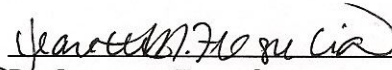


The Legacy of the Danes:
A Look at the Impacts of Viking Conquest
on England in the Late Ninth Century

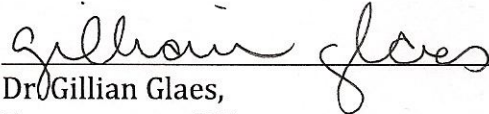
Bryce Kaiser
Senior Honors Thesis
Spring 2012

SIGNATURE PAGE

These signatures certify that I, Bryce E. Kaiser, have completed an honors thesis in the Department of History at Carroll College for graduation with honors.



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Thesis Abstract

The aim of any historical research project is to explore the links between different aspects of history, from crime and retribution to commerce and exploration. More importantly than this, the true purpose of exploring these links is to understand the men and women who came before us, who established kingdoms, empires, companies, families, and ideas. Understanding these men and women is itself the reward. Some argue that to study the past is to find a way to avoid those mistakes. While this is possibility that some pursue, I would argue that understanding the past is a way for mankind to understand itself. To know how a kingdom developed helps to understand why the descendents of those people behave and believe they way they do now. It is from this perspective that I write this thesis. I seek to explore the impacts of the Danish Vikings upon King Alfred the Great and the Anglo-Saxon people of the ninth century Ano Domini and to understand how this conflict established the foundation for a unified England.

Alfred [the Great] was to become the greatest king the Anglo-Saxons ever produced. He became the most seminal figure in English history between the Roman conquest and the coming of William of Normandy. He saved Wessex in her darkest hour, unified the English peoples who were not under Danish rule, and began the reconquest of the Danelaw.

– Joel T. Rosenthal, *Angles, Angels, and Conquerors*

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Introduction

Barbarian. Heathen. Vandal. Ruffian. Rapist. Pillager. Uncivilized brute. These terms are simply a sampling of the pool of words from which descriptions of the Vikings have been made. There is a certain amount of truth in every one of these descriptors, but they are far from a complete list detailing the culture of the Vikings. The presence of these “uncivilized barbarians” has been documented from evidence found from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Bagdad, Iraq to the eastern shores of Canada. With settlements on Greenland and Iceland long before the Age of Exploration in Europe, and the excavated ruins of their infamous Longboats found miles up rivers, far away from the coastlines, the Vikings were the first long-distance European travelers and explorers. It was this spirit of adventure that led them to the shores of England, where they shared their culture and civilization with the inhabitants of that island through warfare and trade.

The Vikings were men from the north coming from Denmark and Norway. As they traveled, they took with them their ancient deities and legends of Thor, Odin, and Freya. However, in the late ninth century several had begun to turn to what they viewed as the new and powerful God of the Christians. Regardless of their religious alignment, the Vikings retained much of their traditional values and beliefs all across the world, past the boundaries of the “known” world.

While the Vikings took their culture with them all over the world, one of the most important places they left their mark was the British Isles. They had first visited the island of England in the seventh century, conquering what little resistance there was and then settling the island. They were attracted to the green pastures and fertile land for

grazing animals, and the forests were large enough to hold game to hunt and with enough wood to make homes and ships. In addition, numerous rivers allowed the now-settled Saxons to explore the island and trade with each other, even to bring fish from the sea to inland towns and villages.

For two hundred years, beginning in the 700s, the Saxons became part of England, part of the land and people. It is likely that they reproduced with the native population of Britons, thus creating a new people that was distinctly British. By the late ninth century, these Anglo-Saxons came to dominate all of England (except for Scotland to the north and Ireland, which is another matter entirely). The Anglo-Saxons created a patchwork of kingdoms all across England, including Mercia, Essex, Northumbria, East Anglia, and Wessex.

Beginning in the middle of the ninth century, however, a new wave of Vikings came to England, the Danes. These new arrivals were just as strong and powerful as the Saxon Vikings from two hundred years earlier, with much of the same culture and beliefs. Despite having retained much of their culture from their initial settlement, the Anglo-Saxons were soon overrun by the Danes throughout England. The only two kingdoms that remained independent were Mercia and Wessex.

Into this tumultuous period stepped King Alfred the Great of Wessex. Described as a man of ill health, suffering from an unknown illness from his youth until his death, but also a man of strong conviction and commitment to his people, he was able to unify his kingdom and stop the Viking advance while the Danes were hammering at the borders of his land and roaming throughout Mercia. Through his strength of character and military reforms, King Alfred led his people resiliently against the Danes. Though he did

not “win” by his death at the turn of the tenth century, Alfred the Great of Wessex, the only monarch in English history to earn the title, created the framework for the future of England and the English people. The Viking presence in England in the late ninth century would, however, impact the course of the future.

Chapter One

King Alfred the Great as a Case Study of Viking Impacts

When King Alfred the Great of Wessex came to power in 871AD, England was a collection of small kingdoms, the remnants of the Roman occupation some centuries before. However, in 871, Alfred began to reshape and reform the southern portion of the island of Britain. This small period of history, though of major importance to the future of England, is often overlooked and forgotten by those outside of Great Britain. In 1901, the English monarchy erected a statue to recognize possibly the most important figure in English history (*Illustration 1*). Without King Alfred the Great and his reforms, the kingdom of Wessex would have fallen to the Danes and the foundation for the country of England would have been forever changed.

In the latter half of the ninth century, the *Danes*^{*} had already established a sizeable foothold on the island of Britain. This space was known as the Danelaw, a collection of towns and cities that were under the control, both directly and indirectly, of the Danes. Danish control of England was not that of a *feudal kingdom*, or even remotely tied as such a system, but rather one of *territorial dominance and martial supremacy*. The Danes conquered land for the resources it could bring to their homes in the northern reaches of Europe.

Outside of direct control of the Danes, there were several small Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms. The major kingdoms were Northumbria, in the northeast of the island just south of Scotland (the Land of the Scots); East Anglia, on the east-southeastern coast;

* For italicized terms, other than sources, see the *Glossary*.

and Mercia, sandwiched between East Anglia and the Irish Sea (*Illustration 2*). Of these three kingdoms, Northumbria and East Anglia were nearly completely dominated and controlled by the Danes, with East Anglia centered in and encompassed by the Danelaw. Mercia, though technically separate from and independent of the Viking invaders, was nevertheless influenced by the Vikings.

The last completely free Anglo-Saxon kingdom, that which had yet to be subjected to the control of the Danes, was Wessex, in the southwestern quadrant of the island. Leading these people, after the death of his brother, Ethelred, in 871, was Alfred of Wessex. He was later given the name of “The Great,” admitting him into a select category of kings and leaders, including Charlemagne (French for Charles the Great), Alexander the Great, and Catharine the Great of Russia.

Anglo-Saxon England was impacted and influenced by the Danish presence so strongly that it began to adapt pieces of the Viking culture, including laws and military tactics. To better demonstrate the extent of the impact of the Danish settlement and conquest of Britain in the late ninth century, a close study of one of the most prominent figures in English Medieval history, King Alfred the Great of Wessex, is required.

Much of what we know concerning Alfred the Great comes from two main sources: Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. These are the heart and soul of the information on Alfred’s reign, and thus it is important to understand them (particularly how they relate to the ninth century) in an effort to create a complete picture of the time. However, there are also other texts that prove uniquely useful. Excerpts from Alfred’s *Laws*¹ still survive, though they are often

fragmented. It is from this text that we can see the direct influence of Alfred on his kingdom, and the Danes on Alfred.

Before delving into the first of the main sources, Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, some background information on the author is in order. Asser was, interestingly, a Welshman, from a monastery called St. David's in the kingdom of Dyfed (*Illustration 3*), and likely adopted the Christian name upon becoming a monk; we do not know his pre-monastic name. We do know, from some of Alfred's own translations of Christian texts, that Asser was most probably a bishop of some kind, or at least a close personal friend of the king.² Though detailed information on Asser himself is not available, his contemporary biography of King Alfred is invaluable, as it highlights many of Alfred's major moments in his life.

The second main source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, is one of the first annals, a year-by-year account, of the medieval period. It begins in year 1 AD, though it was not actually compiled until Alfred's reign.[†] Copies of the manuscript continue until 1154 AD. The years between 1 AD and 1154 AD are detailed in their accounts. The content is not mundane events, such as weather patterns, but descriptions of major battles, who was king and for how long, where people came from or left to, and even laws that were passed by the various kings.³

Now that the two major sources have been introduced, the focus can now turn back to the seminal figure of the time: King Alfred the Great. A little has been said of him, but a more thorough explanation and examination of the texts, particularly Asser's *Life*, is required to fully understand the man behind the name. Only once this

[†] This is most likely due to a lack of patronage, which eventually came from Alfred, as well as near-constant warfare and shifting kingdoms.

has been achieved can it be understood just how strong the influence of the Danish presence was upon the Anglo-Saxon peoples. It is important to note here that Asser's *Life*, in its original form, no longer survives. In the final months of 1731, it was consumed by a fire, leaving behind only a few fragments and what had already been copied before the fire. Thus, there are gaps in the text that we are unable to fill in completely. Nevertheless, it remains vital to the study of King Alfred the Great, and consequently Anglo-Saxon England in the ninth century.

Alfred was born between 847 and 849 at a royal estate that Asser calls Wantage,[‡] which lies in the region of Berkshire.⁴ To highlight Alfred's childhood character, Asser tells a story of Alfred, when he was not quite twelve years old, in which his mother held before Alfred and his brothers a book of English poetry. His mother promised them that the first to learn the book's poems would earn the book. Alfred took the book to his teacher, as he had yet to learn how to read or write, and quickly memorized all the poems in the book by oral dictation and recitation.⁵ This one story begins to show how Alfred was very much a man of learning and study, and how he dedicated much of his time as king to establishing places of education.

Asser notes shortly after telling the story of the book of English poetry that Alfred suffered "all kinds of illnesses unknown to the physicians of this island" from infancy up until his death in 899.⁶ This is an important fact in the study of the life of King Alfred. That Asser mentions Alfred's infirmities, thus displaying weakness in his patron and liege lord, is extraordinary of the times when leaders were more often than not displayed as nearly perfect. At the time of Alfred's reign (871 – 899), and

[‡] This area is in the upper Thames valley.

even after and before, there were certain images and expectations set for the king and his immediate followers. The king was meant to be strong, both in personality and physical prowess. With such illnesses striking Alfred throughout his life (we do not know what exactly they were), for him to continue leading and guiding his people as king was an impressive feat, made even more remarkable by the pressures imposed by the Danish presence.

Asser tells of a battle sometime in 871 in which Alfred displayed great skill as a military commander, even while suffering from the previously mentioned illnesses. While his older brother, King Ethelred, was praying at Mass and refusing to leave his tent until the service was over, the Viking raiding army was already in formation on the battlefield. Alfred, no longer able to wait for his brother, ordered the Christian forces to gather and began the battle with the Vikings. Asser also makes certain to mention that the Christians did not have the advantage of numbers or position, with the Vikings holding the high ground. The battle continued all day, with Alfred himself leading the fight, and ended with the eventual flight of the Vikings, Alfred riding them down in pursuit.⁷

Then, after the Easter of 871, King Ethelred died and left the throne to Alfred. It is not specified how Ethelred died, simply stating that he “went the way of all flesh.”⁸ Here, Asser points out that Alfred, had he chosen, could have taken the throne from his brother at any time, since he was so loved by the people and his peers. Throughout Asser’s *Life*, Alfred is depicted as a man who holds to moral standards and devotion to his people and his church, even in the face of overwhelming enemy forces.

When Alfred ascended the throne of Wessex in 871, he inherited more than lands and people. He also inherited the troubles caused by the often-hostile presence of the Vikings. In an effort to protect his people and his lands, Alfred began instituting various reforms in the military, courts, and *education*.

Before Alfred, education was a privilege reserved for the nobility who could afford to hire instructors from distant lands, particularly France and Italy (Rome). Alfred's love for education was not constricted to those who were directly beneath him, that is, the nobles and military leaders. Alfred is credited with founding at least two religious sites. A monastery at Athelney and a nunnery at Shaftesbury were founded, most likely, in the 870s and 880s (respectively).⁹ This is significant for the education of the people, since monasteries and nunneries were centers of learning for all people in the medieval period, when the Christian church's power was paramount.

Asser continues on to write about Alfred's activities in relation to the common people. Alfred is noted to have presided over judicial matters personally, particularly between the common folk and the ealdormen (nobles) or reeves (similar to a mayor), and to have passed equal justice upon them (favoring neither his nobles nor the common people). Attached to his desire for implementation of just law was Alfred's requirement that all those who could pass judgment in his place be able to read and write,¹⁰ and thus be able to recognize Alfred's law and not be misled by others. This small change in how judicial matters were approached cut down greatly on corruption and misrepresentation of the law.

In a desire for others to be literate, Alfred instructed his nobles and reeves to educate themselves and their children in letters. If they could not understand how to

read, Alfred would have someone read the laws and other books (particularly religious texts) to them until they could devote their content to memory. Though this insistence on literacy may seem to be somewhat mundane, in comparison to battles and treaties, Asser writes that he has “explained this concern for learning how to read among the young and old in order to give some idea of the character of King Alfred.”¹¹ The character of King Alfred the Great is very important in studying his reign and the subsequent impacts of the Danes on him and his kingdom, and thus Alfred’s own legacy as “the Great.”

More of the character of King Alfred can be gleaned from his *Will*. Alfred wrote his will at least two times, for he mentions in his final version that he considers the others that came before to be void and meaningless. In the final will, the version we now possess, Alfred enumerates his wishes for the distribution of his property. Included in the list of people to receive property are his sons, Edward (oldest) and Ethelweard, his various daughters, his wife, and the sons of his deceased older brothers. Concerning his councilors, and whether they should be bound to the next king (Edward) or be free to choose their allegiance, Alfred writes, “But I desire for the love of God and for the needs of my soul that they be entitled to their freedom and their free choice. And in the name of the living God I command that no man should oppress them either with claims for money or with anything, in such a way that they cannot choose whatever lord they desire.”¹²

Alfred was a king who offered and supported the use of freewill in his subjects, a revolutionary concept that would not be widely seen again for several centuries. However, he was not a person to easily forgive or accept failure. If he

offered someone a responsibility, and if it was accepted, he expected the inherent duties to be completed thoroughly and efficiently; there were no “slackers” in King Alfred’s court. It was this high level of expectation in his followers that helped Alfred create the foundation for a future unified England.

It must be understood that Alfred did not free his people from the dangers represented by the Danes. He did, however, lay the groundwork that subsequent rulers would build upon to gradually establish a free English kingdom. There are two lasting impacts of the Danes’ presence upon England during King Alfred’s reign. First among these are the burhs. The second is Alfred’s *Laws*, a collection of laws formulated by the king in an effort to give stability and order to an otherwise chaotic and unpredictable world.

To combat the increasing pressures of the Vikings, Alfred began to institute changes in the fortification of towns. The Vikings were primarily raiders, attacking quickly then leaving, and were not accustomed to carrying out long sieges, with only a few mentions of protracted sieges during the time of Alfred’s reign.¹³ To provide more security for his people, Alfred set about building burhs (earthen fortifications and grid-patterned-based towns).^{*} The building of burhs was successful, as Alfred P. Smyth points out in his book, *King Alfred the Great*. He states that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, when writing about the siege of Rochester in 885,¹⁴ mentions that the city withstood a siege until King Alfred was able to arrive and then drive the invaders away.¹⁵ It is not difficult to imagine that this result, like many others that can be found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, can be credited to the fortifications that Alfred

^{*} For more information on burhs, see “Burghal Hidage” in Simon Kenyes’ work.

had instituted throughout his kingdom. Also, since the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the date of the siege of Rochester as having happened in 885, it is obvious that some kind of fortification or other defense against the Vikings was already enacted half-way through Alfred's reign.

The *Burghal Hidage* is a list of burhs in England that were ordered by King Alfred to be constructed around the 880s. The locations are listed with a term, *hides*, that does not have much meaning in itself today. Traditionally, a *hide* was used to refer to the number of men needed to protect a burh, or wall. They measured walls using a "pole" (roughly five and a half yards), and each pole was manned by four soldiers. Thus, when the listing says "to Hastings belong 500 hides; to Lewes belong 1,300 hides," it is telling the number of men required to protect the burh (500 men for Hastings and 1,300 men for Lewes).¹⁶ By extension, we can estimate the size of the burh based on these numbers. If Hastings requires 500 men, and each pole of wall needs four men, that is roughly 125 poles, which makes the perimeter of the burh to be about 687 ½ yards in length. Following this same method, we can estimate the perimeter of Lewes to be near 1,800 yards in length.

In addition to simply listing the number of men required to fortify a burh, the *hides* also specify how far the leader of the burh was allowed to search for men to staff the walls. In the examples given above, the manager of Hastings and Lewes would be able to search 500 *hides* and 1,300 *hides* (respectively) from the wall itself for men. If men were not to be found within this region, then the leader of the burh would have to seek permission from others to search in a wider area.

This system presented a distinct problem for the Danes. The majority did not use horses to raid, due to the expense of maintaining them, and they were very accustomed to walking into a town, village, or city without substantial walls. However, when the burhs began to be erected, it gave them pause. For, not only was there a physical barrier (the earthen fortifications) between the invaders and the loot they sought, but the barrier was manned with an armed militia. It must be understood that these burhs were not a complete deterrent or a sure means of survival. Before the creation of the burhs, the Danes would march into a town or village, forming a *shield-wall*[§] to protect themselves, quickly dispatch resistance, take whatever they could or wanted, then leave.

After the burhs were initially constructed in the 880s, however, siege tactics and diplomacy grew more commonplace. In most cases, the Danes tried to avoid full-scale battle. Their numbers of soldiers were essential to their survival because they could not simply recruit from a nearby town, but had to “import” men from their homeland. When such conflicts grew more common, they resorted to other methods to gain that which they sought. They would lay siege to a town, barricade all ways to and from it, then wait. Eventually, someone higher up on the hierarchical chain of command would arrive and, in most cases, offer some kind of incentive to leave (aka, a bribe). Having secured what they wanted, the Danes would pack up their camp and leave, repeating the process somewhere else.

[§] A shield-wall is a line of shield-bearing men who overlap their shields (the right edge of the shield covers the left edge of the person's to the right) to create a very strong and mobile barricade, penetrable only from above or beneath.

During Alfred's reign, this system of siege-for-bribes worked only occasionally. While a religious man, who wished to spare life wherever he could, Alfred was also a military leader. Several places in Asser's *Life* mention Alfred pursuing his enemy, cutting down as many as he could before they got away. In some cases, Alfred would simply attack the besiegers, forcing them to retreat. In others, he would offer parlay in an effort to win the day peaceably. Regardless of which method Alfred chose, the construction of the burhs gave him the option to choose.

The second of the two lasting impacts mentioned above, Alfred's *Laws*, was not, in itself, truly unique. Codified laws existed across Europe, and there are records indicating that such laws existed in Britain before Alfred's time. However, Alfred's *Laws* were a result from constant contact and interaction, both aggressive and peaceful, with the Danes. This slight nuance lends the laws a significantly different perspective. While other laws might be seen as directed with a "us-them" approach, Alfred's were mutual. Though the Danes were an external military power, to Alfred they still fell within the rights and freedoms that his own people were given.

To Alfred, the Danes belonged to the same category of his own people: human beings. Despite their violence and quite frequent blasphemy, the Danes were men who had families and beliefs, hopes and dreams. In a rare act of Christian charity, Alfred chose to not judge the Danes on their actions, but instead on their potential.

Alfred may have viewed the Danes as being within his law, but this did not stop him from treating them as enemies on the battlefield. Alfred was a man who was fierce in battle, yet calm and open-minded in court. His laws were not a creation of his own mind, but from himself and his councilors, and they often considered the

words of the church. The *Laws* contain items concerned with fighting before an ordained member of the church and how to proceed with an accidental death, such as a man falling from a tree to his death.¹⁷

What is very interesting about Alfred's *Laws* is the constant appearance of *wergild*.^{*} The term is Scandinavian in origin, introduced to the British Isles by the different waves of Vikings, beginning centuries before Alfred's reign and remaining behind in their descendants. The fact that the term appears in Alfred's *Laws* shows a direct influence of the Vikings upon English and Anglo-Saxon culture. Granted, by the ninth century the Vikings had already had a presence in Britain for some time and some influence was likely left over from their initial contact. Nevertheless, that *wergild* wound itself into Alfred's *Laws* is indeed intriguing. The blending of the "pagan" Norse culture with that of the Christianized Anglo-Saxon peoples suggests some peaceful interactions, sprinkled throughout the violence and bloodshed.

It is at least somewhat clear that the Viking peoples had a strong impact upon Alfred, aside from their military tactics and power. Even as Alfred adapted his country's military to face the Danes by implementing burhs and his own shield-walls, he took some of their culture and integrated it into his own. Blending the concepts of personal living value (*wergild*) and Christian values (abiding by one's oath, abstaining from adultery, etc.) provides a very stimulating code of laws. If a man is caught stealing in Alfred's kingdom, he would face a similar penalty, usually a severing of the right hand from the arm, as he would in the Norse-controlled lands in Britain and Europe.

^{*} The estimated value of a person.

Though there was indeed a separation between classes (the equivalent of lords, lesser lords, and peasants), the laws applied to the peasants were also applied to the nobles. The *wergild* of a noble lord was significantly larger than that of a laborer, but even a laborer's life was worth money. If a farmer was killed by a lord, the farmer's *wergild* was still owed to the farmer's family. There were many exceptions to this, based on the grounds of inability to pay or lack of family, not on status. If a murdered farmer had no immediate family, the *wergild* would be paid to the next of kin; if that failed, it would be paid, eventually, to the church.¹⁸

Once Alfred had stabilized his kingdom by creating an army, instituting new laws, and building fortifications to protect his vulnerable towns, he expanded his vision. Townsfolk from other countries noticed the growing prosperity of Alfred's kingdom, as well as its increase in military might, and began to look to him for protection and wealth, rather than their own kings. Thus, Alfred began to "conquer" the English kingdoms that were not directly controlled by the Danes in the Danelaw. This gradual accumulation of lands outside his own helps to show some of the impact the Danes had on Alfred. The Danes were concerned with finding and obtaining valuables for their homeland, which led them to conquering new lands. Alfred, in comparison, was concerned with obtaining supplies for his people and keeping them safe, prompting him to absorb smaller lands and kingdoms.

Eventually, Alfred came to be known as the king of all non-Dane lands^{**} (that is, lands outside of the Danelaw). The truth of this is still in question, as it is mainly

^{**} Though he was known as the king of all non-Dane lands, Alfred was not the king of the island of Britain. He only truly expanded the borders of Wessex by a small portion.

mentioned in Asser's *Life* and sparingly in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Alfred, for all of his humble Christian beliefs, held an inordinate amount of power. Wessex was not, by any means, a military power to rival that of any of the Viking kingdoms in Britain, but it was the strongest independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

Battle after battle, Wessex grew more determined. They lost many conflicts with the Danes, and even some cities, but they also won many. In 886, Alfred managed to gain control of London (and the support of the Anglo-Saxon people of the region) from the Danes and hold it.¹⁹ The battle of London was significant for the growing power of Alfred's kingdom.^{††} The Danes began to see Wessex as a serious obstacle in dominating the English peoples completely. With Wessex standing strong while Northumbria, East Anglia, and, eventually, Mercia fell to the Norse, the Vikings struggled to maintain their way of life.

Alfred did not overthrow the Danes' power in England, nor did he weaken it; he stalled it. The kingdom of Wessex grew stronger and, by extension, so did the remaining free lands. There is a large and distinct difference between strengthening a kingdom and weakening another. The laws that King Alfred instituted, as well as the building of burhs (fully listed in the *Burghal Hidage*), helped solidify Wessex. It was from this solidified position that Alfred was able to expand his kingdom.

Though Alfred is often seen as one of the greatest monarchs to have ruled an English kingdom, it was not he who eventually unified the Anglo-Saxons behind one

^{††} This is especially important for the strategic position of London, on the Thames, as both a military installation and a trade center.

single banner.^{††} What is important about Alfred are his policies. His laws led to a fair and balanced society (at least, by their standards), and his burhs led to a strong and protected kingdom. Without Alfred's innovations of building fortified towns, the Danes would likely have conquered Wessex before the turn of the century. He stopped the advance of the Vikings in its tracks.

Alfred was a man of deep conviction and faith. He killed and he saved. To him, he was likely doing as he felt needed to be done, fighting when he could not bring peace through words. However, Alfred was not a perfect man. Throughout Asser's *Life*, and scattered in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred is often depicted as mercilessly riding down the weak and defeated Vikings, slaughtering as many as he could. However, despite the violence of warfare, Alfred's mind was constantly on the future and the generations to come, even mentioning in his introduction to his *Laws* that he wanted to create a code of laws that the future generations would abide by.²⁰

The very laws Alfred created, and the kingdom he guided, were directly a result of the presence of the Vikings in England. From the creation of the burhs to help the people withstand assaults and raids, to the codification of laws, especially those focused on the *wergild*, Alfred based his kingdom on how he thought it would best grow stronger and more unified in an ever-changing world dominated by death and chaos. Alfred's impact on English society and culture is a product of the Danes' influence upon him and his beliefs.

It was during Alfred's reign that we begin to see a true merging of Anglo-Saxons and Danish Vikings, two peoples of similar origin but very different goals. A

^{††} A unified England would not be realized until the Battle of Hastings (1066AD) and the Norman Conquest of England.

culture cannot change over the course of one lifetime, but the imprint of one can be left and, given enough time, cultivated upon another until a new culture emerges.

Alfred's struggle and innovations in military, laws, and education would allow an English people to grow and develop from the Anglo-Saxons. The foundations of England, of Great Britain, are rooted in Alfred the Great, King of Wessex, the West Saxons, and the English people recognize him to this day.

Notes

¹ Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* [London: Penguin Books, 2004], 163-170.

² Ibid, 48-49.

³ Michael Swanton, trans. and ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [New York: Routledge, 1998].

⁴ Simon, 67.

⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁶ Ibid, 76.

⁷ Ibid, 79-80.

⁸ Ibid, 80.

⁹ Ibid, 103-105.

¹⁰ Ibid, 109-110.

¹¹ Ibid, 110.

¹² Ibid, 178.

¹³ Michael Swanton.

¹⁴ Ibid, 78.

¹⁵ Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 136.

¹⁶ Simon Keynes, 193.

¹⁷ Ibid, 163-172.

¹⁸ Ibid, 163-172.

¹⁹ Michael Swanton, 80.

²⁰ Simon Keynes, 164.

Chapter 2

Military Innovations from Land to Sea

Introduction

It is difficult to adequately study the Viking Age, particularly as it pertains to English History, without also looking at warfare as a means of cultural exchange and innovation. For the Vikings peoples, warfare played a pivotal role in their culture. Through their adventurous and determined spirit, they brought their personal beliefs and practices to other peoples, particularly those who would eventually become the “English” people of England. This chapter will look at the effects of the Viking presence in England in the late ninth century through the lens of specific military innovations and adaptations.

The reign of King Alfred the Great of Wessex offers the historian an opportunity to more closely examine how warfare can be used to study both an exchange of culture and innovation. Although it is not the purpose for the historian to dwell in “what if” scenarios and create grand sweeping tales of what could have been if some particular event had occurred differently, the discussion of Alfred’s reign begins with an important question: What if King Alfred had not met the threat of the Vikings by developing new and innovative strategies? Indeed, had King Alfred not taken a stand against the Viking peoples, the foundation of England would very likely have been significantly different. The Norman Conquest and the famous (or infamous) Battle of Hastings of 1066 would likely still have happened, but in a far different setting, with a much more disjointed Saxon population. Thus it is important to understand the significance of what *did* happen in England during the reign of King Alfred.

Vikings, England, and the World

King Alfred the Great of Wessex defeated the invading Vikings in a series of battles and wars from roughly 871 until his death at the end of the century, with only a few peaceful years scattered throughout his reign. Though King Alfred lost several confrontations with the Danish Vikings, his creation of a navy and his innovations in battle tactics and defense allowed him ultimately to protect his kingdom and people from destruction. This conflict for early England is a turning point in the history of the world as it defined one of the greatest world powers to exist since the time of Alexander the Great of Macedon and later the Roman Empire.

A change in the structure and function of the early English kingdom of Wessex could only have been brought about by a conflict of potentially grave consequences. Certainly, without the presence of the Viking raiders, there would have been no need to create the *burhs* that evolved into towns and cities, creating an infrastructure for the future of England. Indeed, the changes found in any civilization are brought about by only a few causes: primarily war and trade. For example, the Silk Road between East and West carried more than silks and spices; it also brought ideas and people. However, since the Scandinavian peoples of the Early Middle Ages were not zealous concerning trade at the time (though they did have peaceful interactions with other peoples), the other primary means of cultural exchange was warfare. In purely militaristic terms, the interactions between two competing cultures have led to numerous innovations.

Centuries before Alfred the Great, the city-states of Ancient Greece developed the Phalanx* due to continuous conflict with each other. Ancient Rome adopted a similar style for battle, but found it cumbersome and limited in execution. The Romans took the original idea of the heavily armored infantry and created cohorts, groupings of slightly less-armored men with large rectangular shields, which allowed for greater mobility on the battlefield. This proved useful against other infantries, but when faced with the innovative mind of Hannibal Barka, they were forced to change their own strategies, incorporating archers and mercenary soldiers mounted on horses. This change from the Phalanx-like version of the early Roman army to the Roman Legion explains, in part, how Rome was able to dominate so much of the known world. As Richard A. Preston writes in his book, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationships with Western Society*, co-authored with Sydney F. Wise and Herman O. Werner, “Rome owed her victory over Carthage to the qualities of discipline upon which the legion was based, to her facility in appropriating the techniques of other societies, including that of sea power . . .”¹ As this source illustrates, victory over a force using varied battle techniques requires change and adoption of the enemy’s own tactics. Alexander the Great did the same during his own campaign against the Persians, incorporating archers, cavalry, and even siege weapons in addition to the standard Phalanx.

Much like the Ancient Greeks and Romans before him, King Alfred the Great of Wessex transformed his kingdom and people to meet the new threat. When faced with the military superiority of the Danish Vikings, who were raised in a society closely attached to conflict, Alfred was forced to adopt their style of warfare, while altering it to fit the

* A grouping of heavily armored infantry men, called Hoplites, who pressed their shields together to form a solid, though slow, formation.

landscape and available resources. Horses were expensive to maintain, especially when they could be used in agricultural production, thus relegating them to a few wealthy warriors (similar to the “knights” being developed on mainland Europe). This resulted in a battlefield composed primarily of infantry, with a few supporting ranks of archers (the English Longbow had yet to be developed fully) and a small collection of mounted soldiers whose main objective was to both pursue retreating enemies and protect their lord.

But even as King Alfred developed his land-based military, he knew that to truly protect his people against invaders, he needed a navy. Thus he began to adjust to the ships of the Danish Vikings by building longboats designed to stay close to the shore and drive off any hostile watercraft that drew too close to land. However, Alfred was the king of a single kingdom, and could not afford to spare resources (wood, tar, and men) to create a large fleet. The navy of King Alfred was designed as a deterrent, as a patrol, rather than as an assault force. Regardless of the intended use of Alfred’s small navy, it was an innovation similar in purpose to that of Rome’s first naval force against Carthage (the masters of the Mediterranean Sea at the time). And like Rome’s first naval force, it was not built or tested enough initially to defeat the Danish Vikings in a stand-up naval battle.

Military Innovations

It is important when studying the militaristic aspects of the interaction between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danish Vikings to first look, in detail, at the land-based armies.

Though the Danes were a capable and powerful naval force, it was upon land that Alfred the Great first began to halt their momentum and even push them back from his lands. For this reason, before beginning a closer examination of Alfred's *burhs* and navy, we turn first to the formation of Alfred's military, their physical structure on the battlefield, and the weapons and armor available.

The *Fyrd*[†]

After a brief examination of English Feudalism in the ninth Century, the construction of Alfred's army will be investigated. Unlike mainland Europe, the emerging system of feudalism had yet to be properly developed in England itself. Some aspects, certainly, had crossed the English Channel, such as a system of lords and *thegns*[‡] who owed their land and allegiance to the king. However, this system stems primarily from the Danish Vikings, another example of the invaders' influence upon the society of early medieval England.

In England, the ranks of wealthy and privileged men were known as *thegns*, while in France and mainland Europe they were known as knights. A knight in medieval feudalism was a form of a lesser noble with great amounts of both prestige and influence. In England, however, a *thegn* was a man who dedicated himself to his lord or king and honed his battle skills for the sole task of fighting whomever his king or lord wished him to.

[†] A *fyrd* is a type of early militia-style army. The "soldiers" of the army were craftsmen, farmers, and fishermen who were conscripted into the army.

[‡] A *Thegn* was a man who was granted land by the king or a lord, usually in recognition for his fighting abilities. A *thegn* stood in a place between a freeman and a hereditary lord. An alternative spelling, and the correct pronunciation, is "Thane."

While Alfred's army, known as a *fyrð*, did indeed have several thegns, most of whom were loyal to Alfred himself, the majority of the men fighting were not of such high social stature as England was a mixture of militia-style recruitment and enlistment. It could be said that with the arrival of the Danes and the threat they presented, loyalty to their king and neighbors grew and inspired many to fight. The reasons for "volunteering" were nothing like they are today, the only incentives for such an act being primarily spoils of war and personal fulfillment. A man who proved himself on the battlefield in service to his king had the ability to earn a social promotion and wealth from his lord.

From among these men hoping to gain wealth or protect their families, Alfred managed to bring together enough individuals from various villages, towns, and cities to challenge the Danes. After the creation of the *burhs* and their systems (to be discussed later), it became easier for Alfred to build his army. Only the *thegns* were professional soldiers, who trained and dedicated much of their time to the pursuit of martial knowledge and prowess, while most of the average soldiers were farmers and herdsman. In addition, Alfred instituted a form of conscription for his army² as well as created a rotating system, where half of his total troops would always be at home to attend the harvest and other such activities on the home front. This rotating system inspired his men to remain with the army during long campaigns and during harvest season because they knew that the other half of the militia protected their families.³

After King Alfred the Great gathered his forces, he needed a way to combat the Danes effectively. The physical make-up or formation of the army on a battlefield was important. The Danes, since they were separated from their homeland, were hesitant to engage in every battle freely; they were cut-off from a steady supply of warriors.

However, every Dane was a warrior, a man who knew how to fight and fight well. This is in contrast to Alfred's army that was made of boys and men who had spent more time swinging a sickle or wood-axe than they had wielding a battle spear or sword.

However, Alfred understood that it took more than a large army to win a battle; it took strategy and skill as well. While the Danes had superior training and experience, Alfred's men fought with vigor for their lands and loved ones. Passion for what they were protecting fueled their strength. But passion and determination alone could not ensure victory. Consequently, Alfred began to form his troops into an organized force. Some techniques of the Vikings had passed down through the generations from the previous Saxon invasions, but even those techniques were only marginally helpful. Instead, Alfred focused on learning from his enemies, much as the Romans did when fighting the Punic Wars.

After Alfred had created his army, he needed to study his enemies. In order to fight more successfully against the Danish Vikings, Alfred began to learn their tactics, usually through small skirmishes. The Danish Vikings fought in a shield-wall formation, relying on their superior skill and experience to win them victory. Horses were not conducive to sea voyages, so the Vikings did not bring them to England, but found and used them as they raided. And due to the Viking opinions of the bow (it was not truly a man's weapon), this left the Danes with primarily just an infantry.

Since King Alfred was poor in the beginning of his reign, compared to at the end, so he could not rely on cavalry, and the Anglo-Saxons had yet to develop the Longbow, thus leaving him with a large mass of infantry. Copying the Vikings, Alfred ordered his troops into shield-wall formations, which consisted of overlapping shields, right edge

over the left edge of the man to the right. This created a very strong and solid wall that was resistant to even horses. The shields, traditionally round and wooden with a large metal center and a metal rim, were solid and heavy and protected the wielder from knee to head, but left much of the legs and lower body vulnerable.[§]

The nature of the shield-wall, used by both the Vikings and Alfred, often prevented the effective use of cavalry as well. A horse from early medieval England was not a creature bred specifically for battle, but rather for a farm or wagon. Forcing an animal to charge a mass of men standing near six feet tall, with shields roughly three feet tall themselves, bristling with spears and other weapons was nearly impossible. To use a horse-mounted soldier effectively, flanking techniques were required. This did happen, from time to time, but the risk to both the rider, who likely was a *thegn* and a skilled fighter, and the horse was often too great. This limited the horse-mounted warrior primarily to harrying tactics and pursuing retreating and fleeing enemies.

Having examined the tactics and general make-up of Alfred's army, which mirrored the Vikings, an examination of the weapons and armor used is called for. A standard soldier had a shield, spear, and sword. For equipment like armor, chain mail armor^{**} being the most common, the soldier had to spend a significant amount of money

[§] Wounds to the lower body were primarily focused on the groin, as the men would attempt to stab *up* under the shield and immobilize or disembowel their opponents. The wounds to the head or neck were usually caused by a blade sweeping across the tops of the shields. However, eventually a type of axe was developed that would be used to chop *down* on an opponent, sending a protruding spike through shoulders, helmets, and necks.

^{**} Chain mail armor was created by weaving together very small rings of iron metal. It was effective against slashing motions, such as a sweeping sword, but was particularly vulnerable to thrusting motions, such as incoming arrows or spears.

to have it commissioned.^{††} For armor, most used hardened leather (which was fairly useful in deflecting glancing blows from swords, arrows, and spears).

The shields were made of panels of wood strapped together by leather and iron bands. A metal rim helped keep the pieces together and solidify the shield, while a large metal centerpiece protected against the chance of swords, spears, or arrows slipping through the slats and slicing the arm of the man wielding the shield. This metal center also served the purpose of bashing the shield into an opponent, potentially knocking him from his feet or stunning him.

The legs were often unprotected unless the soldier was able to purchase, or find, the correct equipment. Leather boots offered some protection and support, but were not very useful against direct axe or sword swings. Some soldiers would have metal plates placed on either side of their ankles, hidden beneath leather or cloth. However, most did not have this protection.

The helmets of the ninth-century Danes, contrary to the common myths and legends, did not have horns on them.^{‡‡} In terms of logic, it would be foolish to wear a helmet that provided such an appealing target to a sword or axe. If a helmet had large horns sticking up into the air, a sword or axe could easily knock the helmet off, exposing the wearer's head. Instead, the helmets had faceplates, designed more for appearances than functionality, and only a small ridge running the length of the head (see Illustration 4).

^{††} There was also the alternate way: looting the weapons and armor from fallen enemies (and allies).

^{‡‡} It is likely that this myth was created when the Romans fought against the Celtic "barbarians" in northern Europe. The Celts were recorded as entering battle either naked or with animal furs and horns on their heads like demons. These warriors were known as "berserkers" for their wild behavior that was meant to frighten enemies.

The weapons consisted of swords, axes, and spears. The swords themselves were nearly three feet in length and double-edged (a cutting edge on both sides of the blade). The sword was designed to be used by one hand, usually in conjunction with a shield, and denoted a higher status. The axe had several different incarnations. The most common was a one-bladed variety. It was too heavy to be effectively used with one hand, so its wielder had to stay behind the shield-wall, rushing forward to attack at the right moment. The spear was a long shaft of strong wood, between six and ten feet long, with a metal head attached to an end. Because of the spear's length, it was often used to strike out from behind the shield-wall from a place of relative safety (see Illustration 5).

Alfred's army was a reflection of the strengths he saw in the Viking style of combat. Organization and structure were as important to victory as numbers. Taking the various aspects of Viking warfare (i.e., weapons, armor, structure), Alfred was able to create a strong and united force to defend his kingdom from Viking attacks.

The Burhs

For King Alfred, the safety and security of his people and supplies were just as important as the formations and tactics of his army. In order to wage an effective war that would not leave the countryside destroyed or his people homeless, King Alfred needed fixed locations and garrisons. These fixed locations had a threefold purpose: They protected supplies, discouraged Viking raids, and established more stable means of communication and organization. To do this, King Alfred instituted the construction of *burhs*.

The physical formation of the *burhs* was circular and encompassed a collection of buildings and small muddy streets. The buildings themselves ranged from those found in typical towns and villages (a smithy, a tanner, homes, barns, etc.) to more martial buildings, such as a barracks to house the soldiers. Though the walls of the *burhs*, composed of earthen fortifications^{§§} and wooden palisades^{***}, protected civilians and their homes there is no doubt that the intent behind them was to stop the roaming Viking war bands and armies (see Illustration 6).

According to the *Burghal Hidage*, a listing of *burhs* created in the time of King Alfred (and his successor, Edward the Elder), a set number of men is required to protect the wall. The terms used in the *Burghal Hidage* are *hides* and *poles*.⁴ A *hide* refers to the man required to defend the wall. A *pole* is a measurement (5.5 yards) used to calculate the length of a wall and the number of men needed (four per pole). When a settlement listed in the *Hidage* reads, “to Walingford belong 2,400 hides,” it means that 2,400 men are required to defend the walls.⁵ By this number, and knowing that four men must man each *pole* and that each *pole* is five and a half yards, we can estimate the size of the settlement.^{†††}

Since the physical construction of the *burhs* has been discussed, it is essential now to examine the first of the three purposes: the protection of supplies and people. Before

^{§§} An earthen fortification is a large mound of dirt forming a large circle. The mound is generally taller than a man, with a large ditch in front of it (where else would they get the dirt for the mound?). The ditch could be lined with sharpened stakes, filled with water naturally or artificially (a moat), or laid with foot-snares. Sometimes all of the above.

^{***} A palisade is essentially a wall, varying in height, made of wooden branches, trunks, logs, or any other wooden object that was of sufficient diameter and height to match those beside it. The wall was made by lashing the wooden poles together and driving their bases into the ground and sharpening the tops to points.

^{†††} Using this formula, it is estimated that Walingford was roughly 3,300 yards long, or 9,900 feet.

King Alfred instituted the construction of the *burhs*, his kingdom's supplies were vulnerable to raiding by the Vikings. In the same way, the people of the kingdom were also vulnerable to Viking attacks. Alfred needed to find a way to protect his people and the resources that allowed him to fight against the Viking aggressors. The Vikings in the role of invaders did not need to worry about supplies and lines of communication, since they could take what they wanted and needed from the unprotected villages and towns. However, Alfred found the answer to this problem in the French model of fortified towns and villages.^{†††} This is an example of how conflict causes changes and innovations. Were it not for the Viking threat, Alfred likely would not have turned to the French system.

The *burhs* protected the supplies used to feed Alfred's troops and repair their equipment. This allowed Alfred to expand the range of his troops and his own influence while pushing back that of the Vikings. In terms of protecting his people, Alfred offered a place for the people to go if Vikings were nearby. As Robert Ferguson writes in his book, *The Vikings: A History*, "The main routes into Wessex were now protected by a network of fortified sites or *burhs*, so disposed as to make any one of them accessible to men living within a twenty-mile radius."⁶ The *burhs* were closer to those who needed the protection than the distant cities or King Alfred's army.

The physical construction of the *burhs* leads to the second of the three important roles of the *burhs*: the discouragement of Viking raids. The Viking raids did not stop, but the damage they wreaked upon the populace and countryside was greatly diminished.

With the safety offered by the *burhs*, people were able to gather their valuables and

^{†††} There is some evidence that Alfred took the idea of the *burh* from the French equivalent. Alfred journeyed to Rome twice (once as a child and again in 853) and passed through France, even spending some amount of time with the French monarch, Charles the Bald, who was implementing his own series of *burhs* against the Norse Vikings.

retreat to a fortified and protected place, leaving the roaming Vikings with the decision to either leave or risk a protracted siege. As was stated in the previous chapter, the Vikings were not very eager to engage in sieges and thus expose themselves to Alfred's growing army and the possibility of defeat. Alfred knew his enemy and how they fought. By forcing the Vikings to fight openly and directly, Alfred was able to draw the threat of the Vikings away from the unarmed civilians and to a hardened army. This strategy sheds some light on the character of King Alfred, discussed in the previous chapter, and his desire to protect his people and his land. However, the *burhs* did not keep the Vikings from plundering the countryside, particularly for cattle or crops.

Despite the seeming regularity of large-scale conflicts between King Alfred's army and the Viking armies in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *burhs* did keep the conflict from engulfing and overwhelming the common population. This system allowed the people to harvest their grains and other foods then store them behind the relative safety of the walls of the *burhs*. These fortifications could be destroyed by the Vikings, and some were, but their destruction was quickly avenged. From reading through the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it appears that Alfred spent very little time, aside from the winters, in any one place, preferring to be chasing down fleeing Vikings and expanding his area of influence.

With Alfred almost constantly on the move, a reliable means of communication and organization was needed. This stability leads to the third important function of the *burhs*, that of a method of communication. Before the construction of the *burhs*, the main source of communication was through messengers who would spend days or weeks away from major towns or cities. This time spent away from the protection offered by armies or

towns often ended with the messenger missing, whether from some accident in the treacherous wilderness or from wandering Vikings.

The advent of the *burhs*, however, gave these messengers places to rest and recover from their quick-paced travel. An added bonus of the series of fortified towns for the messengers was a place of safety. Should a band of Viking raiders chance upon a royal messenger, he now had the possibility of escaping his pursuers by fleeing to a *burh*.

Within the *burhs* were men trusted by the king and loyal to him. These ealdormen^{§§§} were responsible not only for protecting specific regions and collections of *burhs*, but also for reporting to the king. This new hierarchical structure, which was extremely useful and important in developing a later version of the feudal system, allowed King Alfred to wander his kingdom, seeking out the roaming Vikings, while also keeping his subordinates informed of his wishes and location, as well as keeping himself informed of the movements of his enemies.

More stable communication allowed for the army to move to where it was needed. In turn, this permitted the people to move more freely and spread out. As Robert Ferguson writes, “With settlement came the freedom to indulge in commercial instincts.”⁷ Additionally, the creation of the *burhs* “across the length and breadth of England as landmarks in the gradual repossession of formerly Viking territories led to the growth of towns and cities in England during the Viking Age.”⁸

It was this threefold effect of the *burhs* that enabled King Alfred to solidify his hold on Wessex and gradually push the Vikings back into the Danelaw. Indeed, it can be argued that this single innovation, the creation of the *burhs*, is what had the most

^{§§§} Ealdormen were essentially nobles. The word “Earl” is likely derived from this term.

enduring impact upon England in the late ninth century, particularly because its direct effects are still felt and seen in the contemporary cities and towns of England, such as York. As Robert Ferguson writes, “But it was the rapid expansion of the city of York, essentially the capital of Viking-occupied territories in the east of England, that was the major contribution of the Vikings to the development of urban life in England.”⁹

The Army upon the Waters

King Alfred the Great understood the need to protect his borders from hostile threats. This proved to be a much larger task than simply patrolling the land. Since England is an island, protecting the borders depends on a navy. Before King Alfred, there was no noticeable naval presence for the various kingdoms in England: “In England no king before Alfred had a navy; and Alfred was compelled to organize a strong sea force to bring the invaders to terms.”¹⁰ As this quotation expresses, King Alfred knew that a navy of significant strength was required to push back the Vikings, by tradition a maritime people. However, England had not yet developed its own naval system, leaving Alfred with nothing but himself and his advisors to help establish a force that could withstand the Vikings in their natural environment.

To do this, Alfred had to think carefully and critically to develop a navy, and ships, that would not overtax his population or resources. The results were hybrid ships “neither of Frisian design nor of Danish, but as it seemed to himself [Alfred] that they might be most useful.”¹¹ This description is not entirely helpful in an objective sense, but

very valuable in understanding how, and why, Alfred was able to match the naval power of the Danes and develop a uniquely “English” ship (see Illustration 7).

The chronicler of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* does not give much more detail on the ships, but he does mention that they were nearly twice as long as the Danish ships, had sixty or more oars (roughly thirty rows of benches), and were much more swift, steady, and maneuverable.¹² If this description is correct, Alfred’s ships would have nearly dwarfed those of the Vikings and been much more agile. In matters of combat, they would have had a distinct advantage.

The Vikings did not use fire or arrows to attack other seafaring vessels; the possibility of losing control of the flames or otherwise damaging potential loot was too high. Their methods of combat were similar to those of Ancient Rome during the First Punic War.^{****} The Roman warships and soldiers, new to naval warfare and sailing, would ram their enemies, who were great seamen and naval fighters. Once the ships were alongside each other, the Romans would use their superior melee fighting skills to board the enemy craft and subdue the occupants.

The Vikings used nearly the same tactic, but preferred to come alongside the craft and board by jumping, thus eliminating the possibility of damaging the other ship by ramming. This tactic worked in favor for the West Saxon marines after the development of Alfred’s navy in 896. With larger ships came the ability to have more fighters stationed aboard. When the two forces would clash, the numbers of the Saxons was larger than that of the Vikings, giving them the advantage. The Vikings were skilled fighters,

^{****} There is no definitive way to prove that they were directly influenced by the Romans’ style of naval combat. Perhaps some former Roman marines wandered away from Rome and took their knowledge with them. Or perhaps it is part of some inherent rudimentary naval tactic.

but by the time of the 890s, when the first West Saxon ships were built, the English had learned to fight them effectively. Twenty years of fierce conflict and grueling warfare had honed the West Saxon military into a force that could withstand the Vikings, now at sea as well.

The ships themselves were a deterrent against the Vikings raids along the coast. Before the creation of Alfred's navy, the Vikings experienced relatively free movement through the waters surrounding England. However, after the West Saxon warships were built and deployed, the free movement of the Danish raiders was limited to the far northern coast of England. This added level of protection was a large morale boost to Alfred's people, particularly the men in his army.

While the army was away fighting the Danes, the people at home were only partially protected. A man would be more willing to fight, to put everything he had into the battle, if he knew that his family was safe. Before Alfred's navy, there was no guarantee that a new Danish raiding army would arrive on the coast and threaten the homes of the troops before the second half of Alfred's army (stationed at home) could be organized. Once the naval forces of Alfred were created, however, the defense of Wessex became much more firm and strong. A kingdom with both strong ground forces and a strong navy, particularly important for an island kingdom, becomes more difficult to attack and invade.

The importance of a naval force stretches beyond that of border protection. Though it is true that an island kingdom requires a naval fleet to protect itself from invasion, a navy also pushes those borders away from the land. This gives the people living near the coast the opportunity to expand their townships and agricultural

production. Once the constant fear of a seaborne attack dwindles, the populace can also move closer to the shore, opening up an entirely new source of trade and supply: the ocean.

With the ocean made available to Alfred's kingdom, his economy became stronger and the production of food more reliable. The navy of King Alfred the Great, though a military construction, was nonetheless instrumental in bringing order and solidity to his kingdom and people.

Conclusion

The character of King Alfred the Great of Wessex, as discussed in the previous chapter, flowed into his military innovations. He respected his advisors and wished for the safety and longevity of his kingdom and people. There were three aspects to the military innovations instituted by King Alfred the Great of Wessex. The army had to not only be constructed, it also had to be altered to effectively combat the Vikings. The *burhs* were a system of fortified towns that had not existed in England before King Alfred took the idea from the fortified towns in France, and without their implementation England would likely have fallen. The navy of Wessex, like the *burhs* and army, had to be created from nearly nothing and then adapted to fight the Vikings on the oceans.

The army began as a loose collection of farmers armed with spears and rough leather armor. Helmets were reserved for the wealthy, just as chainmail and finely crafted swords were reserved for those who could afford them. Shields quickly became essential to the battlefield. Shield-walls would clash and hours would be spent as men pushed

against each other and stabbed and slashed with their weapons. Horses were held in reserve for either flight from the battlefield or to run-down fleeing enemies.

The safety offered by the *burhs* allowed supplies to be stored and protected and a place for the people to seek refuge. With this increased safety came the improved reliability of communications between Alfred and his various ealdormen and thegns. As a result of the safety and reliability offered by the *burhs*, Wessex grew more independent and strong despite adversity.

The creation of Alfred's navy, the first official navy of any English kingdom, was not only a stepping stone for a unified English kingdom, but it was also the foundation for future naval developments. The security of a navy allowed the people of Wessex, and any territory controlled by Alfred, to expand and grow. Safety and security, guaranteed through a strong military system, allow people to explore various leisure activities. Art and science begin to flourish, transitioning from cave paintings and bird signs to pasture scenes and philosophy.

With the growth of arts comes the growth of politics. Though King Alfred was fighting for the very survival and heart of the English people, he formed a new governmental system. The king was no longer the sole voice of the kingdom. The king still held absolute power, but his advisors, the ealdormen and priests, aided him in making a decision.

This change in the hierarchy of England was directly influenced by the presence of the Vikings. Without the conflict and danger represented by the Danish Vikings in the late ninth century, King Alfred would have had little incentive to institute such important innovations in his kingdom, and the foundation of England would not have been the

same. King Alfred the Great of Wessex is the only king in English history to ever have earned the title “the Great.” By studying his policies, both militarily and socially, it becomes clear that he is the true founder of England.

Notes

¹ Richard A. Preston, Sydney F. Wise, and Herman O. Werner, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationship with Western Society* (New York: Frederick A Praeger Inc., 1956), 39.

² Ferguson, Robert, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 147.

³ Churchill, Winston S., *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples: The Birth of Britain* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1956), 118.

⁴ Keynes, Simon and Michael Lapidge, trans., "Burghal Hidage" in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 193 – 194.

⁵ Ibid, 193.

⁶ Ferguson, 147.

⁷ Ibid, 243.

⁸ Ibid, 243.

⁹ Ibid, 243.

¹⁰ Stevens, William Oliver and Allan Westcott, *A History of Sea Power* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1942), 89.

¹¹ Swanton, Michael, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 90.

¹² Swanton, 90.

Conclusion

As this thesis has sought to illuminate, the Viking presence in England in the late ninth century impacted the course of the future. The viciousness of the attacks, the sheer numbers of Vikings, and the length of the Viking occupation left marks upon the land itself. The remains of the Danish Vikings can still be found in England today in their descendants and their treasure hordes, which are still being excavated. Much of the art and architecture spread across England has Viking roots. Even the laws of the late ninth century, written by Alfred and his advisors, have aspects of Viking culture imbedded in them, particularly in the concept of a *wergild*, as we saw in Chapter One.

The impacts of the Vikings would have been less noticeable, however, had Alfred not been king at that time. His personal devotion to Christianity and the pursuit of education for his people show Alfred to be a man of compassion, conviction, determination, and strength. The institution of educational reforms and the creation of both monasteries and nunneries allowed knowledge and teaching to be given to even the poor and non-Christian. Alfred sought justice and the ability to dispense it equitably. The judicial reforms, requiring all men to learn to read and write and establishing a penalty for accepting bribes, ensured that even the poorest citizen of the kingdom could obtain justice.

While Alfred instituted these reforms of his own choosing, conflict breeds change and adaptation in both the social and the military realms. Beginning first with his army, Alfred developed and instituted a form of conscription among the populace so that there was always a significant number of troops fighting abroad while the remaining half was

at home harvesting crops and protecting the towns and cities. Second, he instituted the creation of fortified towns, or *burhs*, based on the French model. Doing so allowed him to keep supplies and people safe, while also deterring the Vikings from raiding his lands for fear of retribution from one of these *burhs*. Third, Alfred developed, created, and deployed the first “English” navy. These ships were larger and faster than the Viking longboats and allowed him to effectively patrol his shores and dissuade new Viking ships from landing in his kingdom while also allowing his people to spread out closer to the ocean.

These social and military reforms illustrate that King Alfred the Great was instrumental in the creation of a uniquely English kingdom, but also that the Vikings were the catalyst that drove him to make these changes. Without the Viking presence, King Alfred would have had no incentive to begin changes in the military or to construct the *burhs* that later became the foundations for future cities and trade centers. The reforms of education and the judicial structure may have been made without the influence of the Vikings, but they would not have had the same effect. Indeed, without the Danish presence, *wergild*, and the whole judicial system, may not have been found in Alfred’s *Laws*, and the equality of the laws would not have existed for Saxon and Dane, poor man and ealdorman, Christian and pagan.

As it was stated in the beginning of Chapter Two, however, the historian does not dwell in “what if” scenarios. Nonetheless, to properly understand how much of an impact Alfred had on Wessex and England, and the Vikings on Alfred, we can only imagine how drastically England might have been.

Based upon the information available, future research possibilities are numerous. The conflict between Christianity and Norse paganism was as strong and prominent in the late ninth century as were the battles and treaties. A detailed and thorough examination of the role of religion in Saxon-Dane relations would be enlightening. Another interesting avenue of thought and research would be a comparison between the development of the Viking settlements in England and in northern France (the Normans of the Norman Conquest in 1066 were of Viking descent as well). Yet another topic that deserves attention is the long-term impact of King Alfred's navy upon England. The lack of research in the areas noted here leaves many possibilities for future Viking scholarship.

Illustrations



Illustration 1. Smyth, Alfred P, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

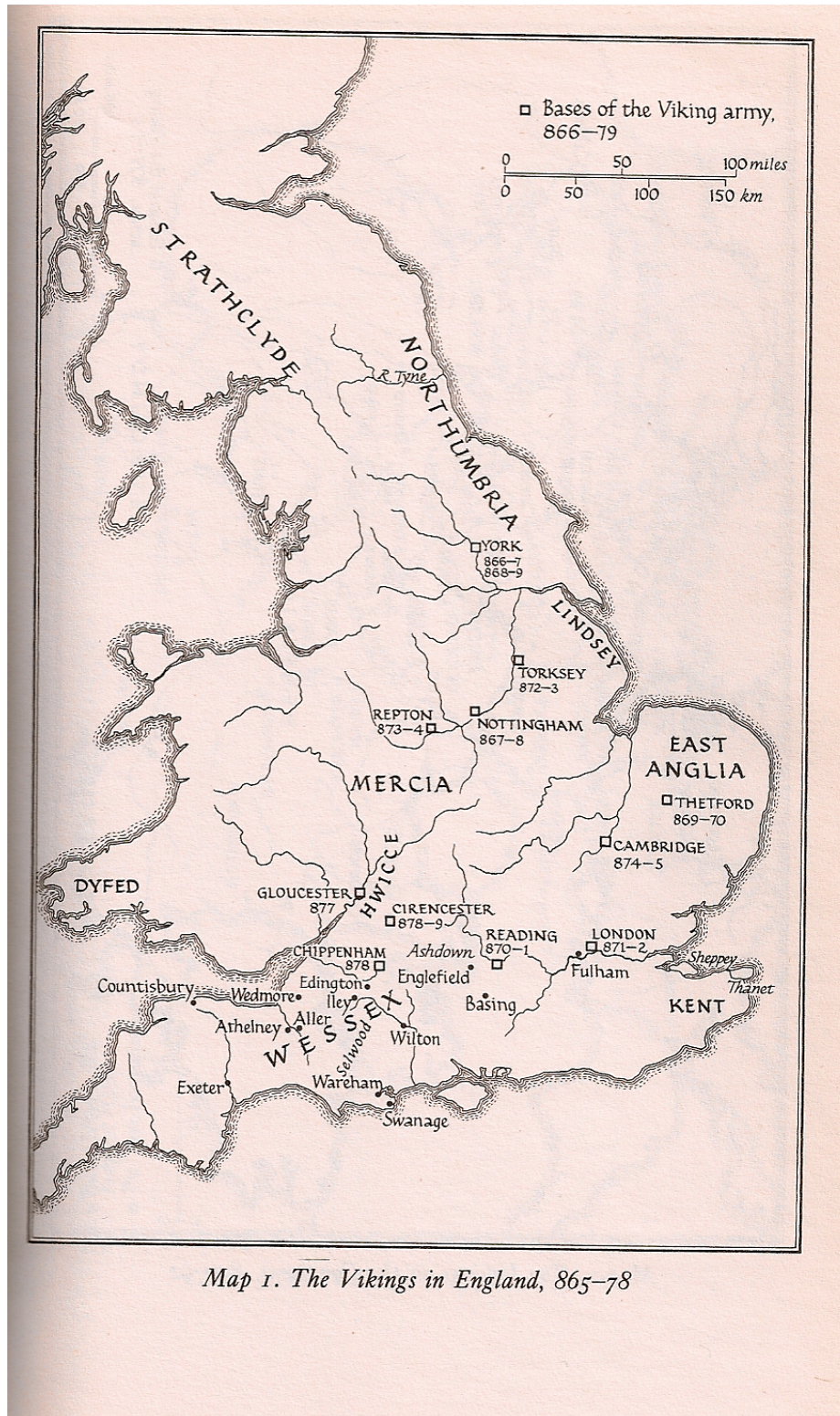
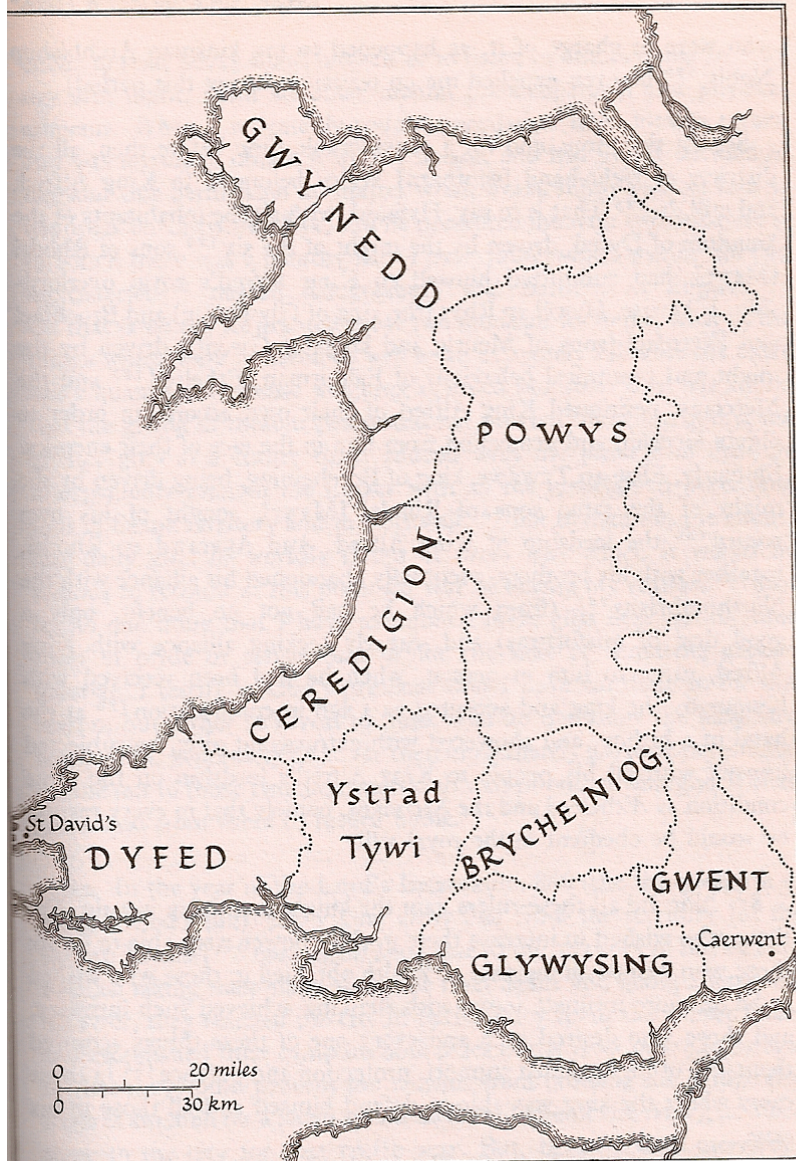


Illustration 2. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge trans, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).



Map 4. Wales in the late ninth century

The political affiliation of Ystrad Tywi is uncertain, for it was connected at different times with either Dyfed or Ceredigion; in the late ninth century it probably formed part of Dyfed.

Illustration 3. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge trans, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).



Illustration 4. <http://regia.org/helmet.htm>



Illustration 5. <http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/gaddis/hst310/nov29/default.htm>



Illustration 6. http://www.pastscape.org/hob.aspx?hob_id=660752



Illustration 7. The Oseberg Ship. <http://elegant-technology.com/SSpecor.html>

Glossary

Burh. A burh is an early form of fortifications. In its basic form, a burh was an earthen fortification, a section of mounded earth that encircled a town (or similar place meant to be protected). Atop the earthen mounds there were usually constructed wooden walls, trenches, or other obstacles meant to slow the attackers. Even today, the remnants of these burhs can be seen around England (now seen as slight rises in fields or around towns).

Danes/Vikings. These terms are nearly synonymous in usage, except for subtle differences in meaning. *Vikings* is a term used to denote, generally, Norsemen who were in the current occupation of raiding or plundering. *Danes* is a term used to denote peoples from the North, situated near modern-day Denmark (but not confined to that locale).

Ealdorman. An ealdorman, or “elder man,” was a noble who served the king as governor, general, confidante, advisor, or some other role requiring the management of others. It is likely that the feudal rank of “Earl” came from this title.

Education. It is important to understand that education in Alfred’s time was a study of religion and loyalty to one’s lord and king. The institutions of education that Alfred created were built upon and around nunneries and monasteries, centers of religious significance. Thus, education of the time did not include mathematics, literature, grammar, or even warfare; it was centered around religion.

Feudal Kingdom. A feudal kingdom is a system of governance that is overseen by a king, or in some cases a queen, with lords, knights, and vassals in a descending order. It is a hierarchical system, with the king/queen in command and power flowing down to the nobles and their knights. In this system, the common people (peasants, vassals, poor, rabble) had no power.

Martial Supremacy. The Danes/Vikings had superior fighting techniques and weaponry over those of the Anglo-Saxons. Due to this unbalance in martial prowess, the Danes/Vikings were able to overwhelm and subdue much of the British Isles.

Shield-Wall. A shield-wall is a kind of moveable fortification. With shields interlaced, and supported by rows of men, a shield-wall became a solid structure. Only when gaps were created (usually by killing the weaker men in the wall) were shield-walls able to be broken. This type of defense/offense structure is known to stop even charging horses and cavalry. Thus, when a shield-wall met another shield-wall, the ensuing battle was long, bloody, and fierce. Wounds to the neck, crown of the head, lower legs, and groin were common, and usually fatal.

Territorial Dominance. This term is tied with *martial supremacy*. Territorial dominance

refers to the complete control of one group of people over the land, subjecting other peoples to this one group's ideologies and laws.

Thegn. A thegn, as was discussed in Chapter Two, was a man of rank equal, essentially, to that of "knight" in Medieval Europe. He wore armor of significantly good quality and was trained in the use of a sword, spear, axe, knife, and any other implement of war that could be used on the battlefield. The thegns were the only "professional" soldiers in King Alfred's army, and they often served as personal guards for the king or other high-ranking member of the court.

Wergild. Wergild is a Scandinavian concept based upon individual value. A person had a specific value (more for a leader and less for a herdsman). But Wergild extended to more than just humans. Animals, particularly horses and oxen (or other breeds and species of beasts of burden), had a wergild. Whether the mentioning of wergild in Alfred's *Laws* is a direct result of the Viking/Danish presence in England in the ninth century or a remnant of earlier Viking invasions, it cannot be said with absolute certainty.

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