Alfred the Great: The Foundation of the English Monarchy

Abstract
Alfred the Great, one of the best-known Anglo-Saxon kings in England, set the foundation for the future English monarchy. This essay examines the practices and policies of his rule which left a lasting impact in England, including his reforms of military, education, religion, and government in the West Saxon Kingdom.

Degree Type
Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department
History and Philosophy

First Advisor
Ronald Delph

Keywords
Anglo-Saxon, Vikings, Ninth Century, Burgh, Reform

This open access senior honors thesis is available at DigitalCommons@EMU: http://commons.emich.edu/honors/459
ALFRED THE GREAT: THE FOUNDATION OF THE ENGLISH MONARCHY

By

Marshall Gaines

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in History

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date 12/17/15
Alfred the Great: The Foundation of the English Monarchy

Chapter I: Introduction

Beginning in the late eighth century, Northern Europe was threatened by fearsome invasions from Scandinavia. The Viking Age had an incredible impact on all of Europe, but especially on England. At the onset of the Viking raids, England was made up of several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, almost all of which succumbed to the Scandinavian invaders during the ninth century. Only a single kingdom was able to hold out against the Vikings in this period. Wessex, ruled by Alfred “the Great” from 871-899, was the sole Anglo-Saxon kingdom to resist the Viking depredations, and in doing so prevented Scandinavians from ruling all of England for another century. With the destruction of the other Anglo-Saxon monarchies, only the West Saxon house survived. For this reason, along with the changes and practices introduced by Alfred, his reign is often considered the beginning of what would become the medieval English monarchy.

Why is Alfred's reign seen as having laid the foundation for what would eventually become the English monarchy? Alfred learned from his early defeats against the Scandinavians, and accordingly reformed the military system of Wessex. He made great changes to the army, or fyrd, and constructed, quite often from the ground up, a network of interconnected burghs, or fortresses, garrisoned at all times. Alfred also believed strongly in the value of education and religion, especially among his noble subjects, and took strides to encourage or reform these elements of society. As a monarch, Alfred also introduced governmental practices which were followed by later English monarchs. His was a very strong central monarchy, and all major decisions were made by him personally, including the promulgation of a new law code for his kingdom.
This study examines different parts of Alfred's rule and policy, and how his reforms or practices set the stage for future Anglo-Saxon and later English monarchs. Chapter II provides a brief survey of the primary sources used in a study of Alfred the Great, along with an examination of existing scholarship on his rule. Chapter III details Alfred's military reforms and how they helped Wessex deny Danish conquest for the next century. Chapter IV covers Alfred's contributions to the realms of education and religion in his kingdom, and examines how they were intertwined. Finally, Chapter V presents a discussion of Alfred's government, along with his legal and economic practices. It showcases his charisma and skill in leading men. Alfred's contributions to the military, defense, education, religion, government, and administration all had a lasting impact. By the end of his reign, he did not rule over a united Anglo-Saxon England, but he did provide the possibility for such an English state to exist in the future.
Chapter II: Sources and Scholarship

Sources

Of all the Anglo-Saxon kings, the most contemporary sources survive from the reign of Alfred the Great. Despite this relative wealth of sources, it is still a small number to work with, and many of the sources provide great challenges to scholars. Scholars disagree on the veracity of many of the primary sources which remain. Perhaps the most useful source is the *Vita Aelfredi*, or *Life of King Alfred* by the Welsh monk, and later bishop of Sherborne, Asser. This biographical work, which covered Alfred's life and rule until 893, where it abruptly ends, is considered by some scholars to be the most reliable contemporary source for Alfred's life. Other scholars, most notably V.H. Galbraith and Alfred Smyth, have claimed the work to be unreliable, or even an outright forgery. Galbraith claimed Asser's work shows damning anachronisms, such as referring to Alfred as "king of the Anglo-Saxons," a usage he claimed did not begin until the late tenth century.¹ Galbraith's arguments were debunked to the satisfaction of most historians by Dorothy Whitelock.² Smyth claimed that the *Life of Alfred* was a forgery written in the early eleventh century by a monk named Byrhtferth, who simply adopted the obscure name of Asser to make his work appear contemporary. His refutation is based on an analysis of the Latin grammar of the work and its similarity to a biography of St. Gerald of Aurillac written by Odo of Cluny

---

around 940. Smyth doggedly pursued his denial of the biography written by the “pseudo-Asser,” but his claims were harshly rebuffed by Michael Lapidge, who considered Smyth’s conclusion to be based upon a lacking knowledge of Latin grammar and a wish to disprove anything negative which was written about Alfred in Asser’s *Vita*. Most Anglo-Saxon scholars now accept Asser’s *Vita* as an authentic primary source, though it is one which comes with its own host of issues.

The next most important primary source for Alfred’s reign is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a historical annal compiled during Alfred’s reign and continued after it. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, or *ASC*, contains yearly entries, covering topics such as battles, important deaths, and other significant events. It is extremely useful, but is also a very frustrating source for historians. While some of the entries do contain critical information, most are incredibly laconic. Regarding the reign of King Alfred, the *ASC* provides the most detailed narrative of Alfred’s military exploits against the Vikings, though the entries are shorter and less detailed during years of peace. For a significant portion of his *Vita Aelfredi*, Asser simply copied the entries of the *Chronicle*. These are the only pieces of Asser’s *Life* which Smyth considered to be reliable. Multiple manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* existed, only some of which survive today. While a comparison of the different manuscripts could be useful in parsing the truth, this goal is frustrated by the fact that some of these manuscripts have come down to modern historians only in the form of garbled medieval translations. A small collection of documentary materials also

---

survive from King Alfred's reign in the form of a law code, a few charters and a political treaty, including an important document now known as the Burghal Hidage, along with more personal records: letters to the king and Alfred's own will. These materials can help researchers understand the workings of Alfred's government, as well as his personal views to some degree, though it is a small sample size, especially when compared to Alfred's Carolingian contemporaries. There also exists a small sample of literary works by Alfred the Great himself. With the help of some of the more scholarly members of his court, including Asser, Alfred translated a few books he considered to be of particular importance. These translations include many of Alfred's own views on religion, political theory, and philosophic issues, allowing historians a glimpse inside the king's thoughts. Alfred and his court used textual activities to outline and change aspects of Anglo-Saxon kingship to fit the unique needs of Alfred's rule.

Scholarship

While an impressive number of primary sources exist for Alfred the Great's reign compared to other Anglo-Saxon kings, they share a fundamental problem: all of them are products of Alfred's court or the king's own hand. Richard Abels stated the problems found with the singular source of contemporary material on Alfred most clearly. Asser was employed within Alfred's court, and the king treated him very well – he was gifted two monasteries by Alfred. It is reasonable that he would wish to write well of his master. Added to this

7 Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, 10.
9 Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, 10.
consideration is the fact that Alfred likely had his own say in what Asser wrote.\(^\text{11}\) The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also began during the reign of Alfred, and the king may have had input or been used as a source by the compilers of the chronicle. Abels believed that the ASC put Alfred’s “spin” on historical events, but that it was not just a work of propaganda.\(^\text{12}\) It actually makes the situation of the 870s seem better than it was for Alfred, something a work aimed only to glorify Alfred’s achievements would not have done.\(^\text{13}\) Abels, Smyth, and others agreed that Alfred’s own translations are both interesting and essential to learning both how Alfred thought, what he considered important, and the style of kingship he wished to portray.\(^\text{14}\) Abels admitted that what we know about Alfred from the primary sources may not be historical fact, but it is “as close as Alfred wanted us to get.”\(^\text{15}\) Though the sources from Alfred’s court should not be considered strictly royalist propaganda, they should be read with a careful eye, as Alfred deliberately shaped the writings produced by his court.

Scholars and other authors almost unanimously consider Alfred himself to have been an exemplary ruler and the starting point of the Medieval English monarchy, though they often differ in the fervor of their praise for Alfred and the distinct actions or characteristics which led to his successful reign. Victorian scholars considered Alfred, with his intellectual interests and reportedly chaste nature, to be an ideal English monarch. English nationalists of the same period

---


12 Ibid., 71.


14 Abels, “Alfred’s Biographers,” 71; Smyth, Alfred the Great, 568; Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, 10; David Pratt, the Political Thought of Alfred the Great, 349-350; and James Campbell, “Placing King Alfred,” 3, to name a few.

found in Alfred an immensely patriotic figure, and he has often been called the “father of England.” The culmination of this view can be seen in the works of Charles Plummer, who considered Alfred to be “history’s most perfect king.” This view still lives on, as can be seen in a host of biographies trotted out throughout the twentieth century, including one which calls Alfred “the light which rose out of darkness,” to defend England. In some instances, this type of view prevails to this day. In a more scholastic work, Smyth described Alfred in almost hagiographic terms, calling him “no ordinary man.” Specifically, he praised Alfred's military leadership, wisdom and pragmatism, and foresight in developing the burghal system despite the displeasure of his magnates (a fact which seems, interestingly, to have come from Asser’s Life).

Smyth has rejected almost all negative assertions about Alfred, including the fact that he did not learn to read until later in life. Alfred, according to Smyth, was a “master” of the Latin language by the time of his translations, despite evidence that he required aid from members of his court. His fervent rejection of Asser’s Life seems as much based upon his disagreement with Asser’s description of Alfred’s shortcomings as upon his analysis of the work’s grammar and style. It is clear the Victorian idea of Alfred as the “perfect king” still influences most historians to some degree. Even his title “the Great,” is an anachronism, first used in the works of sixteenth-century historians, not any of Alfred's contemporaries. Smyth’s portrait of Alfred greatly resembled, or

---

19 Ibid., 145-146, 600.
20 Ibid., 568.
perhaps even exceeded, the Victorian ideal king.22

Though Smyth's conclusions are often bashed by other Anglo-Saxon scholars, many of them have drawn similar conclusions, sometimes despite their best efforts otherwise.23 Regardless of the relatively thin and one-sided sources for the study of Alfred's resistance to Viking invasion, scholars often present him as a "great warrior-king."24 Alfred is praised and remembered most for his military reforms. Abels recognized the importance of Alfred's military reforms, but he also recognized his skill in royal government, calling him "an earnest and pious micro-manager."25 Abels did not, however, consider Alfred to be a particularly adept military leader, and thus gave most of the battle glory to his sons in the later struggle with the Vikings, from 893-96.26 Ryan Lavelle drew similar conclusions, focusing especially on the burghal system and Alfred's pragmatism. He defended Alfred's practice of payment for peace, claiming it was not dishonorable or unusual for the period and, most importantly, it worked, often as a deliberate strategic move.27 Other scholars who have emphasized Alfred's pragmatism in negotiations and ruling policies include Robin Fleming, who wrote of Alfred's use of former monastic lands for defensive purposes, and Simon Keynes.28 Some, including John Peddie, who provided the best treatment of Alfred's campaigns from the perspective of military history, and Paul Cavill, latched onto Alfred's personal charisma and leadership abilities. Peddie claimed that

23 Ibid., 73.
24 Campbell, "Placing King Alfred," 4. Campbell refers to this phenomenon as the "Curse of King Alfred," something which historians should seek to avoid.
25 Abels, Alfred the Great, 302-304; and Abels, "Alfred's Biographers," 73 (quoted).
26 Abels, Alfred the Great, 303.
27 Ryan Lavelle, Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 322-324.
Alfred was "changed" by the difficulties faced during the early parts of his reign, which forged the new king into a skilled and capable commander and general. In a similar vein, Cavill considered Alfred's dedication to defending his people and opposing the invaders a crucial part of his success.

Alfred's military reforms, of the fyrd and the creation of the burghal system, are the most commonly cited reasons for Wessex's victory over the Vikings, followed by the personal characteristics of Alfred himself. His non-military reforms, such as the changes he made to education, were equally important to the history of Wessex and England. N.P. Brooks argued that Alfred's educational programme, which encouraged literacy among the nobles, worked along with his reforms to the fyrd and the burghal network to improve communication between Alfred and his nobles. Many history books and historians also credit Alfred with the creation of the British navy, often calling him the "father of the royal navy." Asser even mentioned Alfred's ship-building activities in his biography. Other historians, including Abels, do not agree with this claim. Abels considered Alfred's founding of the navy to be one of the more famous "Alfredian myths." It is true that Alfred designed a new form of ship and had a new fleet built with the aim of combatting the Vikings on the sea, but his design met with mixed results in battle and had little impact in the defense of his kingdom.

33 Abels, Alfred the Great, 304-306.
No historians consider Alfred to be inconsequential to the history of England and the survival of Wessex, but a few do feel his achievements are a bit overblown. For instance, Keynes did consider Alfred's defensive reforms to be the main reason for his victory over the Vikings, but he also believed the “Great Armies” which raided England throughout the later 860s and early 870s were diminished from their conquest of the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. He applied the same theory to later forces, claiming they were diminished by either fighting in the other kingdoms or, later, from their raiding activities on the continent.34 The image of Alfred as the Victorians' “perfect king” is no longer accepted by most scholars, but the legacy of that reputation lives on. Although scholars now take a more careful approach to acclaiming Alfred, he is still almost universally considered to be the difference between Wessex and the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms when it came to defeating the Viking invaders in the ninth century. The primary sources, if they are accepted, do not support another solution, though researchers need to be careful not to call Alfred great simply because others have done so.

34 Keynes, “A Tale of Two Kings,” 205-206.
Chapter III: Alfred's Military Reforms

Historical Background

At the onset of the Viking Age in England, Wessex was just coming into an age of dominance over the other Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms. Previously, this distinction had been held by most of the other seven kingdoms of the heptarchy, most recently Mercia, under its kings Aethelbald (716-57) and Offa (757-96). Wessex's age of prominence began under Alfred's grandfather, Egbert, and father, Aethelwulf. Egbert brought the kingdoms of Kent, Essex, and Sussex under West Saxon control, though they remained separate kingdoms during his reign. In 855, when Aethelwulf was away on a pilgrimage to Rome, his son, Alfred's eldest brother, Aethelbald, betrayed his father and attempted to take control of the kingdom. Upon Aethelwulf's return, the kingdom was divided between father and son. This division held through the death of Aethelwulf, as Aethelbald inherited the western part of the kingdom and his younger brother, Aethelbehrt, inherited the eastern half. Had it not been for extraordinary circumstances in the following years, it is incredibly unlikely that Alfred would have become king. Alfred was the youngest of Aethelwulf's four sons, and all his brothers were kings of Wessex before him. The Viking invasions brought mortality unexpectedly crashing down on the royal house of Wessex, giving the youngest son a chance to rule the kingdom, if he could only keep control of it.

1 Hindley, *Brief History*, 60-80. The term *bretwalda* was often used to denote the most dominant Anglo-Saxon ruler by contemporary writers. It did not signify control over other kingdoms, only that one king was more powerful than others.
Viking warbands began raiding England in the late eighth century, beginning with the raid of Lindisfame Monastery in 793. Between 794 and 835, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records no Viking raids in England, though this seems to reflect the choice of the compiler more than the reality of the situation.\(^3\) After this period, the *ASC* records mostly battles between Viking and West Saxon armies. The tone of Viking activity in England shifted in 851, the first time the Vikings wintered in England instead of returning home. Despite this troubling development, until the 860s, the Viking presence seems to have been viewed as a manageable if ever-present threat.\(^4\) In 865, a “Great Heathen Army,” hailing from Denmark and led by Ivarr the Boneless, landed in England, signifying the end of Anglo-Saxon success resisting the Vikings. This army, reinforced by another great force in 871, was in England not to raid but to conquer. In 866, they conquered York and Northumbria, and by 869 had defeated Mercia and East Anglia as well. The Danes placed puppet kings upon the thrones of Mercia and East Anglia. They ruled the entire eastern portion of England, leaving Wessex as the only remaining unconquered Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

In 870, they invaded Wessex, then ruled by Aethelred, third son of Aethelwulf. Alfred's other older brothers, Aethelbald and Aethelbehrt had died in 860 and 865 respectively. West Saxon kings had experienced mixed results against Viking armies since 830, with some defeats tempered by victories such as in 851, when Aethelwulf and Aethelbald inflicted upon a Viking army, “the greatest slaughter on a heathen army we have ever heard of until this present day.”\(^5\) This trend continued under Aethelred and during much of Alfred's reign. Upon entering Wessex, 

---

\(^3\) Higham and Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, 258.
\(^4\) Ibid., 258.
the Vikings immediately occupied Reading, but were then defeated by ealdorman Aethelwulf of Berkshire in the Battle of Englefield. Aethelwulf was later defeated and killed by the same army, again at Reading. Four days later, Aethelred and Alfred faced the Vikings at Ashdown, where they won a close victory after splitting their army in half. After the Winter of 870-71, the Vikings, reinforced by a “Great Summer Army” led by multiple Viking chieftains, including one by the name of Guthrum, defeated the West Saxon army in the Battle of Meretun. Aethelred was likely wounded during this battle, and died soon after. Alfred took the throne after his brother, the last adult male of his line.

When he took the throne around the age of twenty-five, he was already an accomplished military commander. He had developed a love of learning at a young age, and was a very pious individual. He believed strongly in the concept of divine kinship, partially due to his crowning by the pope at a ceremony during one of his two visits to Rome at a young age. His upbringing and the circumstances of his young adulthood molded him into a powerful and effective ruler. From his brother's rebellion in 855, he learned the fragility of kingship, and did not let anything similar happen when his brothers' sons began to come of age.  

Alfred's reign can be divided into three different periods. From 871-878, Alfred was fighting for his kingdom's and his own very survival. During the more peaceful years of 878-892, Alfred enacted many reforms and reconstructions which helped Wessex defeat the impending Viking invasions. Lastly, from 892-899, Alfred and Wessex, bolstered by the military and societal reforms of the previous period, waged a successful defensive war against the

6 Abels, Alfred the Great, 45-87.
Scandinavians. Outnumbered, Alfred was defeated by a large Viking army at Wiltshire in 871, after which he was forced to pay the Vikings in exchange for a truce. This truce bought Alfred and Wessex a few years of peace, and in 874 the Great Army broke into three different parts, lessening the immediate threat to Wessex.

The Vikings again invaded in 875 and seized Wareham. While inhabiting this stronghold, Alfred's army surrounded them and secured an oath from the Viking chieftain that they would leave in peace. The Danes violated their oath and burst from the fortification, from which they rode to and occupied Exeter. They were eventually forced to accept another peace deal, because their reinforcements crashed ashore. In 878, the Vikings returned to Wessex, this time led by Guthrum. In January of 878, Guthrum's army seized the royal estate of Chippenham, which essentially gave the Danish king control of all of Wessex. Alfred and his household were forced to flee into the swamps and set up a base on the small island of Athelney. There, he bided his time, performing guerilla-style raids to keep supplied while at the same time planning with the ealdormen who remained loyal to him. A few months later, he assembled an army and attacked the Danes at Edington, driving them back to Chippenham and forcing Guthrum's unconditional surrender. Guthrum agreed to convert to Christianity and never set foot in Wessex again.

Around 880, the two kings signed a treaty which outlined the territory known as the Danelaw, integrating the Danish settlers into the Anglo-Saxon political sphere. The peace with Guthrum bought Alfred the time he needed to shore up his defenses and prepare for new Viking invasions.

The Vikings did not return in great numbers until 892, when a great army which had been

---

plundering the Carolingian Empire for the previous decade turned its attention to the seemingly vulnerable and wealthy Anglo-Saxons. Despite a couple early defeats, Alfred's new defensive system worked just as planned, allowing his armies to achieve victory over the invaders. The Danes attempted to gain a foothold in Wessex until they were forced to disband in 896. Alfred was able to rule Wessex in peace for the final three years of his life, and his descendents made use of the military system he created to reclaim most of the Danelaw in the coming generations. With all the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms brought to their knees, Alfred's heirs became the first monarchs of England, though it was not united in the same way it would be under later dynasties.

The Reform of the Anglo-Saxon Army

Early Anglo-Saxon fyrds, until about the seventh century, were made up of king's retainers and their armed followers. They were very much the Germanic reiks-comitatus (warlord-companions) relationship. Warfare was the profession of noblemen, who also armed some of their loyal companions.8 By the late eighth century, the "common burdens" were in place, which required landowners to pay for bridges, fortifications, and military service based on how much land they owned. The idea of military service as a condition of land tenure was a consequence of kings granting secular land in perpetuity, a practice which was known as "bookland." This allowed nobles to feel secure in their land ownership while still contributing to the kingdom's military.9 By the time of Alfred and his brothers' reigns, the West Saxon fyrd was divided into individual shire forces, led by ealdormen, the king's appointed leaders of each shire. This force was further subdivided into the forces of individual thegns, members of the

9 Abels, Lordship and Military Obligation, 52-56.
aristocratic warrior class who normally had commoners working their fields. The West Saxon kings could also call together the National Fyrd, made up of all the shire fyrd. This mechanism was rarely employed, as it was cumbersome and difficult to assemble, as the individual fyrd all had to come from home. The Anglo-Saxon military structure before Alfred's reforms, consisting of the national fyrd, the shire fyrd, and the warbands of individual thegns, was built for the type of warfare common in Anglo-Saxon England before the coming of the Danish invaders.

Since the Anglo-Saxons had subdued the native Briton population, fighting between tribes and later kingdoms was commonplace. The Germanic invaders conquered the Britons with little difficulty, but they remained an occasional thorn in their side for centuries after. From the eighth century through the conquest of England in 1066, border skirmishes and small-scale battles between the West Saxons and various Welsh princes were not abnormal. More common was warfare between the kingdoms of the heptarchy. During the eighth century, Mercia came to a position of prominence by defeating most of the other kingdoms, and Alfred's predecessors militarily subdued many of the other kingdoms as well. When Anglo-Saxon and Viking armies met in pitched battle, the forces were evenly matched for the most part. During this period, the standard battle formation was the "shield wall," though it is at times unclear whether this referred to an actual tactic or was simply a poetic description, and battle strategy was rudimentary at best. Battles consisted of both sides closing with each other, exchanging a

10 Ibid., 58-62.  
13 Ibid., 45-46.  
14 Ibid., 265, 274-75 for "shield wall" as a literary device.
volley of spears, and then clashing together, attempting to bring spears to bear. As the front lines cleared, there was room for further volleys of spears. Battles were won when one side broke ranks and fled, leaving the opponent in possession of the field and of any valuables left behind. The Vikings thus had no great advantage over the Anglo-Saxons in a pitched battle, besides perhaps greater experience in warfare.

The Vikings' advantage came from their mobility as a force. Anglo-Saxon armies before Alfred's reforms were designed for short, decisive campaigns and local defense. If a king had to call a National Fyrd, as the Viking situation warranted, the shire forces took a long time to assemble. The fact that these shire forces were led by individual ealdormen also presented some issues. They were often more concerned with the defense of their personal holdings than with the kingdom as a whole, and were thus more likely to make premature peace settlements with their enemies or even join the opposing side. This happened to Alfred in more than one instance, most notably when many of his ealdormen defected during his temporary forced residence in Athelney. The Danish strategy consisted of rapid movement and surprise attacks. They were much more willing and likely to attack an undefended or lightly defended town than to meet with an enemy army in the field. They routinely built fortifications or occupied existing ones. They carried little and supplied themselves by ravaging the countryside through which they traveled. When possible, they traveled by horseback, though they did not fight mounted. The Great Heathen Army which landed in 865 forced the East Anglian kingdom to provide them with horses, which they then employed in their campaign against Northumbria and later against the

---

15 Abels, Alfred the Great, 127-129.
16 Peddie, Alfred: Warrior King, 60.
17 Ibid., 62-66.
East Anglians as well.\textsuperscript{19} Danish armies worked well together in the field and their commanders planned their attacks to complement each other's.\textsuperscript{20} In many ways, the Anglo-Saxon armies were the antithesis to their more mobile, professional Danish adversaries. After his narrow victory over Guthrum's forces in 878, Alfred began putting in motion a strategy intended to counter the advantages which the Danish armies held over his own forces. His reform of the fyrd, along with the burghal network, was mainly for the purpose of eliminating his enemies' mobility.\textsuperscript{21} This advantage had allowed the Danes to ravage and conquer the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and Alfred surely learned from their failings, along with his own during his brothers' and the early period of his own reign.

The first of Alfred's military reforms was shifting the fyrd to a standing army. Rather than having to deal with the difficulty of calling together a large number of individual shire forces, he was able to have an army ready to go as soon as he was made aware of the threat. No longer did he have to deal with the news that the Viking forces were gone, laden with plunder, before his army had even assembled. Alfred's most significant change to the structure of the fyrd was to divide it into two equal parts, one of which was on "active duty," and the other which was at home, at any given time.\textsuperscript{22} The constant presence of the army helped Alfred curtail his opponents' movement, which took away the Vikings' main advantage. For the same reason, Alfred also changed the fyrd into a mounted force. Contemporary sources often mention the fyrd "riding" after the Vikings, and in the entry for 893, there is an explicit reference to the English

\textsuperscript{20} Peddie, Alfred: Warrior King, 108-119.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{22} "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," entry for 891, in Readings in Medieval History, ed. Patrick J. Geary (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010) 244.
feeding their horses. Though they rode to battle with horses, Anglo-Saxon fyrd did not
generally ride horses into battle. In this way, they were more of a mounted infantry force than a
cavalry force, though some historians do suggest they were adaptable enough to fight from
horseback when necessary.

Despite the revolutionary change to its structure and operation, the fyrd remained a
composition of shire levies, prone to many of the problems which went alongside such a force.
They were not as skilled or experienced in warfare as their Viking opponents, many of whom
pursued raiding as a full time profession. This weakness could normally be overcome by
strong leadership and a sound defensive strategy, so it was not as great a hindrance as it may
have seemed. The division of the fyrd alleviated many of the difficulties of calling large groups
of peasants together, but when their term of service was over, most were eager to return home.
This was the case in 893, when an army led by Alfred's son, Prince Edward, surrounded a
battered and unprovisioned Viking army on a river islet in Buckinghamshire. Unfortunately for
Edward, his troops' terms of service had expired, so they rode off to defend their own homes and
holdings, leaving just a few dozen of the prince's personal retainers to maintain the siege. Alfred
was on his way with a relief force, but, fearing the Vikings would break out before Alfred
arrived with reinforcements, Edward was forced to agree to the Vikings' request for a treaty.
The Scandinavian force dispersed, though they likely rejoined one of the other armies attempting
to ravage England at the time.

23 Ibid., 245.
24 Lavelle, Alfred's Wars, 280-283
25 Peddie, Alfred: Warrior King, 60, 68.
26 Aethelweard, “Aethelweard's Account of the Closing Years of Alfred's Reign,” entry for 893, in Alfred the
Great, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 189-190. Aethelweard's account is a Latin transcription of a manuscript of
the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which did not survive to our time.
Some historians have suggested that Alfred divided the fyrd into two groups so some would always be home to tend to the fields. This was probably not the case. Instead, the division was likely predicated upon the difficulties of keeping an army provisioned for a long period of time. Furthermore, the new iteration of the fyrd was still composed almost exclusively of the nobility and their lesser-born followers, who did little to no actual agricultural work. Alfred divided society into three orders which were later popularized by other writers, including Adalberon of Laon. This division is found in his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which he wrote, “[the king] must have men who pray, and soldiers, and workmen.” Alfred shows clear distinction between these three “orders,” of society: beadsmen (gebedmen), warriors (fyrdmen), and workers (weorcmen).27 Thus, the fyrd was composed mostly of two groups of noble warriors, while the laborers who tended the fields were an entirely different group. They fyrdmen who were at home did help with agricultural work, but they also retained their military function by defending their land from any raiders at large or accompanying garrisons on expeditions.28 Alfred’s new fyrd was much better equipped to counter the extremely mobile Viking armies, but it was not enough alone to tip the balance in favor of Wessex. While the new mounted, standing fyrd could limit the Vikings’ mobility overland, the Scandinavians could still take advantage of England’s fluvial networks to quickly penetrate to the heart of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Viking ships could also drop armies off at locations far from the fyrd, from which it would take Alfred’s armies a long time to get there on foot.

Military campaigns in Early Medieval Europe were a difficult prospect, fraught with

logistical problems. There were three main issues which faced an Early Medieval army in the field, in order of importance: supplies, cohesion, and prestige. A medieval commander may not have thought of these issues in the same terms a historian would, but they were by necessity near the top of his mind. Feeding an army was difficult, as it required the army to stay near a center of collection or to forage from the populace, generally not an option in a defensive war as Alfred was fighting in Wessex. Even if a field army was kept provisioned, it could be challenging to keep the myriad members and interests of the army functioning as a cohesive whole. This was especially the case with a national fyrd composed of separate shire forces, each led by different ealdormen. Most of Alfred's fighters, being aristocrats of some level, valued their own personal holdings above the kingdom's security.

Lastly, the army and its leaders wanted to be seen as victorious, to be seen otherwise would result in a loss of face. Honor and reputation were important in Anglo-Saxon England at all levels of society. For instance, when the king led an army, he made sure all his people knew he was in control. Even when Alfred was stuck in the swampland around Athelney, with his kingdom effectively in Viking hands, he made sure those following him knew Athelney was royal territory still under royal control. A campaign could only be successful if a ruler enjoyed the support of his noble subjects, for if the ealdormen and thegns did not respect Alfred, they had no reason to come when he called the fyrd together.29 Communication between separate forces was also a struggle for early Medieval armies when infrastructure was not well-developed and modern communication methods were undreamed of. Clearly, even Alfred's newly divided and refitted fyrd, prone to all the problems which faced early Medieval armies and unsupported by a

29 Lavelle, Alfred's Wars, 177-182.
navy tantamount to that fielded by the Vikings, was not enough to successfully defend Wessex from the Scandinavian invaders. Alfred's second major military reform, the burghal system, acted as a complementary force to the standing fyrd, and was a major part of the military strategy which won Wessex its relative safety from the Viking hordes.

The New Burghal System

The Burghal System, established under Alfred's reign, served Wessex and England not only during his reign, but in the reigns of his successors and other future kings as well. The system was constructed by Alfred's nobles at the king's explicit command. It was an interconnected administrative and military network, with many fortified towns, known as burhs or burghs, designed to work together as a cohesive unit for the defense of the realm. When they fit into the network, Alfred had Roman cities restored or used existing Iron Age hill forts, but his plan also required the construction of many new towns and fortresses from the ground up. When built anew, the burhs consisted of earthen ramparts surrounded by a ditch. They were sometimes faced with turf and revetted with horizontal planks, held in place by vertical planks to form a palisade. The burhs were carefully planned, fortified towns, not solely military outfits like castles of the later medieval period. Fortifications were not new to Europe or even England, but Alfred's burghal system was unlike anything before it. The burhs were arranged in a strategic manner, so none were greater than twenty miles, about a days' journey, away from the nearest. The best source of information on Alfred's burghal system is a document from the early

31 Abels, Alfred the Great, 201.
tenth century, named the Burghal Hidage by modern historians. Despite the document's date, historians accept the fact that it refers almost entirely to Alfred's program of defense against the Viking threat during his reign. This document provides researchers with a list of thirty-three burhs, and calculations of the forces required to man these burhs. These burhs include former Roman settlements such as Winchester, London, and Chichester, along with other settlements which survive to this day, such as Oxford, Wareham, and Exeter.

Each burh was manned by a garrison force, separate from either half of the fyrd. This force was intended to work in concert with the fyrd and the actual fortifications which made up the burghal system. They defended the cities, many of which had been converted into fortified burhs, and also had an oft-overlooked offensive role. Offensive expeditions were often launched from the burhs, as the fyrd could only be in so many places at one time. These expeditions sometimes employed hit-and-run tactics which may have been based upon observed Viking strategies and Alfred's experiences of guerilla warfare during his exile in the swamps of Athelney. Individual garrisons could also come to the aid of nearby burhs, due to the fortifications' proximity to each other. Burhs and even more temporary fortifications were extremely useful during the period of Alfred's reign, as there were not yet techniques or technologies designed for siege warfare. Other than prolonged sieges aimed at starving an opponent out or a crafty deception, there was little an army could do against a foe holed up in a secure fortification.

Garrisons' numbers were calculated based upon numbers recorded in the Burghal Hidage.

This document does not date from Alfred's reign, but may have been the work of an assiduous government official during the tenth century recording the particulars of a system which had existed since Alfred's reign or a revised and expanded copy of a document drafted during the original organization of the burghal system. It lists all the burhs, giving the assigned hidage for each. A hide was a measurement of land which was used throughout the history of Anglo-Saxon England, and even into Norman England. It was originally based upon a measurement of the land which was required to support a family, and as such was more of an abstract measure of value than a concrete area of land. The meaning changed and fluctuated throughout time, and it is difficult for historians to understand how much land it may have actually represented in different periods of Anglo-Saxon history.

During Alfred's reign, the ownership of five hides of land was a good indication of thegnhood. Men for the garrisons were provided by these five-hide estates. The Burghal Hidage worked upon the principle that each pole of wall, a measurement equaling about 5 ½ yards, of wall was to be manned by four men, and that one man would be supplied from each hide. The garrisons for individual burhs were supplied from land in the proximity of the burh in question. For example, when the Burghal Hidage reads, “to Chichester belongs 1,500 hides,” it means that, based upon the length of the walls at Chichester, 1,500 men would be required to man the garrison. These men were to be provided from land assessed at 1,500 hides in the vicinity of the burh of Chichester. Similar formulas were provided for all thirty-three burhs, coming out to a total of about 27,000 men to man all the burhs. This is a very large military ratio.

36 Keynes and Lapidge, Alfred the Great, 339.
38 Lavelle, Alfred's Wars, 55-56.

24
when compared to the estimated 450,000 person population of Wessex at the time. It is likely that many of these people served not necessarily as warriors upon the walls, but also as maintenance or supply workers for the burhs' defenses.\textsuperscript{40} The garrisons made up about 6\% of the population of Wessex, and they also served alongside the rotating force of the fyrd. A large portion of the male population in Alfred's kingdom served in some sort of military or military support capacity. These large proportions show very well the strain the Viking invasion put upon Anglo-Saxon society, and the numbers from the Burghal Hidage are often used by scholars as proof that the "great armies" of the time numbered in the thousands, rather than the hundreds.

Throughout the Medieval Period of European history, fortresses were an integral part of warfare and society of the various medieval states.\textsuperscript{41} This was the case in Anglo-Saxon England even before Alfred's time as king. While Alfred did come up with the articulated Burghal System in Wessex, he did not pull the idea out of thin air. He found many different sources of influence when devising his military systems. There is little evidence, textual or archaeological, for fortified towns in Wessex, East Anglia, or Northumbria before Alfred's reign, but royal and noble estates did have strong defences. They helped separate the bishops, ealdormen, thegns, and other landed nobles from their subjects around them, but were rarely if ever employed in warfare.\textsuperscript{42}

The Burghal Hidage and the requirement for noblemen to supply fighters and create defences originated during the reign of King Offa of Mercia, from 757-796. Offa and his father, Aethelbald (r. 716-757), engineered a period of Mercian hegemony over almost all of Anglo-

\textsuperscript{40} Lavelle, \textit{Alfred's Wars}, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{42} Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 200-201.
Saxon England. This dominance was made possible not only by their long and stable reigns, but also by some of the policies and laws which were enacted under them. At some point, likely near the beginning of Offa's rule, the Mercian kings began giving secular land grants in perpetuity. This land came to be known as “bookland.” With the advent of this new system, the kings could no longer depend upon using land as a reward for their noble subjects' service in battle, because they already had land handed down to them from their fathers, which took away any enticement to join the current king on his campaigns. To help with this issue, a concept known as the “common burdens,” first mentioned in a Mercian charter from 749, was developed. The common burdens, called such because they were common to all who possessed bookland, consisted of three “burdens,” or responsibilities, imposed upon the landholder: bridge-building, fortification defense, and service upon the king's expeditions.

By 796, all of these burdens were firmly in place in Mercia, and there is at least some evidence that Offa was beginning to put fortifications in place for defence of his kingdom against Viking invaders at the time of his death. The common burdens had found purchase in Wessex as well by the time of Alfred's reign, and it was he who put them to use in defeating the Scandinavian threat to England.\textsuperscript{43} Alfred went above and beyond the previous purview of the common burdens with the construction of his burghal system, but it was the precedent set by them which made them remotely palatable to his subjects. It was Offa who first realized the importance of employing the landholding nobility to help create the defences of Anglo-Saxon England, and Alfred's burghal system showed his agreement with Offa's way of thinking.

\textbf{Alfred also found inspiration for his burghal system from outside the confines of the}\n
\textsuperscript{43} Abels, \textit{Lordship and Military Obligation}, 52-57.
Anglo-Saxon world. Perhaps most importantly to Alfred, the pious king that he was, was the Bible. Alfred compared himself to Biblical figures like David and Solomon, and his system of defenses does bear some resemblance to those found under these Biblical monarchs.\footnote{Keynes, “A Tale of Two Kings,” 208 and Cavill, Vikings, 91.} Perhaps more realistically and significantly, Alfred took the fortification and strategic systems from other contemporary European states, and even the Viking invaders, as a model. Wessex’s largest neighboring state to the south, the Carolingian Empire, provided many good military examples which Alfred followed. He learned not only from the Carolingians’ success, but also from their sufferings under Viking raids. Alfred considered himself a king in the style of a mythicalized Charlemagne (r. 768-814), whom he saw as the model of Germanic kingship, rather than the current rulers of his empire, who were struggling to hold it together against the infighting and Viking invasions they faced.\footnote{Janet L. Nelson, “Alfred’s Carolingian Contemporaries,” in Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences, ed. Timothy Reuter, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 307-310.} Scandinavians harassed the Carolingian Empire throughout the Viking Age, but a period of particular turmoil took place after the Battle of Edington in 878. Alfred managed to defeat the Vikings and secure a truce with their chieftain, Guthrum, which prevented them from returning to Wessex immediately. To accord with the treaty, but still make a living by raiding, many Vikings made their way south to Francia, where they decimated the countryside from 878 until their return to England in 891.\footnote{Abels, Alfred the Great, 285-286.}

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle followed the activities of the Viking armies in Francia very closely during this time period, a sign that Alfred and his nobles recognized the threat had not yet passed.\footnote{“Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,” entry for 890 in Alfred the Great, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 113, for example.} The Carolingian nobility built fortresses to defend themselves against the Vikings, but
they were created individually by private landowners, rather than under the direction of a central monarchy. This caused many problems, especially when trying to defend an area as large as the Carolingian Empire, as there was little to no attempt at a cohesive network of fortifications across the breadth of the empire. The nobles who built the fortresses were more interested in defending their own lands from Viking depredations.\textsuperscript{48} The Carolingians also faced similar problems to Anglo-Saxon rulers when it came to their armies. These problems were magnified in the empire's case, as the Carolingians controlled a much larger area than any of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs, so gathering individual forces together from across the land was an even more impossible task.

In the decades after Charlemagne's reign, his empire broke up into a number of smaller kingdoms, many of which were plagued by power struggles within and between the kingdoms. Such a divided state was unable to push the Viking invaders back with any kind of consistency, and the monarchs were unable to impose a defensive system as comprehensive as Alfred's. In many instances when a threat arose to Francia in the later ninth century, noblemen would attempt to take each other's lands as part of their strategy to stop the Vikings, or simply as an opportunistic land grab.\textsuperscript{49}

Alfred also learned from strategies in which the Carolingians found success against the Vikings, such as the building of double-sided fortifications across rivers which were used near London in 895 to force a Viking army to abandon its ships and flee overland.\textsuperscript{50} The

\textsuperscript{50} "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," entry for 895 in \textit{Alfred the Great}, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 117-118.
abandonment of its ships and flight of this army essentially spelled the end of the Viking threat under Alfred the Great. Similar fortifications were built under Charles the Bald and yielded favorable results for the Carolingian defenders.\textsuperscript{51} It should not simply be assumed that Alfred learned this technique from the Carolingians, as he was plenty intelligent to come up with it himself, but it seems likely he did incorporate defensive strategies from his southern neighbors.\textsuperscript{52} Alfred learned from Carolingian failures in dealing with the Viking threat: a disunited and selfish nobility, unwieldy army, and weak monarchy, as well as from their successes in the area of fortification-building. In his own kingdom, he took great pains to preserve the loyalty and unity of his noblemen, make the army a more efficient and mobile fighting unit, and maintain a strong grip over his subjects.

Although they were mostly known for rapid movement and raiding, the Viking armies which terrorized Anglo-Saxon England also made great use of fortifications. Common practice for the Viking armies was the rapid construction of a fortified base on an island or tributary of a main stream. From this fortification they sent out foraging and raiding parties to collect supplies or plunder. When an Anglo-Saxon army pursued them, they simply ran into their fortress, after which they had two viable options: they could either hold out in the fortress and wait for the unprofessional Anglo-Saxon armies to run low on supplies and morale, or pour out of the fortification and overrun their opponents with a surprise attack.\textsuperscript{53} During the ninth century, implements of siege warfare had not been invented, so besieging armies had little recourse other than to wait for their opponents to begin starving and surrender. It was a costly and impractical

\textsuperscript{51} J.M. Hassal and David Hill, "Ponte de l'Arche: Frankish Influence on the West Saxon Burh?," \textit{Archaeological Journal} 127 (1970): 189-195.
\textsuperscript{52} Keynes and Lapidge, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 288.
\textsuperscript{53} Peddie, \textit{Alfred: Warrior King}, 54-58.
prospect.

At a young age, Alfred learned the value of fortifications and the difficulties of siege warfare in the early Medieval Period. On multiple occasions, he was forced to buy peace at great cost from Viking armies who were secure behind their fortifications. In 875, he besieged a Viking army at Wareham and, unable to storm the fortress and defeat the Vikings by force or securely wait for them to starve, he had the Vikings swear an oath to leave in peace. This oath was secured only with a payment from Alfred, and his enemies, after receiving their payment, simply chose an opportune moment to break out of the fortification and charge to another fortified locale in Exeter. 54

Alfred learned a lot after his estate at Chippenham was overrun by Guthrum’s forces in 878 and he was forced to take refuge in the swamps around the island of Athelney. While he was forcibly exiled, he built a fortification at Athelney and sustained his men through guerilla-style raiding, not at all unlike what the Vikings had been doing against the Anglo-Saxons in the previous decades. 55 Alfred also learned from the failings of Wessex in earlier conflicts against the Vikings. In 876, the city of Exeter was occupied by a Danish army, and when Alfred was creating his burghal system, he had the city’s defenses shored up. When the city was attacked again in 893, the Vikings were unable to take the city immediately, and the garrison and walls were able to hold the invaders back until a field army was able to come and break the Viking siege. 56

56 “Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,” entries for 876 and 893 in English Historical Documents, ed. Dorothy Whitelock,
The Results of the Reforms

The burhs, along with their garrisons and the reformed fyrd, revolutionized the way Wessex fought against the Viking raiders. Alfred's reforms had three goals to establish a strategy of what John Peddie calls "offensive defense."\(^{57}\) Firstly, the Danes were denied their previous mobility by the strategic placement of burhs upon Roman roads, important trackways, and rivers. Before the burhs were built, the Vikings had free run of the entire West Saxon kingdom. There was nothing to stop them from roving throughout the countryside, plundering as they went, while the shire and national fyrd struggled to come together in time, assuming they even had enough notice to do so. Such was the case in 876, when a force of Danes charged all the way from Cambridge to Dorset without meeting any substantial resistance, and took control of the town with minimal effort. From there, they were able to fortify their position and force Alfred to make a deal with them to get them out of his kingdom.\(^{58}\) Had a fleet carrying Viking warriors who planned to rendezvous with that army not crashed off the western coast of England, the Scandinavians may have taken over all of Wessex with this assault.\(^ {59}\) After the construction of the burghal system, the Vikings did not have such an easy time taking control of West Saxon towns. The only time one of Alfred's burhs fell to a Viking army during his reign was in 892, when the Vikings returned from the continent and overwhelmed an unfinished burh.\(^ {60}\) The Vikings still constructed their own fortifications, but they were unable to quickly occupy any English fortifications or towns in the way they had previously done with ease.

\(^{195, 202-204.}\)

\(^{57}\) Peddie, Alfred: Warrior King, 66.

\(^{58}\) Asser, "Life of King Alfred," ch. 49 in Alfred the Great, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 82-83.

\(^{59}\) "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," entry for 877(c) in English Historical Documents, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 195.

\(^{60}\) "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," entry for 892 in English Historical Documents, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 201.
The second goal of Alfred's military reforms was to deny their opponents the ability to freely maneuver across the countryside. The achievement of this goal had little to do with the burhs themselves, stationary bastions that they were, but with the garrisons and the fyrd. Before the construction of the burghal system, Viking hordes marauded through the Anglo-Saxon countryside unmolested. The unwieldy pre-Alfredian fyrd was simply not fast enough to catch up to them before they packed their plunder back into their ships and sailed to the next location. In 893, after two Viking armies had encamped themselves at Appledore and Milton, Alfred was able to use a strategy which would never have succeeded before the advent of the burghal system. He took the fyrd and camped between the two armies, where he was able to keep watch on both of them and attack either of them. The Vikings sent out small raiding parties, but they were pursued by troops "every day...both from the English army and also from the burhs." Under the new system, Alfred's forces and the garrisons, which this entry confirms performed expeditions outside the walls of their respective burhs, worked to prevent the Vikings from moving around between the immediate proximities of the burhs themselves. Alfred's army was able to do more than prevent small raids. When one of the armies broke out in its entirety and plundered part of the countryside, Alfred's army intercepted them and put them to flight, reclaiming the booty in the process. Under Alfred's new military system, his forces were no longer at the mercy of the more mobile Viking war machine.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the burghal system allowed the West Saxons to
store supplies behind defended walls, denying the Vikings their main source of provisions. Part of the way the Viking forces maintained such great mobility was by feeding their armies and horses on the move, plundering towns, farms, and fields as they went. It was a very effective method, as it allowed the Viking armies to travel very lightly, packing only what they needed for the next few days, rather than being burdened by a long wagon-train. After Alfred's reforms, the Scandinavian leaders had a very difficult time trying to keep their forces fed and provisioned. In 894, an army was forced to leave the area of Wirral and flee into Wales, because they had been denied the opportunity to plunder food from the countryside. Even in situations when one garrison was not enough to keep besieging armies from overrunning a burh for a long period, at least one other garrison was no more than a day's march away. Multiple garrisons, along with the more mobile fyrd, prevented the Vikings from plundering food from either the countryside or from fortified locations. Even during harvest, when peasants were reaping the crops in open fields and thus vulnerable to Viking raids, Alfred's reforms allowed the army the luxury of offering personal protection to farmers when necessary, as was the case in 895. A Danish army created an encampment upon the River Lea, near London. After a West Saxon army was defeated in a skirmish, Alfred and his army camped near the peasants, "so that the Danes could not deny them their harvest." Alfred's burghal system and fyrd reforms allowed him to attain the goal of denying the Danes their mobility, maneuverability, and supplies, eradicating any advantage the Vikings held over the West Saxon forces. The burghal system and the reformed fyrd allowed Wessex to stop the Viking advance during Alfred's reign and push back against the

Chapter IV: Alfred's Reforms in Education and Religion

While his military reforms were essential to the very survival of Anglo-Saxon sovereignty in England, Alfred's contributions to education and religion in his kingdom are also an important part of his legacy. Alfred saw the revival of religion through education to be an essential part of defending his kingdom, not only from the immediate Viking threat, but also potential future enemies. In Alfred's mind, the Vikings were a scourge sent by God to punish the English people for their moral decline in the recent decades. Thus it was important to get his kingdom back on God's good side. He approached this in a way which would provide a permanent solution. He brought intelligent and skilled scholars to his kingdom, and then used them to help develop the intellectual character of his own kingdom through education and translation of important works. Alfred did not achieve the ideal of universal literacy he hoped for, but he did contribute to the future strength of English scholars. By the end of his reign, most ealdormen, reeves, and bishops were literate in at least English and possibly Latin as well. Along with achieving the goals for the moral rehabilitation of his people, Alfred's educational requirements for his nobles helped make a form of administration which employed writs, messages directly from the king to his ealdormen or reeves, viable during his reign and under future kings. He considered wisdom to
be what made a man worthy of power, justifying his attempts to force the nobility to become literate and wise. The West Saxon king wanted to save his people through the pursuit of wisdom and piety, for he considered it his responsibility given to him by God. In doing so, he created a resurgence in learning not seen since the Northumbrian Renaissance, which was been appropriately dubbed the “Alfredian Renaissance.”¹

The Viking raids were detrimental to the state of both education and religion in Wessex. Monasteries were perhaps the most lucrative targets for the raiders, as they often housed religious treasures and were guarded by little more than the monks who called them home. The higher ranking church officials, like bishops and the archbishop of Canterbury, were often forced to focus more attention upon the Danish invaders, as they held authority on secular as well as sacred matters. They were essentially noblemen who also tended to ecclesiastical concerns. Likewise, most education during this time period was handled by educated monks. Ninth century Anglo-Saxon England, in comparison to the previous century, during the “Northumbrian Renaissance,” which featured revered scholars such as the The Venerable Bede (672-735), was not a good place for learned monastics, as they often found themselves upon the wrong end of Danish swords. Patronage from noble sources, including the monarchy, also declined during this period, as the establishment of the burghal system and the reformed fyrd were expensive undertakings, and more immediately important to the well-being of the kingdom. Even before Alfred's reign, resources were being funneled into the defensive efforts against the Vikings. The pre-Alfredian West Saxon army was also a costly operation.

Alfred himself was acutely aware of the degenerate state of learning and piety in his

¹ Ibid., 220.
kingdom. In his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, he states "Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English: and I suppose that there were not many beyond the Humber either." While it is likely that Alfred was exaggerating the severity of the situation to burgeon his own achievements in reviving education in Anglo-Saxon England, it is also clear he was not wholly untruthful.

From a modern perspective, it is clear the erosion of education was caused by the Viking raids, but Alfred disagreed with such an assessment. He was a very pious individual, and considered the Viking raids as punishment for what he perceived as the moral decline of the English people, reflected in the sorry state of learning and religion in his kingdom. To Alfred, learning and knowledge were associated with the success of a healthy Christian state. In his mind, the revival of education was just as important as the construction of the burghal network in the grand scheme of defending his kingdom.

Taking a page from St. Gregory, Alfred considered it his duty as a ruler to be a teacher of virtue. Gregory's original work dealt with the responsibilities of priests to their "flocks." While Alfred did provide a translation of this work, he also applied his own spin to some of the practices, showing he saw himself as the "pastor" of his subjects. It was his responsibility to care for them and teach them virtue, which in the king's mind, could be acquired through learning and acquiring knowledge. Alfred desired a religious revival in his kingdom, because he felt it would help his people not only in this life, but in God's realm as well. In a way he aimed

---

2 Alfred, "Gregory's Pastoral Care," in *Alfred the Great*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
3 Cavill, *Vikings*, 73.
4 Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 220.
to tend his flock, preparing them for heaven. In this view, he was influenced by Augustine's *Soliloquies*. In his translation of this work, he declared, “It is not to be supposed that all men have like wisdom in Heaven. For everyone has it in the measure which he here has merited. As he toils...here...after wisdom and righteousness, so has he more of it there.”\(^5\) Alfred acknowledged that perfect wisdom was an impossibility in this life, but the thirst for and pursuit of it were beneficial to a soul's experience in the afterlife, thus the search for knowledge was pleasing to God.

Alfred's educational and religious programme, are likely another example of the West Saxon king's assimilation of Carolingian ideas. The similarity of goals between Alfred's plan and that of Charlemagne a few generations previous are striking. They both sought “the renewal of religion through the revival of literacy.”\(^6\) They in turn were both influenced by Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*, a treatise on Christian education which claimed liberal arts were the essential tools required to understand scripture. Alfred's and Charlemagne's courts both embraced the learning of liberal arts, though Alfred, more than his Carolingian predecessor, sought to spread the knowledge of literacy both in Latin and the local vernacular not only within his court, but outside it as well.\(^7\) Although such a goal was unrealistic, and ultimately unrealized, Alfred dreamed of educating all the free-born of his kingdom, but he had to begin from the upper levels of society.

Much of the specific nature of Alfred's attempt to revive education in his kingdom is

---

7 Ibid., 231.
unknown to modern scholars. He began making strides towards the educational revival of Wessex in the early 880s, only after removing the immediate threat that was Guthrum's army and buying his kingdom a few years' peace. His victory at Edington and handling of the peace negotiations with the Viking leader allowed him the space to pursue reform. One of the first steps he took was the recruitment of foreign scholars into his personal retinue. Alfred recruited numerous luminaries from neighboring Mercia, including Waerferth, bishop of Worcester, Plegmund, the future archbishop of Canterbury, and mass-priests Aethelstan and Waerwulf. He also recruited from Wales, whose leaders had recently pledged their allegiance to Wessex. Asser, his contemporary biographer, was a monk from the monastery of St. David in the kingdom of Dyfed. When Charlemagne began his educational rejuvenation, he also recruited scholars from England, particularly Northumbria, which was undergoing its own cultural renaissance at the time, flowing from its monasteries, which produced fine works of art and literature dealing with Christian imagery. Many of the best minds of Northumbria were recruited to the Carolingian Empire, including Alcuin of York and his less famous countryman, Cathwulf. It is even possible the exodus of many of Anglo-Saxon England's best and brightest scholars for the continent may have come from the countryside. Even in situations when learning in the beginning of Alfred's reign. In turn, Alfred also looked to the continent to stock his court with brilliant scholars, including John, "the Old Saxon," and Grimbald of St-Bertin, both German priests and monks. Alfred was willing and able to pay handsomely for the scholars he brought in. Some of the monasteries

8 Asser, "Life of King Alfred," ch. 77 in Alfred the Great, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 92-93.
10 Hindley, Brief History, 210-215.
were loath to give up their best scholars, and on occasion the scholars were unwilling to abandon their spiritual homes for the court of King Alfred. Alfred had to negotiate and give gifts to Archbishop Fulco of Rheims, former abbot of St-Bertin, to secure the services of Grimbold. It took Asser over a year to decide whether he wanted to serve in Alfred's court, as he was not sure he wanted to leave St. David's on a permanent basis. For his part, Alfred showered the monk in gifts, including entire monasteries with their lands and people, along with other highly valuable treasures.

Alfred brought the myriad scholars from different backgrounds together and created a school within his court, aimed to educate his own children and those of his nobles. Alfred himself had a deep passion for learning. At a young age, he was tutored in his parents' court, where he learned skills which helped with memorization and recitation, along with basic recognition of letters. Alfred gathered scholars to his court to help educate his kingdom, but he also yearned for greater personal knowledge. The assembled scholars acted also as the king's personal tutors. Among their duties were reading aloud to the king in Latin and helping him understand particularly complicated or difficult passages.

Alfred, growing impatient with this passive style of learning, decided he wanted to learn how to actually read Latin himself, and from that point of greater understanding, translate

---

12 The evidence for these negotiations survive only in a letter addressed to Alfred from Archbishop Fulco. From the bishop's response, the tenor of Alfred's request can be surmised. "The Letter of Fulco, archbishop of Rheims, to King Alfred," in Alfred the Great, Keynes and Lapidge, 182-86.


14 Alfred's childhood tutelage also provides the setting of one of the more famous legends featuring the king, in which the young prince receives a book of poems from his mother and memorizes them to earn the right to keep the book.
seminal Latin works into the English language. While Alfred was fascinated with learning and the pursuit of knowledge, he also sought to attain skills required to bring the pursuit of wisdom to his subjects.\(^1\) Alfred's children, particularly his sons Edward and Aethelweard, and his daughter, Aelfthryth, were educated, along with the children of nearby noble families, by tutors within the king's court. They learned to read and write Latin and English, and were instructed in the liberal arts. They were thoroughly educated in these areas before they reached adulthood, and as nobility, they made great use of books.\(^1\) The level of education experienced by noble children was more than Alfred planned for "all free-born young men...who have the means to apply themselves to it."\(^1\) Alfred's long-term plan called for education in reading and literacy in English beginning at a young age for all free-born men in England. If Alfred established parish or monastic schools aimed to educate free, local lay-people, no trace or record of them exist.\(^1\) It seems as if Alfred's plans for education were more grand than could be supported by the difficult times and prevailing social opinions of the period.

Alfred took the education of his noblemen very seriously. Alfred relied upon his ealdormen, reeves, thegns, and bishops for many things, including judicial decisions on their land and providing personal council for the king. It only made sense for Alfred to hold them responsible for being educated and seeking to attain wisdom, so they could competently perform their non-military duties to the kingdom. Alfred required his nobles to judge cases in a just manner according to the established law of the kingdom, as he wrote it himself. A noble not knowing the law was no excuse for Alfred, and if he found a noble servant to have made an

15 Abels, Alfred the Great, 225-226.
17 Alfred, "Gregory's Pastoral Care," in Alfred the Great, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 126.
18 Abels, Alfred the Great, 229.
unjust judgment due to lack of knowledge, he commanded him to either relinquish his office or immediately start working to gain wisdom. Asser indicates the education of the nobility was a successful endeavor. After hearing Alfred's admonitions, the ealdormen and reeves rushed off to go learn how to read so they could understand the laws which they were tasked with upholding.

Many among the nobility lamented the fact they did not learn to read at a young age, while the youths growing up under Alfred's reign were lucky to receive teachings in the liberal arts from an early age.19 Alfred himself, not learning how to read as child, was of a similar mind. His tirade against the state of learning before his reforms was based upon the sort of education he received as a child. Asser blamed his king's lacking literacy upon the "shameful negligence of his parents and tutors."20 According to Asser, however, the king suddenly gained the ability to read and write Latin through "divine inspiration" in the year 887.21 Less fortunate mortals had to settle for having books read to them by their educated children if they found themselves behind in their literary skills.

Whether he learned to read and write Latin through divine inspiration or the tutoring of his new scholarly companions in court, Alfred took it upon himself to translate into English, the vernacular of the laity, works which he considered important for all men to know. The four works translated by Alfred himself, with the aid of his court scholars, were Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, St. Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and the first fifty psalms of the Psalter. Alfred's court also produced a translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*, to which the king added a preface. He likely initiated his court's translating programme around 890.

---

20 Ibid., ch. 22, p. 75
21 Ibid., ch. 87, p. 99.
Alfred translated these works with the help of the scholars assembled at his court. His acted as the authorial and deciding voice. During the translation proceedings, one likely read a passage of Latin aloud, after which all would discuss the meaning, until Alfred had heard enough and decided upon a final meaning and wording in English.\textsuperscript{22} The fact that Alfred had the final say in the composition of the translated works meant that reading them could give a deep impression of how and what the king thought, along with the message he was attempting to send with each work.

Though they are considered translations, Alfred's versions often read more as the West Saxon monarch's own take on the original author's work. Meanings are sometimes altered, and at times sentences and passages are either added or subtracted from the work. Alfred used the translations not only to spread important knowledge from earlier authors, but also to impart his own views and wisdom to the masses.\textsuperscript{23} In some ways, they can be viewed as propaganda, much as the original works of Alfred's court, such as Asser's \textit{Life of King Alfred} and the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle}, are informative while clearly glorifying the king's achievements and lineage.

Gregory's \textit{Pastoral Care} and Boethius's \textit{Consolation of Philosophie}, and the Psalms were chosen almost by default. Any ninth-century churchmen or educated laymen would consider these books essential. \textit{Pastoral Care} was written specifically for medieval bishops, and addressed such topics as how prelates should live and how they should administer and correct those under their guidance. Alfred saw the work as a guide not only for bishops but for princes

\textsuperscript{23} Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 233-234, 240-241.
as well. He believed that all authority, sacred or secular, came from God, and that kings and noblemen were as responsible as bishops for upholding God's laws in their domains. This work may also have had special meaning to Alfred, as Gregory was the pope who undertook to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity during the sixth century.

Boethius, a philosopher imprisoned during the sixth century on suspicion of treason against King Theodoric the Great, wrote his Consolation of Philosophy while awaiting execution. The book took the form of a discussion between Boethius and “Lady Philosophy” on the comforts of philosophical study and disconnection from the difficulties of this world. The work was very popular during the Middle Ages, and the subject matter was comforting to Alfred and his kingdom, constantly beset by Viking raiders. Boethius lacked the sacred authority of Gregory, so Alfred took much greater liberties in altering the text of the work during translation. The conversation, in Alfred's version, is between “mind” and “Wisdom.” It reads more as the comforts of Christian wisdom than of philosophy. The voice of the work is also different. In place of a wrongly accused philosopher, the speaker is “a high-born chieftain, cherishing his lord...a giver of treasure, glorious ever, wise toward this world, wishful of honor, learned in booklore.” The speaker in the Consolation became Alfred himself.

The Psalms were dear to Alfred personally, as he had memorized them as a child. They were a natural choice for him to translate. It is in his translations of the Psalms that Alfred's desire to increase the learning of all the people of his kingdom is most apparent. For each Psalm,

24 Ibid., 237.
26 Abels, Alfred the Great, 237-238.
Alfred wrote a three part introduction, each explaining a different level of meaning in the Psalm: “the historical (what the Psalm meant for David), the moral (what it means for each of our lives), and the analogical (how it prefigures events in the life of Christ).” Alfred understood how much easier it was to grasp the meaning of a text with the help of a knowledgeable teacher, so he provided just this in his edition of the Psalms. The introductions could also come off as personal notes from Alfred, such as the introduction to “David’s Psalm,” where the Biblical king complained to the Lord about his enemies and his troubles. Alfred claimed “everyone who sings this Psalm does likewise with respect to his own enemies.” It is easy to see why Alfred would have fielded similar complaints to God, and the king may have seen a kindred spirit in David.

It is his translation of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, a relatively unpopular text at the time, where Alfred’s alterations are most prominent. He treated the fourth century theologian’s treatise, which took the form of an internal dialogue between Augustine and his Reason about the possibility of knowledge of God and the self, and the relationship between knowledge and the immortality of the soul, as a structure for his own meditations. Alfred was interested in the relationship between wisdom, God, and salvation; he asked, “whether shall I live always; and then I would know whether I, after the parting of the body and the soul, shall ever know more than I know now...for I can not find anything better in man than that he know, and nothing worse than that he be ignorant.” To some degree in all his translations, Alfred altered the meaning to fit his own world view. The result was not perfect word-for-word translation. Instead, Alfred

27 Ibid., 238.
29 Both kings were anointed to kingship as children above their brothers, endured a fugitive period, followed by a victorious emergence through the grace of God.
30 Alfred, “St. Augustine’s Soliloquies” in *Alfred’s Soliloquies*, ed. Carnicelli, 84.
translated the texts to say what he thought they should say. He hoped these translations would help spread learning and education through his kingdom, bringing a return to the scholarly climate enjoyed by the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the previous century and all the benefits enjoyed by a society under such circumstances.

Although Alfred personally enjoyed learning and the pursuit of knowledge, he saw the revival of education to be a necessary step in the recovery of its moral character through religion. The king himself was a very pious person, this piety and sense of closeness to God likely influenced by two trips he made to Rome at a very young age. He was sent by his father, Aethelwulf, to the papal court at the age of four, where he was supposedly anointed as a king by Pope Leo IV, and went again with his father a few years later. The young prince was impressed by what he saw in Rome, and the images of the great cathedrals and saturation of religious life stuck with him through adulthood. Although he was a secular ruler, Alfred saw himself as part of a hierarchy of authority which comprised both secular and sacred rule. As king, he was below only God, and all his subjects, including his bishops, were below him. As such, Alfred saw it as his responsibility to administer the kingdom not only in the governmental sense, but in the spiritual sense as well. Although he had no formal training as a priest, Alfred saw nothing wrong with providing his own translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* to all his bishops, basically telling them the right way to do their job. His bishops were also secular lords as well. They had the same responsibilities as ealdormen and other nobles on their land, which included the paying of the common burdens and providing for the burghal system.

Alfred wanted to rejuvenate the ecclesiastical structure in England, but he did not fundamentally restructure the episcopate as some future monarchs, including his son, Edward the Elder, did during his reign. He did have two monasteries founded, but he did not think the answer to England’s moral and religious failings stemmed from a lack of religious establishments, though many had been ravaged by Vikings. Alfred focused on quality, rather than quantity, when addressing the religious issues his kingdom faced. Building more monasteries and churches would not change the fact that the monks could not read any of the Latin works kept on their shelves. Here is where Alfred's educational reforms came into play. He hoped that through his court school and the dispensation of texts in the vernacular language, the people of his kingdom, including the ecclesiastics, could attain a greater understanding of scripture. Alfred made a point of promoting only pious, well-learned churchmen to important sacred posts in his kingdom, including some of the foreign scholars who he recruited to his court. He was focused only on improving the state of Christianity within his kingdom; he did not actively attempt to convert the pagan invaders who were terrorizing Britain. His passivity in converting the heathens earned him a scathing letter from Pope Formosus which basically threatened excommunication of England from the Catholic Church.34

Despite his attempts to revitalize the character of the church in his kingdom, Alfred did not always have a good reputation among his own holy subjects. Despite his great personal piety, his kingdom was facing a very difficult period, and he had to manufacture every advantage he could. To Alfred, his ecclesiastical subjects and their land were not off-limits when it came to

defending the kingdom from the Vikings. He took control of land where churches and
monasteries which were destroyed by the invaders had previously stood, even if this land had
been granted to the church in perpetuity. Alternatively, Alfred was also known to occasionally
pressure his bishops into exchanging land with him, so he could gain access to strategically
important areas. The requirement of bishops and abbots to pay their share of money for the
burhs and other defensive charges, such as when Alfred had to levy a tax to pay off the Danes,
provided another possible way for church land to fall into the crown's hands. The bishop of
Winchester was forced to hand over two estates which Alfred's father had granted him in his will,
because he was unable to come up with his share of gold to help pay off the Danes. Alfred paid
his share and took control of his lands. Twelfth-century monks of Abingdon remembered Alfred
as a Judas for robbing them of their house of its granted lands. Although the king was pious and
loved the church, he was also pragmatic. There could be no revival of education or religion if
the Vikings conquered and burned all. The church was sacred, but Alfred considered his
authority to be sacred as well, being a result of the grace of God, so he saw no problem in using
church lands and money to aid in the defence of Wessex.

For Alfred, the pursuit of wisdom was tantamount to the pursuit of God. Through his
reforms and translations, he hoped to inspire and facilitate a desire to seek wisdom in his subjects.
The realization of these goals was most evident in the sharply increased literacy of the noble
class. Literacy became a requirement for nobles who wished to have any role in the king's
government during Alfred's reign, a trend which carried forward into the reigns of future

36 Abels, Alfred the Great, 243-246.
monarchs. He also attempted to make religion more available to the masses, most notably through his translation of the psalms into English. It is unclear whether literacy among the lower classes became any more prevalent as a result of his attempts, but the sentiment showed his concern for the spiritual well-being of his kingdom and subjects.
Chapter V: Government and Administration

While Alfred reformed and improved many aspects of his kingdom, government was not one of them. Alfred's government was the same which had been used in Wessex for centuries. His government was not remarkable, only what he managed to accomplish through the existing system. The government was very centralized, as Alfred had the right to make any decision he chose to, but he could also not disregard his thegns. He often consulted with some of the members of his court, which was a fluid group which changed as Alfred's court traveled through the kingdom. The witan (wise-men) who gave the king counsel was not a structured group, and it was certainly nothing like a modern Parliament.

His most impressive achievement as an administrator was the construction of the burghal network. Before this new defensive network was implemented, his thegns paid the common burdens, which covered fortress-work, bridge work, and military service on the king's expeditions. The cost of the burghal system, and it was massive, came on top of these existing burdens. His thegns were resistant to the thought of building such an expensive network of fortresses across the breadth of the kingdom, but Alfred knew it would be necessary if they were to repel the next wave of Viking attacks.

The thegns, according to Asser, "would undertake of their own accord little or no work for the common needs of the kingdom." Thus, the king needed to bring them all over to his side,

2 Abels, Alfred the Great, 261.
which he did very skillfully. He ruled by “gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and, in the end, when his patience was exhausted, by sharply chastising,” his disobedient thegns.\(^3\) Surely he was aided in this specific endeavor by the knowledge that the Vikings might successfully conquer Wessex if nothing changed before they returned in force. Nonetheless, Alfred was very skilled in making his subjects do what he commanded. He knew when to be firm, when to show compassion, and when to let his anger persuade his subjects for him. He had a charisma which made it easy for people to follow him, and he used many techniques to bind his subjects to his will. Alfred involved himself extensively in the minutae of running the kingdom, and was called by one scholar, “a pious and earnest micro-manager.”\(^4\) Aside from the construction of the burghal system, Alfred improved his kingdom in many ways, including financially and legally. Many of these reforms resonated far beyond Alfred’s reign and formed the basis for practices and concepts which were exemplified in the rules of English monarchs for centuries.

Alfred was committed to defending and improving his kingdom and the lives (and afterlives) of his subjects. He accomplished both goals, remarkable given his circumstances. It is clear Alfred was a very skilled ruler. He was shaped by the difficulties he faced throughout his life, living in a country constantly beset by foreign invaders and suffering through a painful and debilitating illness from a young age.\(^5\) The throne was only his after the deaths of his father and brothers, and Alfred was almost reluctant to take it after his brother Aethelfred’s death in

\(^4\) Abels, “Alfred’s Biographers,” 73.
\(^5\) Ibid., 101. Possibly Crohn’s Disease or Hemmorhoids.
871. He rose above the tribulations thrown at him in his life, and through divine intervention, as Alfred believed, was able to rid his kingdom of the Viking threat and bring it back to a position of respectability in the eyes of God. His path required him to navigate the treacherous political atmosphere of the ninth century, a task he managed with aplomb. He forged a powerful kingdom through his wise and firm rule, just as he was forged into a masterful ruler by the hardships he endured both before and during his time as king.

The government of Wessex, in line with most of early Medieval Europe, was very centralized. In this setting, a kingdom's success was based mostly upon the military and administrative talents of the ruler, with other factors such as geography and natural resources being much less important than they are in a more modern political world. These rulers were generally warrior-kings, as was Alfred, but they also controlled and were responsible for much more than military activities. There was little to no structured bureaucracy during the Early Middle Ages, so in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the kings almost constantly traveled from one royal estate to another, bringing their court with them as they went. This was an important practice, as it allowed the monarch, whose decisions influenced the lives of most of his subjects, to seem close to those he ruled. Some later English kings got away from the practice, negatively influencing how their subjects viewed them, but Alfred traveled to different royal estates throughout his reign, including Chippenham, where Guthrum's forces overran the West Saxon forces, forcing Alfred into the swamps.

The importance of strong kings in such a centralized system meant monarchs often took

---

6 Ibid., ch. 41-42, pp. 80-81.
steps to help bolster their authoritative appearance, and Alfred was no exception. He took the throne as the youngest of four brothers in very uncertain times, so making strides to appear a legitimate king was prudent. When he was driven into the wild areas around Athelney, some of his ealdormen did not remain loyal. Some surrendered without fighting, and others defected to the Viking side. These ealdormen were likely not wholly loyal to Alfred, a rather new king who had been having mixed results against Viking raiders since his accession in 871. His military reforms did much to mitigate the issues which arose from disloyal subjects, but Alfred also wanted to project himself as a powerful and successful ruler to his subjects, along with other states around him.

One of the most important ways an Early Medieval monarch could gain renown was through military victories. The acquisition of prestige was one of the most important reasons for military campaigns during Alfred’s time. Until the Battle of Edington in 878, Alfred’s results in battle had been mixed. He was victorious in at Ashdown in 871, then was defeated at Basing the same year (leading half the fyrd along with his brother, Aethelred). He lost at Wilton (871) and had difficulty trying to force the Vikings out of Wessex when they took over the fortification at Wareham (875), and his army was routed by the Vikings at Chippenham in 878. Alfred was not exceptionally skillful as a leader on the battlefield, but he made up for it with his strong strategic sense. He could see the bigger picture of warfare, a trait which allowed him to develop the burghal system.

After Edington, when he had some breathing space away from the Viking invaders and
was hard at work implementing reforms, he also took the time to initiate projects which would increase his prestige. The production, translation, and dispensation of texts from Alfred’s court not only aided with learning in the kingdom, but also allowed people to read of the accomplishments of King Alfred. Asser’s *Vita Aelfredi* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are very dependable sources, but they were both produced by Alfred’s court, and it is unclear to what degree the king himself had a hand in the content of these works. Both laud the king’s accomplishments, but this does not mean they are untrue. Whether he dictated what would be written in the documents or just approved the content, Alfred likely had some level of involvement in their production, meaning they convey information Alfred did not object to being known. According to Abels, the Alfred who is projected in Asser’s *Life* and the ASC represent only what Alfred wanted to be remembered.\(^{11}\) They were not purely works of propaganda, but it is not difficult to see how they may have effected Alfred’s prestige and legitimacy positively.

Alfred was also compared to Biblical figures by both contemporary biographers and modern scholars, an image which appealed to Alfred through his personal piety.\(^{12}\) He also compared himself to an idealized idea of the Carolingian Emperor, Charlemagne, with whom he shared many attributes.\(^{13}\) A comparison to Charlemagne showed Alfred’s desire to be seen as a world figure, and also connected him to Rome, as Charlemagne was crowned Roman Empire. Alfred also began referring to himself as “King of the Anglo-Saxons” rather than “King of Wessex,” around 885. This was a radical departure from typical Anglo-Saxon convention, and a

---

\(^{11}\) Abels, “Alfred’s Biographers,” 66. This is not to say it was untrue or purely propaganda, though some scholars would do qualify it as such.


\(^{13}\) Nelson, “Alfred’s Carolingian Contemporaries,” 310.
sign of unity to come in the future. Alfred never reigned over the territory of all the former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.\textsuperscript{14} This title may be more in reference to the fact his line was the last surviving Anglo-Saxon royal house, rather than a claim to rule over a certain amount area or group of people, though it seems Alfred had an idea of himself as a ruler in a wider sense than only the king of the West Saxons.

Despite the highly centralized nature of Anglo-Saxon government, the king could not do everything himself. Alfred relied heavily upon his noble subjects for local administration, military service, counsel, and development. As such, it was important for Alfred to maintain good relations with his ealdormen, reeves, and thegns. Projecting an authoritative and prestigious image was only one method of keeping subjects loyal. Alfred was very generous in rewarding his subjects. He followed the tradition of Germanic kingship which the Anglo-Saxons had been practicing since before they emigrated from the continent to Britain. Germanic kingship grew out of the tribal relationship between warlords and their companions, in which the leader of a warband rewarded his companions with shares of their spoils from war in return for their services. It was a relationship which valued camaraderie and trust, but remained intact only so long as the warband was consistently victorious in battle. Without victories, the flow of spoils stopped, and the warriors became restless. Eventually, one might challenge the warlord for his position, and possibly win leadership of the band through battle.

Alfred used vernacular poetry, exemplified in the famous epic, \textit{Beowulf}, as a source for how to rule. He desired the respect, loyalty, and love of his subjects, and conveyed his desire and companionship through the giving of gifts. The giving of gifts created bonds of mutual

\textsuperscript{14} Hindley, \textit{Brief History}, 205.
moral obligation.\textsuperscript{15} Alfred learned to be a generous ruler from his father, Aethelwulf, who divided a tenth of the royal estate among his nobility and churchmen before he departed on a pilgrimage to Rome in 855. While he was away, his son, Aethelbald, attempted to take control of the kingdom. When the Aethelwulf returned, “the nobles of the whole of the Saxon land [would not] have any part of [Aethelbald's rebellion].”\textsuperscript{16} The king had a network of loyal and loving subjects who supported him in one of his most dire hours.

Gifts could take the form of land, weapons, food, and titles or positions. To Asser, one of his favorite subjects, Alfred gave the two monasteries of Congresbury and Banwell, with all the land which attached to them. He also gave him a very valuable silk cloak, and “daily gifts of worldly riches of every sort.” Asser took pains to explicitly celebrate his king’s generosity in his biography.\textsuperscript{17} This does again call into question whether Asser’s work represents the truth, as he certainly had a reason to write well of Alfred, but it is just as likely he was expressing his true feelings as he was engaging in any kind of propagandist agenda.

Bishop Wulfsige of Sherborne, in a preface written to a translation (not by Alfred’s court) of Gregory’s \textit{Dialogues}, praised Alfred as “the greatest treasure giver of all the kings he has ever heard tell of.”\textsuperscript{18} Among his subjects, Alfred had a robust reputation as a giver of treasure and one who rewarded his people properly. His will is one of just two which survive from Anglo-Saxon kings. He gave most of his private property to his children, but also bequeathed large

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{Abels1989} Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 252.
\bibitem{Ibid1984} Ibid., ch. 81, pp. 96-97.
\end{thebibliography}
sums of money to his noble subjects.¹⁹ This proves Alfred cared for his people in a way beyond merely keeping them loyal, after all he did not need them to remain loyal to him after his death. Alfred understood very well how to make friends and inspire loyalty among his subjects in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Gift giving could also build relationships between different groups, as was the case when Alfred defeated his opponent, the Viking chieftain Guthrum, in the Battle of Edington. The two kings signed a treaty in 884 which included the requirement that Guthrum convert to Christianity and legally established the Danelaw, acknowledging the Danish conquest of East Anglia and parts of Mercia and Northumbira. This treaty was just one example of Alfred's skill in foreign policy. It bought Wessex a decade of peace, during which Alfred implemented many of the reforms, military and otherwise, which helped his kingdom survive the next Viking incursion. After the treaty was signed, Alfred entertained Guthrum and some of his men, “bestow[ing] many excellent treasures on him and all his men.”²⁰ Alfred wanted to build a relationship with his former enemies. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had a lot of trouble dealing with the Vikings in previous negotiations, but when Alfred forced Guthrum to become a Christian king and integrated the Danelaw into the political sphere of England, he made it much more possible to deal with them. After being entertained by Alfred, who baptized him and accepted him as his adoptive son, Guthrum stayed true to the treaty and never again returned to Wessex. The Danes of the Danelaw and the people of Wessex became political equals, removing the anomalous

---

nature of the Danes in England.\textsuperscript{21}

Alfred also had success in dealing with other foreign entities, including what remained of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms ravaged by the Vikings, and continental powers. Alfred gave graciously to foreign dignitaries in his court, spending up to one sixth of the yearly revenues from royal taxation on the practice.\textsuperscript{22} After Alfred expelled Guthrum and his forces from his realm, the power and stability of Wessex attracted other states of the British Isles. Many of the small Welsh kingdoms submitted to Alfred, as did the western half of Mercia, which remained under Anglo-Saxon control.\textsuperscript{23} Alfred's daughter, Aethelflaed, was married to Aethelred, Lord of the Mercians in 881, which cemented the alliance and union of the two kingdoms. Alfred became very close with his son-in-law, who performed amicably as a commander when the Vikings returned. In his will, he left Aethelred an extremely expensive sword.\textsuperscript{24}

He also had relations with Franks, Gauls, Bretons, Irish, and, if Asser is to be believed, corresponded with Elias, the patriarch of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{25} His myriad foreign relations and the way he is written of by contemporary sources show that Alfred was quite shrewd when it came to political interaction. He used gift giving to create bonds not only with his own countrymen, but with foreigners as well.

Alfred also greatly advanced the concept of law in Anglo-Saxon England. He promulgated a new law code, the first attempt to do so in over a century, based upon that of his

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., ch. 80, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{24} "The Will of King Alfred," in \textit{Alfred the Great}, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 177.
ancestor, King Ine, from the seventh century. The issuing of a new law code was meant to be more than simply that. The act of law-making publicly showcased the king's authority and power. Alfred used it to state his ideological and political ideas and aspirations.26 Despite its origin, Alfred's law code differs significantly from Ine's in a certain aspect. Ine's laws were mostly concerned with the king's rights to land and the tenants who inhabited land which was managed by his nobles. Alfred's code depicts the king as standing above the bond of lordship and ruling directly over the nobles. This fit with Alfred's conception of lordship as a hierarchical chain arranged with God at the top, directly followed by the king. Such a structure reorganized the society to fit the hierarchical model more closely.

Alfred ruled over, and had jurisdiction, over his nobles, who were generally responsible for those they administered as landowners. The right of bookland by Alfred's time likely brought with it judicial responsibility, and even thegns who did not hold land in perpetual grant were responsible for the behavior of their tenants. This system in which the nobility were responsible for the behaviors of those who they lorded over developed further after Alfred's reign, growing into a system of tithing, and eventually the Norman idea of frankpledge, in which a group of people shared legal responsibility for one another, and if one member of the group failed to appear for a legal summons, the entire group could be fined.27 The code is far removed from legal systems of the modern Western world. There was no police force or way to enforce laws with any sense of reliability. As such, a defendant's guilt or innocence did not depend upon a thorough investigation of the facts related to the case. Instead, the defendant would be forced to

26 Keynes and Lapidge, trans., Alfred the Great, 39.
27 Abels, Alfred the Great, 276.
turn to a power greater than that of earthly lordship or kingship, a supernatural sanction: the oath. Oaths were taken very seriously in Anglo-Saxon society, and a person's willingness to take an oath in front of God and, more importantly, his ability to provide "oath-helpers" who could attest to the defendant's good faith, was what proved their innocence. Somebody guilty of breaking an oath had to come to a king's estate and endure for forty days whatever a bishop prescribed for him.

More devastating than such a punishment was the potential loss of oath-worthiness, by which a person could become legally defenseless. In such a situation, any who bore grudges against said person could pursue settlement with relative impunity. Alfred's code calls upon subjects to act with self-restraint, and espoused dealing with any problems between the two opposing parties. If a dispute went on unresolved for long enough, it could result in a feud, which could with time grow into a vendetta, where one party sought to right a perceived wrong by taking the life of the other party. In the absence of a police system, vendettas were one of the most effective mechanisms for preventing violence. People did not wish to endanger themselves or their families by allowing a dispute to fester into a vendetta.

Violence, under Alfred's new law code, was seen as a last resort, if no other legal option was available. The code made specific rules for how a feud was supposed to be handled, which included protection for those who surrendered peacefully. If they failed to surrender, they could be attacked at will. The king's representatives collected fines from those who broke the new laws regarding feuding. If a wronged party was not strong enough to successfully bring a feud to fruition against a defendant, he could appeal to an ealdorman, who could then choose whether he wanted to intervene or not. If the ealdorman decided not to, the potential plaintiff could take his
case directly to the king. This was a difficult prospect, as the king was never in one place for a particularly long time, so reaching out to the king could be an expensive and frustrating process. Violence was the last resort in solving problems between two parties, and the king was the last resort when seeking an arbitrator.28

Despite these difficulties, Alfred did personally oversee many cases. Asser presents him, as in most endeavors, as a very wise, Solomonic judge, who was "painstaking...in establishing the truth in judicial hearings." He especially took it upon himself to be fair and just when dealing with cases involving the poor, and very carefully watched his noblemen, in whom he had vested the responsibility of judicial administration in their locales, to make sure they came to just decisions.29 The theory of the king as the fountainhead of justice was one which would remain popular with English monarchs well into the future, and the judicial structure stayed consistent with the hierarchical model Alfred believed in until the early modern period.

Alfred also took a very active role in boosting the West Saxon economy. The burhs he built were intended to be a defensive network, and they were a very successful one, but during Alfred's reign and after, they became much more than fortifications. The burghal network grew to have an economic function to go along with its intended defensive uses. Many burhs were placed in already thriving urban locations. In these cases, existing fortifications, usually of Roman origin, were refurbished. In other instances, they were created where no settlement had previously stood, and some of these towns developed into trading posts or places of commercial activity.

28 Ibid., 276-278.
The burhs were placed in close proximity on important roads and rivers, mostly for security, but there is also evidence that Alfred placed them in a manner to be economically viable. Viking raids had decimated international trade in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for decades before Alfred came into power, and it continued in his reign. The naval might of the Scandinavians made commercial seaports into alluring targets. The burghal system helped Alfred's kingdom develop a burgeoning and robust domestic trade network.\textsuperscript{30} Alfred's mind toward the economic functions of burhs was apparent in the redesign of not only the fortifications, but the urban organization of some of the towns which became part of the burghal network. Many towns which had existed before becoming burhs, most notably Winchester, were reorganized with logical, gridded street plans encouraging commercial activity.

During the reigns of Alfred and his immediate heirs, the urban development if England began, due in no small part to the establishment of a network of fortified towns throughout the country. Kings began the practice of selling merchant rights and land plots within the walls of these cities.\textsuperscript{31} It was an early form of merchant taxation, and a practice which future English monarchs followed and later abused. The burghal system increased the control of the monarchy over its subjects, regularizing the demands upon them to supply labor for fortifications and men for war. In times of need, Alfred's and his successors' reeves could milk a town of extra money through taxation of merchant transactions.

Alfred also established mints in some burhs which he felt had the potential for long term

\textsuperscript{30} Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 216-217.
\textsuperscript{31} Hall, \textit{Burhs and Boroughs}, 606-607.
Although Viking raids greatly damaged the international trade network of Anglo-Saxon England, they also created a domestic demand for more coins. Alfred and other kings had to raise cash to buy off the Danes. Much of this cash came from their subjects, who often were hard-pressed to come up with the sums required. During Alfred’s reign, there were likely millions of pennies circulating in Wessex. When he took the throne, there were only two active mints south of the Humber River: one in Canterbury, and another in London. Under his brother, Aethelred, they produced debased “silver” pennies which were actually only 20% silver. During his reign, Alfred removed the debased currency and had it replaced with fine silver pennies. The enormity of such a task showed the authority he held over his subjects and his interest in the economic well-being of his kingdom.

Alfred understood very well that wealth was a necessary tool for effective ruling. When he translated the works of Augustine and Boethius, he consistently changed passages which denounced the pursuit of material wealth to reflect the practical necessities of royal governance. Alfred needed great amounts of money not only to pay off the Danes when necessary, but also for the day-to-day business of the kingdom, which often involved spending lavishly to entertain foreign dignitaries or giving to his own subjects. Alfred generated the wealth required for effective governance through commercial activities and mints in the burhs, the dues of justice, tribute from client rulers, and the revenues of his own public estates. In his will, after he finished stating the division of money for his beneficiaries, he quipped “I do not know for certain whether there is so much money, nor do I know whether there is more, though I suspect so.”

---

32 Ibid., 610.
33 Abels, Alfred the Great, 209-212.
34 “The Will of King Alfred,” in Alfred the Great, 177.
alone, Alfred distributed 486,000 pennies.\textsuperscript{35} It was impractical to count out the amount of money in the king's treasury during Alfred's time, so it was likely weighed rather than precisely counted, which provided another reason for him to restore the purity the currency. For Alfred, the "tools" of kingship were his people, and the means to support them. Throughout his reign, he made decisions and implemented policies intended to increase control over his people, whether through generosity or harshness, and to raise money to use for this purpose.

\textsuperscript{35} Abels, \textit{Alfred the Great}, 210.
Chapter VI: Conclusion

Alfred's reign was a watershed in English history. He preserved Anglo-Saxon rule in England for another century by defeating the Viking invaders who had eliminated all other royal houses in Britain. He implemented policies and practices which were used, for good or ill, by monarchs throughout the Middle Ages. Alfred's reforms of the fyrd and creation of the burghal system allowed him to pass along the title of “King of the Anglo-Saxons” to his son, Edward. Under Alfred's successors, his military reforms were employed to reclaim the Danelaw from the Scandinavian conquerors. Alfred's educational reforms reinvigorated the ecclesiastical segments of Anglo-Saxon culture and created a literate nobility, which was crucial to the ruling style of Alfred and future holders of the Anglo-Saxon, and later English, crown. The governmental, legal, and economic practices of Alfred the Great also had far-reaching effects. Maintaining the loyalty of powerful noble subjects remained a constant necessity for succeeding English kings, many of whom used the same laws and economic strategies as Alfred to manage their kingdoms. Had a less capable ruler ascended to the West Saxon throne when Alfred did, the Danes likely would have conquered England well before Canute the Great took control of the island in 1016. From the very point of defeat, Alfred claimed victory and preserved Anglo-Saxon culture in England. As a powerful ruler, he set the stage for the monarchs who came after him. Most did not live up to the image of their “Great” predecessor.
Works Cited


