, but a debacle ensued when the tide went out, grounding Alfred’s larger, heavier boats, while the surviving Danes escaped in their smaller, shallow-draft boats.<sup>356</sup> Hardly a rousing start to the infant “national navy,” but we *can* credit Alfred with the “then very new idea that the best way to deal with a sea-borne invader was not to let him land but meet him in equal strength at sea.”<sup>357</sup>

The myth of Alfred as founder of the Royal Navy was a relatively late development and the only major contribution to the Alfredian myth to arise in the modern era. Joanne Parker lays the credit, or perhaps the blame, for the maturation of Alfred’s “swifter, steadier ships” into the modern Royal Navy upon John Spelman.<sup>358</sup> Spelman devotes three full pages of his biography of Alfred to the details of Alfred’s “navy,” describing him as “the first that put to sea such a Navy as was awful unto Strangers,

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<sup>353</sup> Swanton, “King Alfred’s Ships,” 2.

<sup>354</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 303-4.

<sup>355</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 897 (*recte* 896).

<sup>356</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 306.

<sup>357</sup> Grant Uden and Richard Cooper, *A Dictionary of British Ships and Seamen* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980), 17. They cite in turn Geoffrey Callender, (*The Naval Side of British History*, 1924): “There is no advantage of living on an island unless your navy rides in undisputed sway over the waters that surround it.”

<sup>358</sup> Parker, ‘*England’s Darling*,’ 150.

begun the first Mastery of the Seas.”<sup>359</sup> David Mallet and James Thomson popularized the notion of Alfred as Father of the Navy in the “Grand Ode in Honour of Great Britain” from their drama *Alfred: A Masque*, later known, away from its original context, as “Rule, Britannia.”<sup>360</sup> A closer look at symbols depicted in most popular images of Alfred in the eighteenth century, however, do *not* include naval accoutrements or motifs,<sup>361</sup> indicating that the tradition of Alfred as Founder of the Royal Navy is perhaps not as well-established as the Victorians would have us believe.

In his summary of Alfredian depictions in history paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Keynes includes, among others, Alfred the cake-burner, law-maker, and harp-player, but no naval hero of any sort.<sup>362</sup> There are, however, a few pre-Victorian mentions of Alfred as naval hero to be found. Henry Hoare’s monument to Alfred, erected at Stourhead in 1770, includes a plaque crediting Alfred with creating a naval force.<sup>363</sup> The Hanoverian supporters, continuing a tradition of comparing Alfred to various modern kings, held him up as an exemplar for William IV (r. 1830-1837), also known as the Sailor King, based on the two kings’ supposed common interest in naval affairs.<sup>364</sup> In 1851, John Callcott Horsley depicted Alfred approving a model of his new ship design in his painting “A model for Alfred’s navy.”<sup>365</sup>

The lack of a mention of Alfred’s alleged role in founding a “national navy” on the plaques of either the 1877 statue of him at Wantage or on either of the plaques on the

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<sup>359</sup> Spelman, *The Life of Ælfred*, Book III, §75 to §80, pp 150-2..

<sup>360</sup> Parker, ‘*England’s Darling*,’ 64. “Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves. . . “

<sup>361</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 291.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>364</sup> Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, 31.

<sup>365</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 338.

1901 statue at Winchester (see above, pages 1 and 2, for the full inscriptions) does not strengthen the tenuous association of Alfred with the Royal Navy.

We must look six hundred years after Alfred, to Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547), to find the true founder of the Royal Navy. Henry created “an administrative and logistical structure. . . capable of maintaining a permanent navy.”<sup>366</sup> Henry’s predecessors had begun work toward a national navy, but even Henry V (r. 1413-1422) had directed in his will that the royal ships and their equipment be auctioned off upon his death.<sup>367</sup> The concept of a royal dockyard for the king’s ships, along with the Crown ownership and maintenance of the ships was not truly implemented until Henry VII (r. 1485-1509).<sup>368</sup>

Ironically, the first modern ship named for Alfred, was not *HMS King Alfred*, but the colonial American ship *Alfred*, originally built as the *Black Prince* in Philadelphia in 1774. The colonial Naval Committee purchased the ship and fitted it out as a man-of-war. She was one of four ships authorized by the Continental Congress to comprise the newly-formed Continental Navy, and served as its flagship until 1778, when she was captured by the British, condemned, and sold.<sup>369</sup> Parker suggests the English may not have even been aware that there was an American cult of Alfred, notwithstanding their capture of a colonial ship named for him.<sup>370</sup> In his *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine draws parallels between King George III (r. 1760-1820) and William the Conqueror, arguing

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<sup>366</sup> N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Seas: A Naval History of Great Britain*, vol. 1, 660-1549 (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 221; cited in Susan Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare*, 19.

<sup>367</sup> Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare*, 18.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>369</sup> James L. Mooney, ed., *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, vol 1-Part A, *Historical Sketches – Letter A* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1991), 174-5.

<sup>370</sup> Parker, ‘*England’s Darling*,’ 157.

that “a free Saxon constitution had been replaced by Norman tyranny.”<sup>371</sup> Even Thomas Jefferson kept in mind the supposed “Saxon liberties” as he drafted the Declaration of Independence.<sup>372</sup> Alfred was thus regarded by eighteenth century American revolutionaries as an exemplar against empire and absolute monarchy, yet a hundred years later, he was celebrated by the British in support of the same empire and its now constitutional monarchy.

The myths surrounding King Alfred arose from many sources and for many reasons. They developed over the course of a millennium, but as each successive myth arose it built upon an existing accretion of truth, hearsay, and legend that began during the lifetime of Alfred himself. Alfred recruited Asser as his “mass priest,” teacher, and most importantly, his biographer. Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* is flawed, naïve, partisan, and suspected of being a forgery, but it was nonetheless *available* to later historical writers who were able to glean facts from Asser’s *Life* and the less-flawed *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to support whichever myth they were sponsoring or promulgating. Whether the achievements attributed to Alfred are exaggerated continuations of earlier myths (or even truths) concerning Alfred, or are the retroactive assignment of a modern English institution to an “ancient” and noble forbearer, they still contribute to his durability as an English institution.

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<sup>371</sup> Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, 34.

<sup>372</sup> Keynes, “The Cult of Alfred,” 288.

## Chapter 5 – King Alfred’s Actual Accomplishments

Alfred’s mythical deeds greatly over-shadow his actual accomplishments, making it difficult to discern what those accomplishments actually were. Some of his achievements can be seen as simply performing his duties as a Christian king, while others were truly exceptional for his time. Alfred fended off Viking predations, assembled a law code, implemented legal reforms, and personally translated Latin religious works into the vernacular.

### 1. *The Sources*

None of Alfred’s mythical accomplishments discussed in this thesis appear in sources contemporary to his reign. A careful look at these same sources, however, will reveal what Alfred actually did for his kingdom and his people. The contemporary sources are problematic at best, but, if used cautiously, can still elucidate Alfred’s life and reign. Primary sources from England, France, Ireland and Scandinavia describe Alfred’s activities in England in the ninth century. Sources outside of Wessex will bear mostly on the image of Alfred as Warrior, as we have Alfred’s own Law Code and translations to tell us how he filled his roles as Law-Giver and Scholar.

Asser wrote his *Life of King Alfred* after being summoned to Alfred’s court to tutor the king and his household. Asser’s *Life* is biased toward Alfred, provides details that can not be verified elsewhere, and is suspected (by a minority of scholars) to be a forgery. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provides an historic sketch of England, especially



of Wessex. Since it was set down in Wessex in King Alfred's time, even if not on his direct orders, it is biased toward events in Wessex. However, the complicated tradition associated with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which includes seven different recensions, require that it be used as a source with care. The *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, based on an unknown manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, provides material beyond the *ASC*, including added detail concerning the wars with the Danes.<sup>373</sup>

Several Frankish sources document events in Wessex, especially the Viking incursions into England and Francia. The *Royal Frankish Annals* detail Frankish involvement with their Danish neighbors before the Danish attacks on England and Francia began in earnest. The *Annals of St. Bertin*, covering the period from 830 to 882, were not written by monks, and so provide contemporary historical information from the point of view of palace clergy and bishops, with their primary concern "the deeds of secular rulers and prelates."<sup>374</sup> The *Annals of St. Vaast* cover the period from 874 to 900, and can be used for the period after the *Annals of St. Bertin* end. The *Annals of Fulda* cover roughly the same period (838 to 900) as the *Annals of St. Bertin* and the *Annals of St. Vaast*, but from the perspective of East Francia. Where the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems mainly preoccupied with Viking invasions beginning with the attack on Lindisfarne in 793, the Frankish sources mainly focus on internal politics, border skirmishes, treaties, and occasional Viking attacks.

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<sup>373</sup> Campbell, *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, xxvii.

<sup>374</sup> Janet Laughland Nelson, trans., *Annals of St. Bertin: Ninth Century Histories, Volume I*. Manchester Medieval Sources Series, series advisor Janet Nelson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 1-2.

The *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Innisfallen* cover northern and southern Ireland, respectively.<sup>375</sup> The *Annals of Innisfallen* give very little information on events in England in the time of the Vikings, but the *Annals of Ulster* at least mention the deaths of a few Anglo-Saxon kings and even a queen.<sup>376</sup> The annals for 1016 and 1017 include the record of four deaths of Irish kings “by their own people,” yet also pronounce that “Ireland is at peace.”<sup>377</sup> Could it be mere coincidence that Ireland is considered to be at peace at the same time that England fell completely to the Kings of Denmark?

The Scandinavian sources for Viking depredations during the Anglo-Saxon period number far fewer than the English and Frankish sources. The Old Icelandic *Saga of the Jomsvikings* tells the story of a fleet of Danes (the Jomsvikings) invading Norway and being defeated by Earl Hakon at Hjorunga Bay (986).<sup>378</sup> While its historicity is questionable, it does contain a brief mention of raids on England by Knut and Harold (sons of King Gorm the Old) toward the end of the reign of Æthelstan, “a good king, and old,” but goes on to say they “subdued a great realm to their rule.”<sup>379</sup> Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* contains several references to Norwegians traveling to Scotland and Wales and ruling the Orkneys in the mid-tenth century. Three chapters of *Heimskringla* (38 to 40) concerning the Saga of Harald Fairhair detail exchanges between King Æthelstan of

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<sup>375</sup> Seán MacAirt and Gearóid MacNiocall, trans., *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983). Available online via Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) Edition, University College, Cork, Text ID Number T100001A. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100001A/index.html>. Seán MacAirt, trans., *The Annals of Innisfallen (MS Rawlinson B.503)* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951), xxi.

<sup>376</sup> *Annals of Ulster*: Offa of Mercia, s.a. 796; Cenwulf, s.a. 821; Æthelwulf of Wessex, s.a. 858; Æthelflæd of Wessex, daughter of Alfred, s.a. 918; Æthelstan of Wessex, s.a. 939; King Edgar the Pacific, s.a. 975.

<sup>377</sup> *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 1016, 1017.

<sup>378</sup> Lee M. Hollander, trans., *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), 13.

<sup>379</sup> Hollander, *Jomsvikings*, 39.

England and King Harald of Norway.<sup>380</sup> Books 8, 9 and 10 of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* tell of Danish activity in Francia during the reign of Charlemagne, and later in England prior to, and including, the reign of Alfred. Overall, however, they contain more about the tenth and early eleventh centuries, with narratives concerning Æthelred II (r. 978-1016), when renewed Danish and Norwegian attacks left all of England in Danish hands.<sup>381</sup> Generally, the Scandinavian sources simply see England as one more place to raid in the ninth century, but by the tenth century, they are dealing more with the English in an attempt to add England to the Danish territories. Scandinavian sources are thus far fewer, but nonetheless still valuable in assessing how the Vikings saw the Anglo-Saxons.

Alfred's achievements must also be viewed in the light of modern scholarship, especially his victories over the Vikings. Only then can one reach a conclusion as to whether or not the descriptions of the raids in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in Asser's *Life*, which both carry an Anglo-Saxon and Alfredian bias, exaggerate the threat to England in order to elevate Alfred.

## 2. *Alfred the Warrior*

Anglo-Saxon defenses up to the ninth century consisted mainly of temporary levies raised to defend a given locale from invading neighbors or other marauders. For the kings of late-ninth-century England, beginning with Alfred's brother Æthelred I, this was not

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<sup>380</sup> Snorri Sturlason, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1664).

<sup>381</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia: Books X–XVI*. Vol. I: *Books X, XI, XII and XIII*. Christiansen, Eric, trans. BAR International Series 84. General editors A. R. Hands and D. R. Walker. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1980. Peter Fisher, trans. and Hilda Ellis Davidson, ed. *Saxo Grammaticus: "The History of the Danes."* Vol. I: *English Text*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979.

enough to withstand the waves of Viking attacks. Defending Wessex from invading Vikings, known in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the Danish “Great Heathen Army” (Old English *micel hæthene here*) dominated the first half of Alfred’s adult life. Alfred makes his first appearance as a warrior at the age of nineteen, riding to the defense of Mercia alongside his brother, King Æthelred I in 868. Along with the West Saxon army, Alfred seems to have fought almost continuously during those years, first as prince to his brother King Æthelred, and later (after 871) as king himself. He fought the Viking army with the half of the West Saxon army that was under his command while his brother finished his prayers.<sup>382</sup> He fought the Great Heathen Army, and then he fought the Great Summer Fleet.<sup>383</sup> He fought nine battles against the Vikings just in 871, winning a few and either losing the rest or settling with the Vikings by paying tribute.<sup>384</sup> After a period of relative quiet in Wessex, the Vikings surprised and defeated the West Saxon army at Chippenham in the middle of winter “and occupied the lands of the West Saxons and settled there, and drove a great part of the people across the sea, and conquered most of the others; and the people submitted to them.”<sup>385</sup>

Alfred and his kingdom barely survived the initial wave of Viking attacks. The *ASC* does not describe any individual battlefield heroics by Alfred. Even Asser, Alfred’s private propagandist, describes Alfred’s battles mostly as conflicts between Christians and pagans, with only one mention of Alfred “acting courageously, like a wild boar.”<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, ch. 37.

<sup>383</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 871. So-called because it arrived in the summer and did not over-winter in England.

<sup>384</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 871.

<sup>385</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 878.

<sup>386</sup> Asser, ch. 38. Asser refers to the invaders as *pagani*, to set them apart from the Christians, yet the *ASC* generally refers to the invaders as simply “the Danish” (Old English *Deniscan*).

Alfred hid in the swamps of Athelney to regroup after his defeat at Chippenham early in 878 and to assemble a force strong enough to beat the Danish army at Edington later in the year and establish a treaty dividing England between the Danish-ruled (the Danelaw) and the English-ruled territories. By then, he had added half of Mercia to his kingdom, but had to defend that territory, also. After at least temporarily securing peace with the Danes, he set about creating a lasting defensive system.

The Anglo-Saxon kings had used a local military levy (*fyrð*) from at least the seventh century to raise temporary local militias to defend their kingdoms.<sup>387</sup> Alfred radically changed the old *fyrð* in 893, from a local levy into an improved militia, with only half of the men serving at a given time, thereby allowing the other half to remain at home to tend to their own households and to help defend their villages.<sup>388</sup> Alfred had obtained only limited resources with this scheme, however, as later that same year, the *fyrð* abandoned a siege of the Danes at Colne as their term of service was over and they had exhausted their provisions, even though Alfred was on his way with reinforcements.<sup>389</sup> Logistical problems aside, Alfred at least had the beginning of the idea of a standing army.

In a much more important military reform, Alfred built a network of fortified defensive works known as *burhs*, beginning around 890, at intervals throughout Wessex and Mercia, and instituted requirements for supplying them with troops. Alfred situated the *burhs* such that most of the populace was within twenty miles of at least one of

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<sup>387</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 290.

<sup>388</sup> Campbell, et al., *The Anglo-Saxons*, 150.

<sup>389</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 893.

them.<sup>390</sup> Some of them consisted of new fortifications of existing towns, some were built on old Roman foundations, and some were entirely new constructions, complete with a grid-work of roads with which the new town was laid out.<sup>391</sup> The *burhs* also defended the roads and navigable rivers, giving their garrisons an offensive as well as defensive capability.<sup>392</sup> Approximately 27,000 men were required just to maintain the *burhs*.<sup>393</sup>

Alfred was now well-prepared to meet the next Viking onslaught. After the more-or-less peaceful break from 879 to 893, the Danes attacked again. This time, Alfred and his soldiers were ready—or at least far more ready than the West Saxon army of 865. Supported by his son Edward (later King Edward the Elder) and Ealdorman Æthelred of London, Alfred defeated the Danes, forcing them to again depart English territory for the Danelaw,<sup>394</sup> which Alfred's son and grandsons later reclaimed for England.

Alfred's military successes against the Vikings loom large in the popular image of his kingship. They were less ground-breaking than his scholarly achievements, but were the most critical to the survival of his kingdom. Alfred demonstrated military skill in fighting where necessary, and retreating and regrouping when defeat was imminent. Alfred's main military reform was the reorganization of the *fyrð* and his establishment of the fortified *burh* system.<sup>395</sup> In this endeavor, Alfred saw beyond just his reign or the short-term survival of his kingdom, and paved the way for his eventual defeat of the Danes by 896. While the final victory over the Danes did not come easily for Alfred and

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<sup>390</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 24.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>392</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 195.

<sup>393</sup> John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 86.

<sup>394</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 295-6.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 196.

his men, it would have been impossible without his military reforms. For the first time since the Romans, the English had a permanent defensive structure.

Recent scholarship has questioned the magnitude of the Viking threat to the English, and whether it could have been exaggerated by contemporary authors. A complete and objective depiction of the situation in Wessex in Alfred's time must include sources other than those of his own West Saxons. The Frankish and Irish sources provide information about the activities of the Danes in their territories, and allow an assessment of the magnitude and severity of the challenge Alfred faced and a comparison to what the Anglo-Saxon sources claim. Recent scholarship can provide valuable objective information about the Danes themselves.

The *ASC* gives an hysterical account of the "heathen" attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne. The attack was preceded by "dire portents" including "immense whirlwinds. . . and fiery dragons" and a great famine.<sup>396</sup> The *Royal Frankish Annals* contain no mention of the Viking attacks on England of 793 and 794, but Alcuin, a Northumbrian scholar in Francia, heard of them and responded in a letter to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne, expressing his sorrow that the pagans "shed the blood of saints around the altar. . . and trampled the bodies of saints like dung in the streets," and goes on to describe the sins that the monks must have committed if even Saint Cuthbert and the others could not defend them.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> *ASC*, *sub anno* 793. The passage appears in MSS D and E, known as the northern recensions, but not A.

<sup>397</sup> Alcuin's Letter "On the Sack of Lindisfarne by the Northmen in 793," trans. S. Alcott in *Alcuin of York* (York: William Sessions, 1974), reprinted in Paul Edward Dutton, ed., *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 124.

The Vikings harried the Franks periodically throughout the ninth century, but did not establish a lasting presence until Rollo was granted the Duchy of Normandy by Charles the Simple in 911.<sup>398</sup> A very different story unfolded in England. The Vikings overran and settled half of England, and were not ousted for almost a hundred years. The Viking threat to England was therefore much greater than it was to Francia: the Franks, or the Galicians, Cordobans, or Italians, for that matter, were harried and their towns occasionally plundered, but they were not in danger of being conquered.

The Vikings were clearly not focusing solely on England, as some sort of God-given punishment meted out to the English for their sins. The Vikings spread out from Scandinavia in the late eighth century, and attacked all of the western European kingdoms with equal ferocity. The Vikings came, at least initially, for plunder, which they found in great quantity first in the English and Irish churches and monasteries and later in those on the continent. The Vikings were pagans, and did not hesitate to ravage Christian sites, much to the horror of the devout chroniclers of their raids.<sup>399</sup>

Modern scholars find that contemporary accounts of Vikings exaggerate their brutality and treachery, and that their behavior, at least in Francia, was in fact not appreciably worse than that of the eight- and ninth-century Franks.<sup>400</sup> The English accounts are also similarly exaggerated, in accounts both of the Vikings' numbers and their ferocity relative to what the English were capable of.<sup>401</sup> England and Francia were

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<sup>398</sup> Haywood, *Atlas of the Vikings*, 80. The Duchy was a sizable territory, but only a fraction of the Frankish empire.

<sup>399</sup> Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1962), 3.

<sup>400</sup> Simon Coupland, "The Vikings on the Continent in Myth and History," *History* vol. 88, no. 290 (April 2003), 202-3.

<sup>401</sup> Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 143.



wealthier than Ireland, and England did not initially have the types of coastal defenses built by Charles the Bald beginning in 862.<sup>402</sup> England bore the brunt of this situation when the Great Army attacked in 865. Alfred was one of many European kings defending their kingdoms from the Vikings, but he attracted the largest foe, without a defensive structure in place. To his great credit, he and his kingdom survived. To his greater credit, he subsequently initiated reforms meant to ensure his kingdom's continued survival.

Alfred's military reforms may seem at first glance to be quite obvious. At the time of Alfred's reign, however, his reforms were revolutionary, with no contemporary model for Alfred to follow, and none of the bureaucratic institutions in place to coerce the nobles and *fyrð*-men into cooperation.<sup>403</sup> The Victorian depiction of Alfred the Warrior should more properly be Alfred the General, or Alfred the War Secretary, as his contributions were organizational, as opposed to being earned in the trenches.

### 3. *Alfred the Law-Giver*

A law code is much more than an administrative document. It represents a society's need for order and justice, and reflects the social and political milieu of the people it governs. Traditionally, any new law code is based on a corpus of previous laws, adjusted to address new customs and practices and to remove obsolete laws.<sup>404</sup> The Anglo-Saxons wrote their law codes in their vernacular of Old English, instead of Latin, which was

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>403</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 194-7.

<sup>404</sup> Patrick Wormald, "*Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis*: Legislation and Germanic Kingship, from Euric to Cnut," in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds: The University of Leeds and Contributors, 1977), 113.

unprecedented in medieval Western Europe.<sup>405</sup> This could be attributed to a desire by the kings to bring the law to the common person. One scholar suggests though, that the early medieval insular scholars (the Irish and the Scottish are included here) simply suffered from a lack of scholars sufficiently trained in Latin.<sup>406</sup> Alfred's oft-quoted lament that proper Latin was disappearing from England would support this conclusion.

In the preface to his *Law Code*, Alfred refers to the laws of three previous Anglo-Saxon kings, Æthelbeht of Kent (r. 560-616), Ine of Wessex (r. 688-726), and Offa of Mercia (r. 757-796), as the laws which he gathered together for his own law code.<sup>407</sup> By basing his law code not just on that of his own kinsman (Ine), but on those of two other important Anglo-Saxon kings, Alfred seems to be positioning himself as successor to *all* of them, and therefore as guardian of a unified English people.<sup>408</sup> It had been a hundred years since the last Anglo-Saxon law code was promulgated, so Alfred's would have been the first new law code issued in the memory of his living subjects.

Patrick Wormald builds a convincing case for the issuance of a law code as a purely political or ideological maneuver. He notes that many early medieval law codes suffered from such flawed transcription and transmission as to render them unusable by judges, thereby leaving the judges with the original oral legal tradition on which the laws were based.<sup>409</sup> Why then, bother to promulgate written law codes at all? The transmission of written laws served another, more important purpose. The kings could raise their own status by imitating the ancient Roman tradition of rule by law, and by

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<sup>405</sup> Innes, *Early Medieval Western Europe*, 362.

<sup>406</sup> Wormald, "Lex Scripta," 115.

<sup>407</sup> "The Laws of King Alfred," Int. 49.9, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 164.

<sup>408</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 39.

<sup>409</sup> Wormald, "Lex Scripta," 123-4.

positioning themselves as protectors of the Church by including Biblical laws in their codes.<sup>410</sup> There was political motivation behind the promulgation of law codes, also. Manuscripts of Alfred's *Law Code* dated to before the Conquest have been found collected together not only with West Saxon king-lists and genealogies, but also the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, suggesting a conscious effort by Alfred and his heirs to link themselves to their dynasty and their legislation.<sup>411</sup>

Asser reinforces our image of Alfred the Law-Giver when he credits Alfred with concern for the poor by depicting him as a “painstaking judge in establishing the truth in judicial matters, and this most of all in cases concerning the poor.”<sup>412</sup> He further describes Alfred allowing parties to a dispute to appeal to him for judgment, and admonishing his judges to either maintain discretion and restraint, or relinquish their posts.<sup>413</sup> Alfred sets a precedent here, following Carolingian practice, for English royal participation in the judicial process, including intervention where necessary.<sup>414</sup> The Fonthill Letter (c. 900), concerning a dispute eventually settled in the reign of Edward the Elder, contains the story of Alfred hearing an appeal on the case while washing his hands—indicating a personal concern for justice.<sup>415</sup> Alfred's laws themselves give insight into his kingship: nearly a quarter of them are concerned with crimes against churches, churchmen, and nuns, while another quarter deal with crimes against the king

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>412</sup> Asser, ch. 105.

<sup>413</sup> Asser, ch. 106.

<sup>414</sup> Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. I, *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 122-3.

<sup>415</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, trans. “The Fonthill Letter,” *English Historical Documents, Volume I, c. 500 – 1042, #102*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1979), 544.

or his nobles.<sup>416</sup> The rest involve the taking of oaths and the penalties for breaking them, and various crimes of violence or negligence, plus theft and burglary.

Alfred's *Law Code* is notable in that it was the first law code issued in a hundred years. His accomplishment is not so much that he simply issued a law code at all, but that he understood the symbolism behind such a code, and how it could unify the English people (under him, of course) and lend legitimacy to his own kingship and dynasty, and by extension, to all of the English people.

#### 4. *Alfred the Scholar*

Alfred was not the first literate medieval king in Western Europe, but he may have been the first to actually publish an original work. Janet Nelson describes his activity as an author as “an astonishing fact, almost unprecedented—and unparalleled for centuries to come.”<sup>417</sup> Alfred's prose preface to his translation of Pope Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis* is perhaps quoted most often: “Therefore it seems better to me...that we too should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know.”<sup>418</sup> In the interest of providing Christian writings to all his people, Alfred is credited with personally translating Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis*, Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, a portion of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and the first fifty Psalms, and with directing his scholars to translate others.

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<sup>416</sup> “The Laws of King Alfred,” trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 164-170.

<sup>417</sup> Nelson, “Political Ideas of Alfred,” 140.

<sup>418</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 126.

Many anecdotes, possibly apocryphal, attest to Alfred's cleverness, including the story of his use of standardized candles to gauge the passing of time and his invention of a shielded lantern to protect the candles from breezes.<sup>419</sup> Stories such as these are meant to point to Alfred's capacity for innovation and a desire for reform. While the sources are not entirely clear as to *why* Alfred felt the need for reforms, the medieval notion of a Christian king providing for the betterment of his people, in addition to the knowledge of the Carolingian reforms already carried out on the continent would have loomed large in Alfred's awareness.

Alfred had already begun his plan for carrying out a revival of learning in Wessex in the early 880s with his requests for help from outside of Wessex.<sup>420</sup> Initially, Werferth, bishop of Worcester, and Plegmund (later archbishop of Canterbury) and the priests Æthelstan and Werwulf came from Mercia. Later, around 886, the monk Grimbald of St. Bertin, the scholar John the Old Saxon and the Welsh monk Asser came to the court of King Alfred.<sup>421</sup> Asser describes in detail Alfred's lamentations over the shortage of teachers in Wessex and his subsequent summoning of scholars to Wessex in his *Life of King Alfred*, along with numerous reports of Alfred's progress in furthering his own education and translating various Christian works.<sup>422</sup>

Alfred inherited a world-view that included the belief that God had entrusted him with not only the physical well-being of his people, but also their spiritual welfare. He was compelled to return knowledge of Latin to the clergy and to restore the churches and

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<sup>419</sup> Asser, ch.194.

<sup>420</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 222.

<sup>421</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 26.

<sup>422</sup> Asser, chapters 24-25, 76-79, and 87-89.

monasteries.<sup>423</sup> Appalled by the decline of learning and Latin learning in particular, Alfred required his judges to be at least literate in the vernacular if they wanted to keep their positions, and that his clerics be fluent in Latin as well.<sup>424</sup> The Victorian English preferred to give Alfred sole credit for preserving Christianity and monasticism, but Richard Gem is less generous in the amount of credit he gives to Alfred. In describing four stages in the monastic reform movement, he refers to the period in which Alfred's reign fell as that of only "attempted reform," with actual significant reform only coming later.<sup>425</sup>

Alfred no doubt felt it was his duty as king to encourage the growth of Christian faith among his people. In his case this meant promoting literacy in the vernacular for at least the young boys of the kingdom, and providing training in Latin for the smarter boys and the clerics. He must be credited with having the insight to emulate others around him (mainly the Carolingians) by seeking out and bringing scholars from all over Western Europe to England, and charging them with educating at least himself, his family, and his household. In his study of the government of Alfred's reign, Loyn concludes that "by the end of Alfred's reign royal government played an ever-increasing part in the lives of the Christian English Community."<sup>426</sup> Fortunately, it was a beneficial part that Alfred played as part of his intellectual renaissance.

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<sup>423</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 221.

<sup>424</sup> Asser, ch. 106.

<sup>425</sup> Richard Gem, "ABC: How should we periodize Anglo-Saxon architecture?" In Lawrence A. S. Butler, Richard K. Morris, eds, *The Anglo Saxon Church: Papers on history, architecture and archaeology in honour of Dr. H. M. Taylor*. Council for British Archaeology, Research Report no. 60 (London, 1986), 151.

<sup>426</sup> H.R Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 72.

### 5. *Alfred's Succession*

Alfred understood the need to arrange for an orderly succession upon his death.

Primogeniture was not in force yet; the tradition then was more of a brother-to-brother succession. Alfred's own father, Æthelwulf, was the first West Saxon king to actually succeed his own father (Ecgbert) since 641.<sup>427</sup> Alfred would have been familiar with the rebellion of his brother Æthelbald against their own father,<sup>428</sup> and quite aware that his nephews Æthelwold and Æthelhelm had been passed over in the succession upon the death of their father, Alfred's brother King Æthelred I.<sup>429</sup>

Situations that played out in future centuries illustrate the perils of uncertain successions. Of the four sons of William I (r. 1066-1087), two were killed in "hunting accidents," conveniently leaving one to rule the Duchy of Normandy and the other to rule England as King Henry I. The anarchy and devastation during England's "Nineteen-Year's Winter" (1135-1154) resulted directly from the death of Henry I's only legitimate son when the White Ship sank in 1120.

Asser would have us believe in his image of Alfred as "the happy father of a tidy nuclear family."<sup>430</sup> The circumstances were in fact much more complicated. A certain Oswald, *filius regis*, appears in charters in 868, and may have been a third son of Alfred's

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<sup>427</sup> Campbell, et al., *The Anglo-Saxons*, 140. Cenwealh succeeded his father, Cynegils, in 641.

<sup>428</sup> Asser, ch. 12. This incident is not mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

<sup>429</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 93. Around 861, the three surviving sons of Æthelwulf had apparently agreed to succeed to the kingship in turn. This was confirmed in an agreement between Æthelred and Alfred in 871; Abels, 133.

<sup>430</sup> Janet Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family: Reflections on Alfred, From Asser, Chapter 2," *People and Places in Northern Europe, 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1991). Reprinted in Janet Nelson, ed., *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others*, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), 59.

brother Æthelred.<sup>431</sup> He could also have been a son of one of Alfred's other brothers, Æthelbald or Æthelberht.<sup>432</sup> Even more intriguing is Alfred's "kinsman" Osferth. Keynes and Lapidge speculate he could be the son of Oswald, or a kinsman of Alfred's mother Osburh.<sup>433</sup> Nelson puts forth the even more interesting theory that he could well have been an illegitimate son of Alfred himself.<sup>434</sup> All of these situations left the potential for a contested succession.

Alfred's will is one of only two surviving wills of Anglo-Saxon kings.<sup>435</sup> Alfred leaves a number of estates to his wife and daughters, and the rest to his two sons, his two nephews, and to his kinsman Osferth.<sup>436</sup> Edward is favored with the estates in the Wessex heartland, indicating his role as Alfred's successor. The succession was still not secure, however, as immediately upon the death of Alfred, his nephew Æthelwold rebelled against the new king Edward the Elder.<sup>437</sup> Edward pursued Æthelwold, and finally killed him in 903, along with many of the Viking leaders with whom he was allied.<sup>438</sup>

Alfred took care to secure the succession of his older son Edward, but even his careful plans went somewhat awry. Overall, he did better than most Anglo-Saxon kings, as there was only one rebellion against Edward the Elder, compared to the plots, murders,

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<sup>431</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 322, n. 79.

<sup>432</sup> Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 59.

<sup>433</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 322, n. 79.

<sup>434</sup> Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 60.

<sup>435</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 322, 173. The other is Eadred (r. 946-955).

<sup>436</sup> "The Will of King Alfred," trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 175-7.

<sup>437</sup> *ASC*, s.a. 900.

<sup>438</sup> *ASC*, s.a. 903.



and accidents that afflicted later generations. Alfred's best-laid plans should then be described as more "aspiration rather than reality."<sup>439</sup>

Alfred's proven achievements are recorded by his chronicler, his biographer, or in his own writings. They indeed pale next to his mythical accomplishments, but are still commendable. He held his kingdom together, not so much by personal heroics, but by astute military management. He promulgated a law code for the governance of his people, and to show all those around him that he was the guardian of a unified English people. He translated Christian works into the vernacular for the edification of his subjects, and did his best to secure a peaceful transition for the next King of Wessex.

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<sup>439</sup> Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 62.

## Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, King Alfred of Wessex had become many things to many people. He was a hero to royalists and rebels alike. His reputation was used to both support and oppose the British Empire. He was a warrior to some, a scholar and law-maker to others. A twentieth-century scholar even claimed that Asser's portrayal of Alfred as a "neurotic invalid" proved his biography was a fake.<sup>440</sup> His various roles aside, Alfred can hardly be blamed for his mythical accomplishments, but he *can* claim credit for a number that were genuine. He had the vision to discern what should be done to better his people, and had the benefit of a long reign in which to carry out his plans. His grandfather, Egbert, and his father, Æthelwulf, ruled Wessex for a total of over fifty years, but spent much of that time building up and consolidating the kingdom following the collapse of the Mercian Supremacy. The task of defending and strengthening Wessex fell to Alfred. Even during the lull in Viking attacks, Alfred did not become complacent, but rather used the respite to prepare a better defense for when the Vikings attacked again. He also used that time to implement his legal and educational reforms and begin his translations of Christian works.

Alfred used the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the services of his court biographer to ensure that the memory of his deeds and his legacy did not diminish with time. Portions of the ASC were incorporated into the works of historical writers from the tenth century onward, as well as being maintained as a chronicle itself until the twelfth century (the Peterborough Chronicle, MS E). More importantly, excerpts from Asser's *Life of Alfred*

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<sup>440</sup> Vivian Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History* (London: C.A. Watts & Co., Ltd., 1964), 113.

were also included in various historical writings through the centuries before being printed in their entirety by Matthew Parker in 1574. This kept Alfred (and Wessex) not only in the public knowledge, but provided fuel for the cult of Alfred for a thousand years to come. The *ASC* also served an immediate need: Alfred used the descriptions of West Saxon victories over the Vikings to persuade his subjects of the necessity of new and burdensome institutions [such as the increased military levy], so that he could carry out his reform programs.<sup>441</sup>

The Victorian English presided over the high point of the cult of Alfred. Should we blame them entirely, though, for fostering the mythical Alfredian accomplishments? They were more than happy to perpetuate the myth of Alfred in the interest of English nationalism, but can only take direct credit for furthering Spelman's portrayal of Alfred as Father of the Royal Navy. The rest of the myths originated during the medieval period, with a series of historical writers enthusiastically sending them along to the next generation. The Victorians, to their credit, had already begun to suspect that Alfred was not all he had been built up to be, but nonetheless knew a good national hero when they saw one. If the medieval myths of Alfred had not been available to the Victorians and their predecessors in the previous centuries, England might well have found another hero, but not one with Alfred's aura as a genuine pre-Conquest and therefore truly "English" ancestral hero. Alfred himself did not influence history beyond the ninth century, but his reputation, earned or otherwise, influenced history each time his name was invoked for a political or historical cause.

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<sup>441</sup> R. H. C. Davis, "Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth," *History* vol. 56, no. 187 (June 1971), 182.

Did he actually achieve enough, though, that we can still call him “great?” Even modern scholars must resist the temptation to believe that “Alfred was a great and glorious king in part because he tells us he was.”<sup>442</sup> Does he meet the standard of greatness defined in Chapter 1? Did he strengthen his kingdom, forward the word of God, and advance his bloodline?

Alfred’s network of fortified towns (*burhs*) and his requirement for a standing army allowed Wessex to withstand a second wave of Viking attacks between 892 and 896. Alfred’s heir, Edward the Elder, used the *burhs* to defend against later Viking incursions. These same *burhs* later grew into towns and trade centers, becoming the backbone not only of the English system of defense, but also the foundation of a commercial trade network, regulated and taxed by the king. Alfred’s treaty with Guthrum confining the Vikings to the Danelaw, gave the Danes land to build the settlements they wanted, yet allowed for relative peace in Wessex. The English on both sides of the treaty line were thus able to rebuild farms and monasteries neglected or destroyed during nearly a hundred years of sporadic warfare.

Alfred’s *Law Code* was the first truly English code, making English law distinctive among European states in that it is essentially as old as the English kingdom itself.<sup>443</sup> Alfred’s laws protected the kingdom from internal conflict by fostering trial by impartial judges in addition to punishment of crimes with imprisonment and fines, rather than settlement of grievances by blood feuds and *wergild*. More important than any specific laws, however, is the simple fact that Alfred issued a written law code at all,

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<sup>442</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, quoted in David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>443</sup> Wormald, *Making of English Law*, xi.

under royal authority, not just for Kent or Mercia or Wessex, but to *all* of his subjects in what was already becoming a unified English state.<sup>444</sup>

Alfred also issued laws protecting the Church's property, clerics, and nuns. He furthered the word of God by translating selected Christian writings into Old English, and by directing that his clerics learn correct Latin and that the young members of his household be properly educated. He also founded two religious houses, and allocated half of his revenue to God.<sup>445</sup> We can surely say, then, that Alfred would very likely have pleased his God with these accomplishments.

Producing a suitable heir and ensuring an orderly succession is subject in part to the vicissitudes and hazards of medieval life, but also to the foresight of the current king. Alfred had two sons who survived into young adulthood, the older of which, Edward, he groomed to succeed him. Edward first rode into battle alongside Alfred, and then later led the Anglo-Saxon *fyrð* into battle himself. He inherited the best royal estates, but his brother and sisters, along with his nephews and a kinsman named Osferth, were taken care of also, presumably as the sort of consolation prize awarded to sisters and younger brothers. Alfred should perhaps have paid more attention to his nephew Æthelwold, who was passed over upon Alfred's accession to the kingship, but then rebelled against Edward immediately upon the death of Alfred.

Happenstance, in the form of Danish raids and his own relative longevity, provided Alfred of Wessex with the impetus and the opportunity to carry out his obligations as king. His upbringing in the world of Christian kingship taught him how to

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>445</sup> Asser, ch. 102.

fulfill those obligations. The survival of a manuscript of Asser's *Life* long enough to become entrenched in English historiography certainly helped Alfred's reputation, but credit must be given to Alfred for initially summoning a team of learned men to his court, including his biographer, Asser. Ecgbert and Æthelwulf also enjoyed long reigns, but only Alfred had both the foresight *and* the opportunity to conceive and implement an extensive reform program.

Alfred's achievements do not match those of Charlemagne or even Charles the Bald, but he nonetheless deserves the title of "great." A thirteenth-century historian originally gave him the epithet but gave us no accompanying explanation or justification. Later generations of scholars carried the title forward, supported by an assortment of myths, each with a grain of truth. If we look at what he actually accomplished, we see that he is much more than Asser's Alfred, plodding along with his stomach pains and piles, just trying to get the job done. His own writings, along with his accomplishments attested elsewhere, prove his greatness. He not only made the best of the situation in which he found himself, but he looked beyond it, to what his kingdom could be.

Alfred was not simply a literate king; he mandated literacy for all of his judges and priests. He promulgated a law code not just for his subkingdom of Wessex, but for *all* of England. His *burhs* were more than a defensive network: they were the core of English commerce that later flourished. Alfred neither "invented" England, nor simply saved it: he strengthened and transformed an England that was already taking shape.

## Appendix - The Authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*

The contemporary *Life of King Alfred* by Asser bears most of the responsibility for providing the seeds of the cult of King Alfred. Of the scholars called to Alfred's court, Asser was the most influential. While in Wessex, he wrote a biography of Alfred that came to be known as the *Vita Ælfredi*. Very little is known of Asser outside of his *Life of Alfred*, just that he *did* exist, and was a monk or bishop. No outside source places him at King Alfred's court, other than Alfred's prose Preface (see below). According to autobiographical information within the *Life*, Asser was from St. David's monastery in Wales, where he was "brought up, educated, tonsured, and—finally—ordained."<sup>446</sup> In his prose Preface to his Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, however, Alfred refers to the help of "Asser my bishop."<sup>447</sup> Because Asser seems to include himself alongside Archbishop Nobis of St. David's, and Gerald of Wales lists Asser as a bishop of St. David's in his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge present a compelling argument that Asser was indeed the bishop of St. David's when he was called to King Alfred's court and not simply a monk.<sup>448</sup> This explains his initial reluctance to spend half of every year there. Asser may have become known to Alfred during treaty negotiations when the Welsh kings Hywel ap Rhys of Glywysing and Hyfaidd of Dyfed submitted to Alfred's overlordship, since an "Asser" witnessed a charter of King Hywel ap Rhys circa 885.<sup>449</sup> We know further that Asser served as bishop of Sherbourne from somewhere between 892 and 900 until his death in 908 or

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<sup>446</sup> Asser, ch. 79.

<sup>447</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 126.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-2.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

909.<sup>450</sup> William Stevenson, in what is still considered to be the definitive Latin edition of Asser's *Life*, also places an "Asser" near Hywel ap Rhys circa 885,<sup>451</sup> apparently using the same source as Keynes and Lapidge.

The oldest manuscript of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* to survive beyond the medieval period (British Library Cotton MS Otho A.xii) was dated to the early eleventh century, very close to the year 1000, and is considered to be at least a copy of a copy of the original.<sup>452</sup> In the sixteenth century, the manuscript was in the possession of Archbishop Matthew Parker. Prior to publishing the manuscript in 1574, Parker had his staff "fix" it by correcting perceived errors and adding interpolations from other, supposedly contemporary manuscripts. Many of these interpolations came from the *Annals of St. Neot's*, which Parker erroneously assumed were also the work of Asser.<sup>453</sup> The original manuscript was destroyed in the Cottonian fire of 1731. Stevenson, in his edition of 1904, was able to sort out the additions and changes, and return the text to the version still in use today. He acknowledges at the outset, though, that the issue of its authenticity may never be resolved.<sup>454</sup> The destruction of the Cottonian manuscript and the lack of corroborating documents made it difficult for Stevenson to specifically label it genuine, but the lack of definitive proof of forgery, such as anachronisms, led him to conclude it must be genuine.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 10-11.

<sup>451</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's "Life,"* lxx.

<sup>452</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Genuine Alfred*, Stenton Lecture of 1967 (Reading: University of Reading, 1968), 8.

<sup>453</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's "Life,"* xiv.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, vi-vii.



The question of authenticity was later brought up by Vivian Galbraith in his Creighton Lecture of 1949. In his lecture, which concerned itself with medieval historiography in general, and twelfth century historiography in particular, he devotes a few pages to a discussion of Asser, concluding that “the strangest book in our medieval history remains, accepted, if grudgingly, by our best historians because they do not believe historical research had reached a point at which it could have been fabricated.”<sup>456</sup> The strongest argument that Galbraith could muster was that he found it odd that the *Life* was unknown to William of Malmesbury in the early twelfth century.<sup>457</sup> Dorothy Whitelock required only one paragraph to discredit Galbraith’s objections to Asser.<sup>458</sup> Galbraith brought up the issue again in 1964 in his *Introduction to the Study of History*. In what reads like a primer for beginning students of history, the first two parts of which were published previously, he includes “Part III: Research in Action.” He presents the question of the authorship of Asser’s *Life* as a case study in historical research, seeing it as “an example to be shot down by all who read it, my examination of a well-worn problem.”<sup>459</sup> He concludes, based on a number of perceived anachronisms in the text, that the *Life* was written over a hundred years after the death of Alfred, quite possibly by Leofric, first bishop of Exeter.<sup>460</sup>

Galbraith’s research and conclusions elicited a longer, more detailed response from Dorothy Whitelock, who devoted her Stenton Lecture of 1967 to “The Genuine

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<sup>456</sup> Vivian Hunter Galbraith, *Historical Research in Medieval England*. The Creighton Lecture in History, 1949 (London: The Athlone Press, 1951), 24.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>458</sup> Dorothy W. Whitelock, “Recent Work on Asser’s Life of Alfred” in Stevenson, *Asser’s “Life”* pp. cxxxii to clii (especially cxlii to cxlvii).

<sup>459</sup> Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History*, vi.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Asser,” for the purpose of re-establishing “both the authenticity and the value of the work.”<sup>461</sup> Whitelock takes a thorough and balanced approach to the issue, proceeds to dismantle all of Galbraith’s objections to Asser, and builds a solid case for its authenticity. About midway through the lecture, she patiently dispenses with a few of Galbraith’s objections which she states had already been addressed by previous scholars.<sup>462</sup> In his encyclopedic work *Anglo-Saxon England* (originally published 1943), Frank Stenton describes Asser’s *Life* as an important source for Alfred,<sup>463</sup> and the editor of his third edition (published posthumously in 1971) looks to Dorothy Whitelock’s 1967 Stenton Lecture to put to rest any questions of the *Life*’s authenticity.<sup>464</sup> His editor does not even bother to mention Vivian Galbraith’s published questioning of the authenticity of Alfred, even though Dorothy Whitelock’s Stenton Lecture was a response to Galbraith.

In the Introduction to their collection of contemporary sources relating to Alfred, Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge begin their brief discussion (less than two pages) of the Asser issue by giving a nod to Galbraith’s arguments, but then stating that they were “promptly and comprehensively demolished by Dorothy Whitelock.”<sup>465</sup> The debate warmed up again in 1995, with the publication of Alfred Smyth’s seven hundred page tome on King Alfred. At the outset, Smyth accuses Whitelock of perpetuating a “Stentonian orthodoxy” concerning Asser’s *Life of Alfred*, thereby limiting scholarly questioning on the subject, and establishing a “Stenton-Whitelock axis” of scholarship.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Whitelock, *The Genuine Asser*, 3.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>463</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 271-2.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 696.

<sup>465</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 50.

<sup>466</sup> Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxi.

He then proceeds to devote over two hundred pages of the book to what amounts to a direct attack on the credibility of Whitelock and to charges of academic hostility toward Galbraith's work. He concludes by declaring Asser's *Life* to be a forgery compiled at Ramsey in the early eleventh century, possibly by Byrhtferth.<sup>467</sup> The reviewers of Smyth's book were not kind.<sup>468</sup> In general, they acknowledge his contributions to Alfredian scholarship, but the reactions to his questioning of Asser range from academic caution to outright condemnation. In his review article of Smyth's book, Simon Keynes dismantles many of the problems found in the *Life* by Smyth, and expresses his surprise that the book was even published "because it is animated by a premise which is so demonstrably perverse" namely, that Smyth is "moved at almost every stage in the exposition of his argument to give vent to his ludicrous notions of a modern academic conspiracy."<sup>469</sup>

In his 1998 biography of Alfred, Richard Abels provides a short appendix (nine pages) on "the Authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*." Abels sides with the anti-Smyth scholarship, pointing out that Asser's *Life* in fact *reads* like a ninth-century work, and that the Alfred portrayed by Asser resembles Alfred's portrayal of himself in his own writings.<sup>470</sup> The reviews of Abels' book were generally positive, and as supportive of his

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>468</sup> All reviews in this note are of *King Alfred the Great*, by Alfred P. Smyth. Janet Nelson, "Review Article: Waiting for Alfred," *Early Medieval Europe* 7 no. 1 (1998), 115-120. David Pelteret, *Speculum* 73 (1998), 263-5. Ted Johnson-South, *Albion* 29 (1997), 78-9. Michael Altschul, *American Historical Review* 102 (Dec. 1997), 1463-4. David R. Howlett, *English Historical Review* 112 (Sept. 1997), 942-4. Bernard Bachrach, *Journal of Military History* 61 (1997), 363-4. James Campbell, "Alfred's Lives," *The Times Literary Supplement* 4869 (26 July 1996), 30. Simon Keynes, "On the Authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, no. 3 (July 1996), 529-551. Barbara Yorke, "Fake Cakes," *History Today*, 46.12 (Dec. 1996), 58.

<sup>469</sup> Keynes, "Authenticity of Asser's *Life*," 550-1.

<sup>470</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 324-326.

views on Asser as they were critical of Smyth's views.<sup>471</sup> In a collection of papers from a 1999 conference commemorating the eleventh centenary of Alfred's death, Smyth is cited in numerous places, but his views on the authenticity of Asser are generally ignored.<sup>472</sup> This seems a conscious academic snub of Smyth and his views on Asser's *Life*.

Not to be deterred, Alfred Smyth published his latest entry into the fray in 2002.<sup>473</sup> At the core of the book is a highly readable new translation of the *Life*. Unfortunately, Smyth devotes his entire introduction and most of his commentary and notes to the question of the *Life*'s authenticity. It is quite distracting to read the text and commentary when constantly confronted by Smyth's promotion of Byrhtferth of Ramsey as the true author of the *Life*. Smyth vigorously defends his position, stating that Asser's *Life* "had been allowed to develop into a scholarly black hole...that has drawn far too much scholarly energy into its destructive vortex, precluding progress in other aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies and stifling constructive debate and a free exchange of ideas."<sup>474</sup> Reviews of this latest work by Smyth show even less patience than they did in 1995.<sup>475</sup> Andy King contends that many of Smyth's arguments are "highly speculative" and that the book "remains essentially a partisan polemic in a rather vitriolic academic

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<sup>471</sup> All reviews in this note are of *Alfred the Great*, by Richard Abels. Bernard Bachrach, *Albion* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 620-1. Barbara Yorke, *American Historical Review* 105 (April 2000), 595. James Campbell, *English Historical Review* 115, no. 464 (Nov. 2000), 1258. Simon Coates, *History* 84, no. 276 (Oct. 1999), 715-6. Lesley Abrams, *Speculum* 75 (2000), 887-8. Sarah Hamilton, "Review Article: Early Medieval Rulers and their Modern Biographers," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, vol. 2 (2000), 247-260. Janet Nelson, *Times Literary Supplement* (14 May 1999), 32. Sean Miller, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52 (2000), 128-9.

<sup>472</sup> Reuter, *Alfred the Great*, passim.

<sup>473</sup> Alfred Smyth, trans., *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (New York: Palgrave Publisher, Ltd., 2002).

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

<sup>475</sup> All reviews in this note are of *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, by Alfred P. Smyth. Stephen J. Harris, *The Medieval Review* 2003 online at [www.name.umd.edu/baj9928.0301.012](http://www.name.umd.edu/baj9928.0301.012). Andy King, *Medium Ævum* 72 no. 1 (2003), 182. Richard Abels, *Albion* 36.1 (Spring 2004), 86-8. Thomas D. Hill, *Speculum* vol. 79 no. 4 (Oct. 2004), 1144-5.

controversy.”<sup>476</sup> Stephen Harris’ review is so derisive as to provide entertainment to his readers at Smyth’s expense. In his review, Richard Abels simply concludes that there is very little that is new in Smyth’s 2002 book that was not in his 1995 *King Alfred the Great*.<sup>477</sup>

Given the only surviving manuscript of the *Life* was destroyed in 1731, and that there are no other sources or copies of it contemporary to Alfred to prove its existence, we will never know for certain of its authenticity. It seems likely, though, that it is authentic, given the weight of scholarship in its favor, and if only for the reason that there is no obvious motive for its forgery that stands up to academic scrutiny, and no obvious question or problem that would be answered by such a forgery. Thomas Hill takes the point of view of a literary historian by pointing out that such a forgery *could* have been executed by a very learned and intelligent individual in the tenth century, but that a person of such intelligence would also have seen that “deceiving scholars in the distant future is hardly worth the effort.”<sup>478</sup> He also sees no possible motive for the forgery. One must also look at the broader picture. If Asser were removed as a source for Alfred, would the world be a much poorer place for it? Janet Nelson argues that discounting Asser “does not *fundamentally* alter (though it sadly diminishes) the picture we would otherwise have of Alfred.”<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> King, Shorter Notice on Smyth’s *Medieval Life*, 182.

<sup>477</sup> Abels, review of Smyth’s *Medieval Life*, 8.

<sup>478</sup> Hill, review of Smyth’s *Medieval Life*, 1144.

<sup>479</sup> Nelson, “Waiting for Alfred,” 120.

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