Geoffrey R. Little

Dynastic Strategies and Regional Loyalties: Wessex, Mercia and Kent, *c*. 802-939

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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In memory of
Alfred John Little and Dorothy Little

'Dynastic Strategies and Regional Loyalties: Wessex, Mercia and Kent, *c*. 802-939.

Abstract

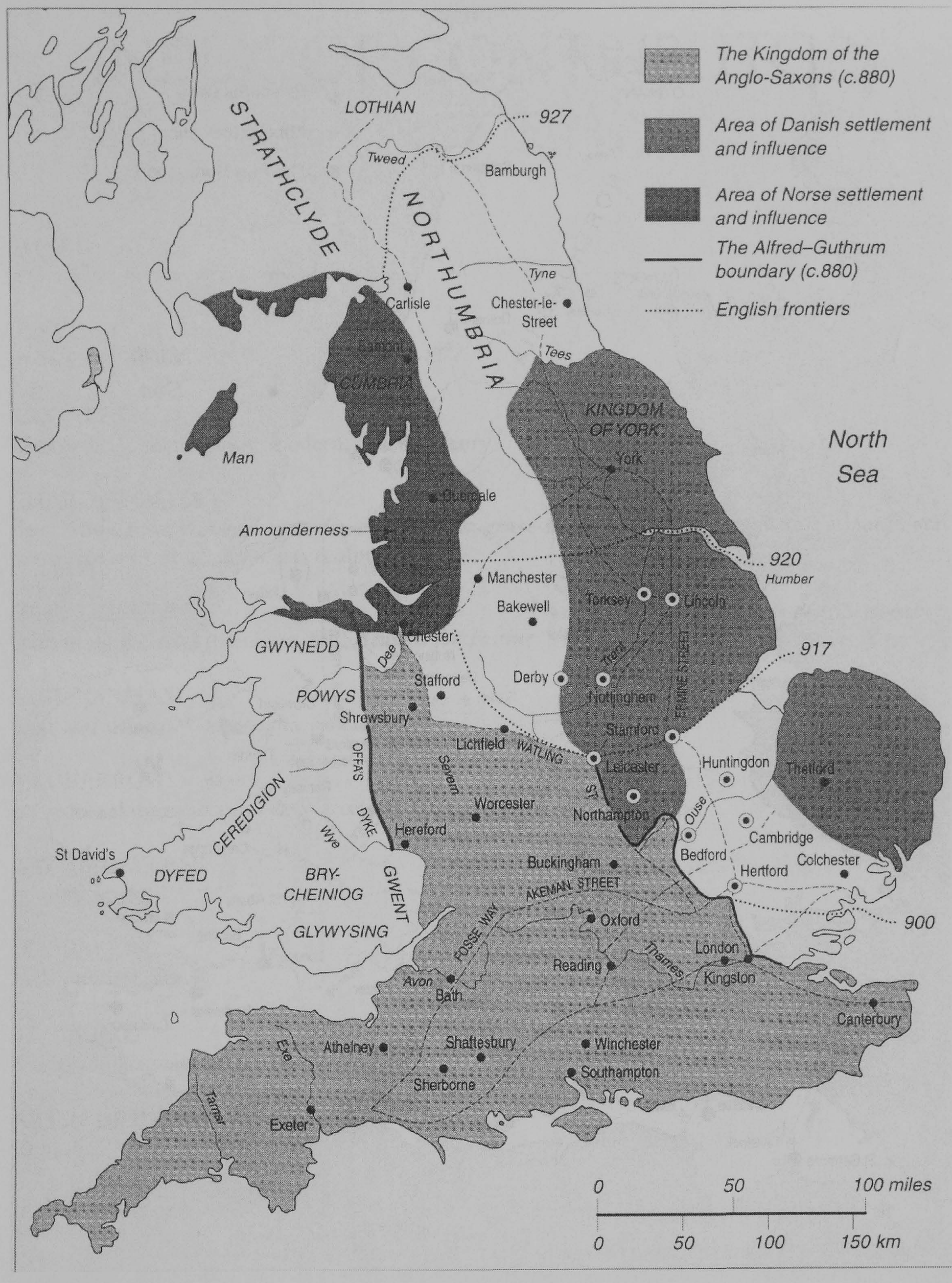
This thesis explores the expansion of the Kingdom of Wessex between 802, when King Ecgberht ascended the West Saxon throne, through to the death of his great-great-grandson, King Æthelstan in 939. It explores how, as a dynasty, these particular West Saxon kings managed to overcome the claims of rival branches of the West Saxon *stirps regia*. The term 'dynastic strategies' has been coined to emphasise that these West Saxon kings introduced protracted policies of succession in order to maintain their supreme social position, and, where possible, to extend their political authority further afield. Family dynamics dictated much of these complex policies and these strategies resulted in intense rivalries between the different strands of the royal house which, at times, erupted into contested successions, rebellion and even civil war. However, a major part of the phenomenon of West Saxon expansion was shaped by external factors, particularly the associations their kings made with Mercia and with Kent. The presence of these external elements involved in the emergence of Wessex as the dominant 'English' power will form a major component of this study. By situating the expansion of Wessex firmly into a family and dynastic context, this thesis forms a departure from previous works on this subject. It relegates the creation of any 'imagined communities' to the periphery and concentrates upon the available source material produced for these West Saxon kings as texts written for the furtherance of one particular family, thereby allowing the pre-occupations of a dominant, but essentially insecure, dynastic régime to emerge more clearly. This thesis demonstrates that the primary intention of King Ecgberht and all of his successors was not the creation of a West Saxon-dominated united kingdom; it was the retention and transmission of the throne of Wessex intact within one single dynastic bloodline.

Contents

Acknowledgments

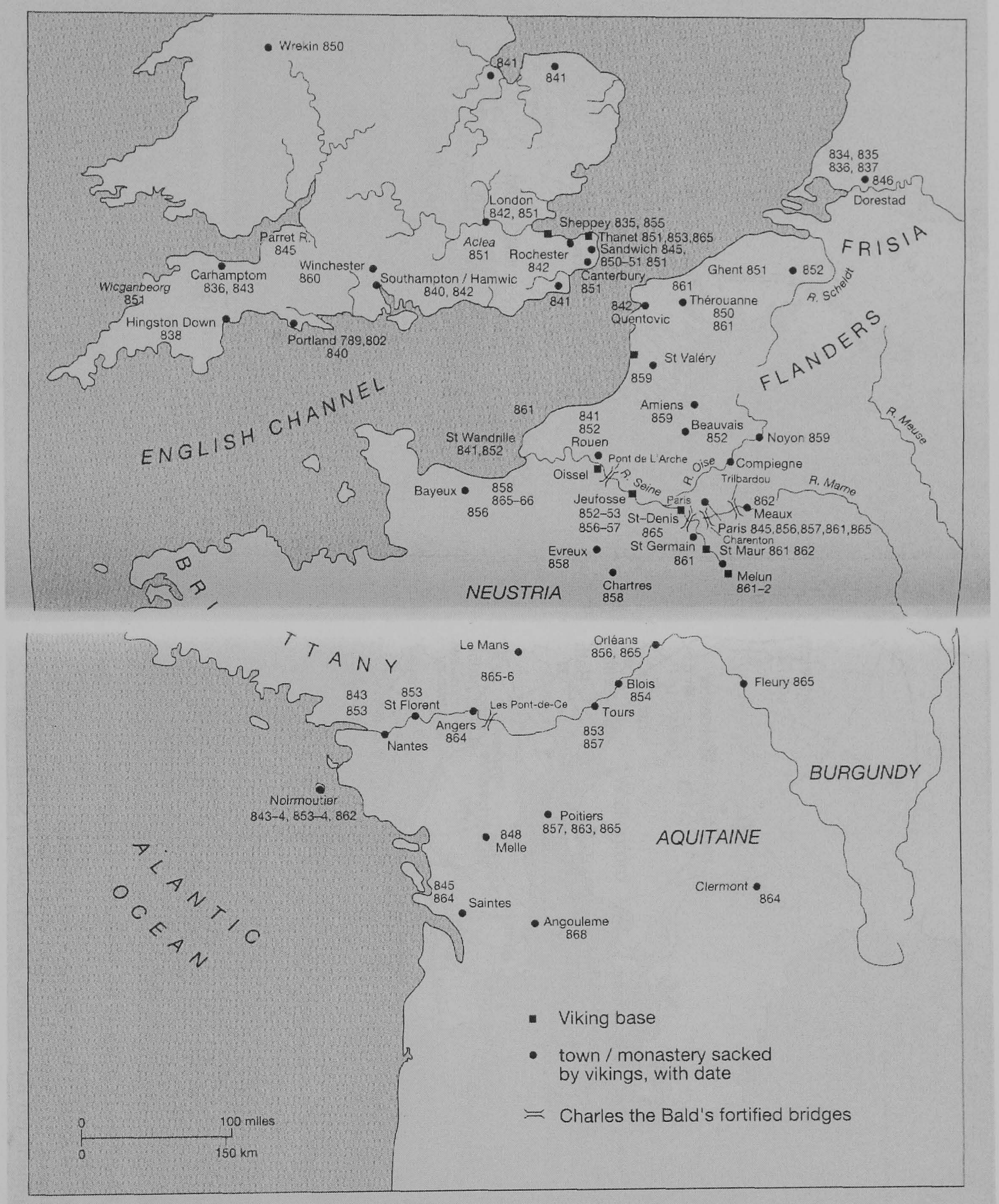
First and foremost, I must thank my principal supervisor, Professor Sarah Foot, whose unflinching support has made this thesis possible. Sarah has been a constant source of inspiration, intellectual stimulation and encouragement throughout the writing of this work and it is to her that I owe the greatest debt. I would also like to thank my secondary thesis supervisor, Dr. Simon Loseby, for providing me with further inspiration and the extra backing needed to make it through the writing of a research project. Other members of the academic staff at the Department of History here at Sheffield have been supportive and some require to be especially mentioned: Professor Edmund King, Professor David Luscombe, Professor Bob Moore, Professor Ian Phimister and Dr. Linda Kirk have all provided me with much-needed encouragement. From the Department of Politics, I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Helen Mathers, from the Department of English, Dr. Philip Shaw and to Mr. John Wade, for his assistance with languages. The Department of History provided me with a fee-waiver without which I would not have been able to pursue my interest in the rise and extension of West Saxon royal power. I would also like to express my appreciation for the support I have received from all the administrative staff at the Department of History. During my time at Sheffield, a number of my postgraduate colleagues have moved on to bigger and better things and I would like to convey my gratitude for their assistance and their continuing friendship. These include Mr. Dave Adfield, Ms. Laura Cole, Mrs. Susan Drewett, Dr. John Jackson, Dr. Miles Larmer, Dr. Tom Leng, Dr. Sid Lowe, Dr. Graham Macklin, Dr. Simon Miller, Dr. James Palmer, Dr. John Tanner, Dr. Joe Street, Dr. Kevin Watson, Dr. Peter Webster and Dr. Tracey Wire. My current postgraduate colleagues should also be thanked – not least for putting up with my many idiosyncrasies and, like their predecessors, proving to be agreeable drinking companions over the years. Three have read parts of my work and have suggested valuable improvements to its presentation and for their fortitude in wading through various sections of my thesis are deserving of special praise. These are Simona Latimer, Martha Riddiford and Gary Rivett. Others who form part of the thriving postgraduate community here at Sheffield include: Paul Ashmore, Morn Capper, Nichola Clayton, Andy Cohen, Matt Cole, Keith Fildes, Catherine Marshall, Oliver Pengelley, Anna Qureshi, Matt Phillpott, Louise Radford, Aldwin Roes, David Sarias, Felicity Stout, Jenny Thompson and Dave Vessey. The 'Medieval Discussion Group' designed and run by history postgraduates has also provided me with varied intellectual stimulation and I would like to acknowledge all those who have organised and participated in this enterprise over the last two years. On a non-academic note, I would like to say many thanks to Dave Latimer for being such a good friend. And I owe a special debt of gratitude to Louise Burton, Dave Edwards and to Helen McKay for being generous in their support of me and my project through some of the darker periods of my life.

Map 1.



From Michael Lapidge *et al.*, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2001), p. 519.

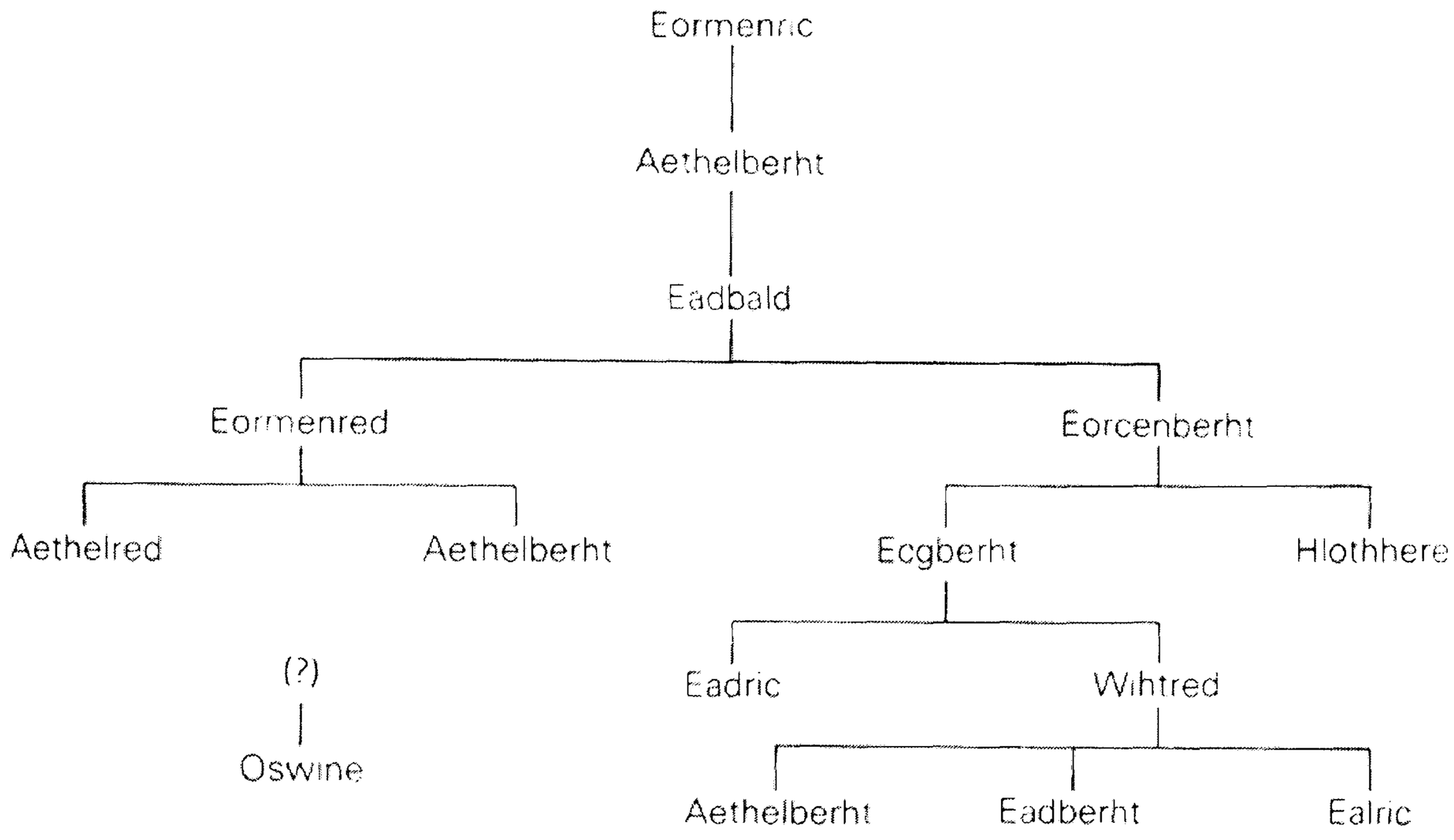
Map 2.



Viking activity in south Britain and west Francia to 865

After Nicholas Hooper and Matthew Bennett (eds), *The Cambridge Illustrated Atlas of Warfare: The Middles Ages, 769–1487* (Cambridge, 1996) and David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981)

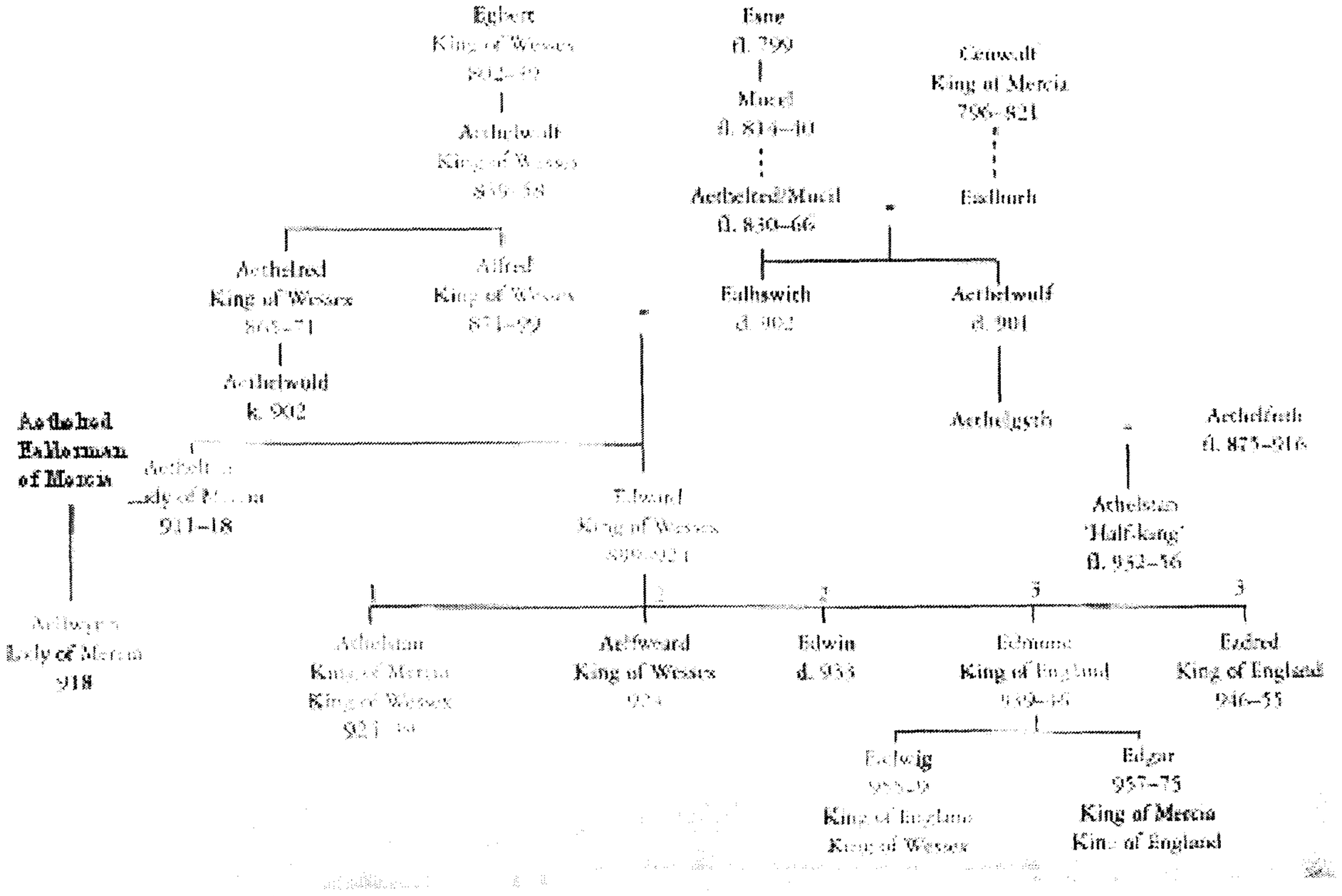
From Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture* (London and New York 1998), pp. 352-353.



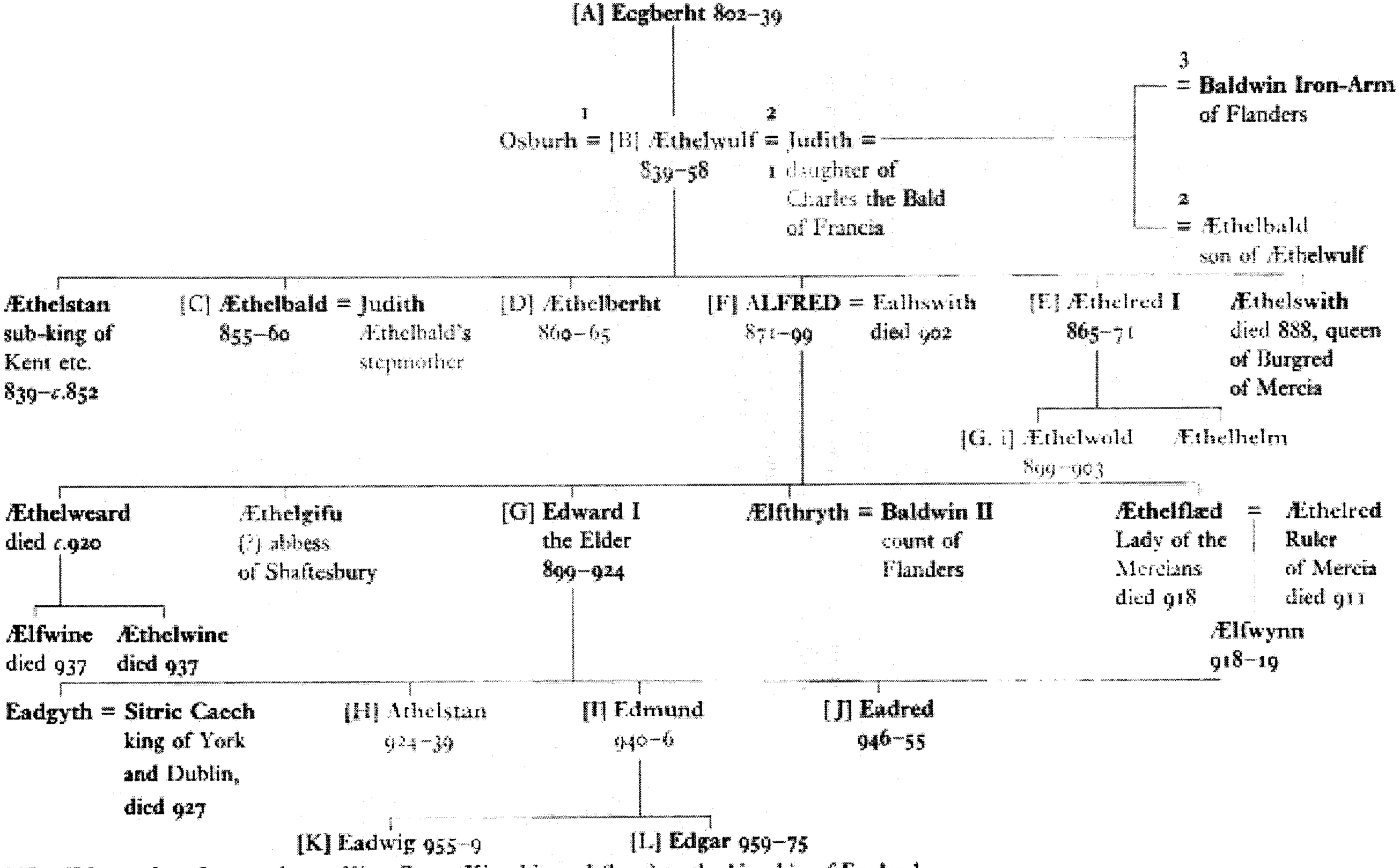
The descent of the kings of Kent from Eormenric.

From D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, revised edition, 2000), p.179.

Mercian and West Saxon Rulers and Connections



After Ian W. Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England* (Stroud, 2000), p. 210.



From Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford1995), p. 10.

Abbreviations

AB	*Annales Bertiniani*, ed. G. Waitz, *MGH SRG* 5 (Hanover, 1885); trans. Janet L. Nelson, *The Annals of St Bertin*, Manchester Medieval Sources: Ninth-Century Histories 1 (Manchester, 1991).
AF	*Annales Fuldenses*, ed. F. Kurze, *MGH SRG* 7 (Hanover, 1891); trans. Timothy Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda*, Manchester Medieval Sources: Ninth-Century Histories 2 (Manchester, 1992).
ANS	*Anglo-Norman Studies*.
ASC	*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Revised Translation*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker (London, 1961).
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*.
Asser	*De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*, ed. William Henry Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots, Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1904 new impression, 1959); trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 66-110.
Æthelweard	Æthelweard, *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, ed. and trans. A. Campbell (London, 1962).
BAR	*British Archaeological Reports*.
Bede, *HE*	Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969).
EHD	*English Historical Documents c 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (2nd edition, London, 1979).
EHR	*English Historical Review*.
EME	*Early Medieval Europe*.

GP	William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, vol. I text and translation, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom, with the assistance of R. M. Thomson (Oxford, 2007).
GR	William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R. A.B. Mynors and completed by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, vol. I (Oxford, 1998).
GR, Commentary	R. M. Thomson in Collaboration with M. Winterbottom, *William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings, General Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1999).
HSJ	*Haskins Society Journal.*
JW	John of Worcester, *Chronicon Johannis Wigorniensis: The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, vol. II eds. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), vol. III ed. and trans. P. McGurk (Oxford, 1998).
Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*	Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans. *Alfred The Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983).
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica.*
OEB	King Alfred, *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899); trans. W. J. Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius, Done into Modern English* (Oxford, 1900).
S	P. H. Sawyer, ed. *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society guides and handbooks 8 (London, 1968). Now superseded by the Electronic Sawyer: http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/eSawyer.99/eSawyer2.html
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.*

Introduction

> In the year in which the very mighty king Æthelstan [*Æthelstan rex robustissimus*] enjoyed the crown of empire, 926 years were passed from the glorious incarnation of our saviour. After thirteen years a huge battle was fought against the barbarians at *Brunandun*, wherefore it is still called the "great battle" by the common people. Then the barbarian forces were overcome on all sides, and held the superiority no more. Afterwards he [Æthelstan] drove them off from the shores of the ocean, and the Scots and Picts both submitted. The fields of Britain were consolidated into one, there was peace everywhere, and abundance of all things, and [since then] no fleet has remained here, having advanced against these shores, except under treaty with the English. After a period of two years Æthelstan, a king worthy of honour left the world.[1]

Æthelstan's defining victory at *Brunanburh* in 937 stands as a lasting memorial to his greatness. For the author of the *Annals of Ulster* writing *c.* 939, Æthelstan was quite simply 'the pillar of the dignity of the western world.'[2] The twelfth-century historian and possible editor of Æthelstan's tenth-century panegyric, William of Malmesbury, acclaimed King Æthelstan as 'one honoured by the world and grieved by his land: Path of rectitude, thunderbolt of justice, model of purity.'[3] Mirroring Æthelstan's imperial charter-styles, the Malmesbury shrine to Saint Paternus carried the grandiose inscription: '*rex Ethelstanus totius Britanniae multarumque gentium in circuita positarum imperator.*'[4] But no-one summed up Æthelstan's kingship more impressively than his kinsman, the chronicler, Æthelweard.[5] Writing some forty years after the battle,

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[1] Æthelweard, p. 54. *Anno etiam in quo imperii functus fuerat stefos Æthelstan rex robustissimus, transacti sunt anni a gloriosa incarnatione saluatoris nostri D C C C C, supraque iniginta et sex. Igitur post annos tredecim facta est pugna immanis barbaros contra in loco Brunandune, unde et uulgo usque ad præsens bellum prænominatur magnum. Tum superantur barbaræ passim turbæ, nec ultra dominari; post quos ultrapellit oceani oris, nec non collasubdunt Scoti, pariterque Picti; uno solidantur Brittannidis arua, undique pax, omniumque foecundia rerum, nec usque ad istas motus adhæsit sine littora Anglorum foedere classicus. Biennio post migrat de mundo rex uenerandus Æthelstanus.*

[2] *The Annals of Ulster (to A. D. 1131)*, eds. Sean Mac Airt and Gearoid Mac Niocail, part one text and translation (Dublin, 1983), *s.a.* 939.

[3] *GP*, v. 247.3.

[4] *Ibid.*, v. 248.

[5] Æthelweard states that he was himself descended from King Alfred's elder brother King Æthelred I. Æthelweard was most probably a prominent ealdorman in the government of King Æthelred II and he dedicated his chronicle to his relative, Matilda, granddaughter of the Emperor Otto I. *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, ed. and trans. A. Campbell (London, 1962), pp. xii-xiii. For Æthelweard's possible career see E. E. Barker, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle used by Æthelweard', *Historical Research* xl 101 (May, 1967), 74-91, esp. 85-91 and for Æthelweard's peculiar Latin style see Michael Winterbottom, 'The style of Æthelweard', *Medium Ævum* 36.2 (1967), 109-118.

Æthelweard accorded Æthelstan the superlative of '*rex robustissimus* [who] enjoyed the crown of empire', an epithet which situated Æthelstan's kingship on a level previously unknown. It constitutes a fitting tribute both to the changes that Æthelstan imposed upon West Saxon royal power and to the manner in which his apparent *imperium* was accepted as reality during his comparatively brief reign. Æthelweard's eulogies for Æthelstan are also informative in other ways; it is instructive that Æthelweard apportions the provision of peace during his own lifetime to the platform laid by Æthelstan, not to the martial abilities of King Edgar. While the original *Brunanburh* poem stressed the dynastic harmony that was forged between the two sons of King Edward, Æthelstan and his half-brother Edmund, Æthelweard's version lays emphasis upon a single acclamation solely in praise of Æthelstan's kingly virtues. But perhaps Æthelweard misread the poet's underlying intentions, for no less of an achievement was Æthelstan's ability to ensure that the West Saxon kingship was transmitted safely and intact - as he planned it would be - to his preferred heir, his half-brother Edmund. By remaining unmarried, Æthelstan seemingly chose to put wider dynastic considerations before the establishment of his own personal lineage. In putting the welfare of the West Saxon dynasty before the creation of a personal dynastic legacy, Æthelstan broke the traditional mould of kingly aspirations. This thesis traces how this happened and why.

'Dynastic Strategies and Regional Loyalties: Wessex, Mercia and Kent, *c.* 802-939'

As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary a strategy may, 'in (theoretical) circumstances of competition or conflict, [be] … a plan for successful action based on the rationality and interdependence of the moves of the opposing participants.'[6] Strategies can also be defined as being extensively premeditated policies that are enacted to outmaneuvre opponents and have long-term goals. The dynastic strategies under review in this thesis were designed primarily to retain the throne of Wessex, acquired somewhat mysteriously in 802 by King Ecgberht, and to transmit it within his single bloodline through the generations. This thesis covers the reigns of successive West Saxon kings, beginning with King Ecgberht and ending with the death of his great-great-grandson, King Æthelstan in 939, and it explores how, as a dynasty, they managed to overcome the claims of rival branches of the West Saxon *stirps regia*. These temporal limits are designed to illustrate the transformation of succession strategies from Ecgberht, who provided the inspiration behind West Saxon inheritance procedures, up to the succession of King Edmund in 939. By ensuring Edmund's untroubled elevation to the West Saxon throne, his elder half-brother King Æthelstan had provided the West Saxons with the constancy his own complicated West Saxon accession lacked and in so doing he completely changed the parameters of kingship and its method of transmission. It was the loyalty displayed by Æthelstan towards Edmund that paved the way for the eventual succession of both his younger half-brothers and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that during the reign of King Edmund his own younger brother, Eadred, held an unprecedented role at court. In essence, this thesis is an examination of how the expansion of the kingdom of Wessex came about but placed

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[6] http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50238986?query_type=word&queryword=strategy&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=B3GC-5XEUIh-1814&hilite=50238986se1 [accessed 28th March 08]

firmly within a family/dynastic context. Family dynamics dictated much of these complex policies; there were intense rivalries between the different strands of the royal house and at times contested successions erupted into disorder, even rebellion. Shaped by the need to keep hold of, and where possible to extend, the royal power and prestige achieved by these West Saxon kings, the dynastic strategies implemented were protracted efforts to maintain their supreme social position and broaden their political horizons; they were a planned, conscious mode of decision making.

Also important will be questions surrounding the extent to which these far-ranging strategies could be maintained in uncertain times. Strategies are, of course, not infallible, and on occasions, the West Saxons had to come to improvised arrangements when necessity demanded swifter action be taken. These more *ad hoc* arrangements will be analysed alongside the intensely orchestrated strategies devised by successive West Saxon kings. One major problem the direct bloodline of Ecgberht had to wrestle with constantly was the understandable reaction of those members of the royal kin-group excluded from the kingship, as successive attempts were made to re-structure inheritance procedures. At times this dissatisfaction led to violent conflict between the different strands of the royal house and their respective supporters. Some rebelled against this pull towards a single bloodline and this produced factionalism within the West Saxon kingdom as a whole. This dissatisfaction, both royal and aristocratic, will also be studied. The reign of King Alfred provided a major sea-change for the dynasty as Alfred himself aimed to become, what Richard Abels has described, as the 'font of all regality.'[7] To this end, Alfred further polarised inheritance procedures to the

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[7] Richard Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability in ninth-century Wessex', *HSJ* 12 for 2001 (2005), 83-97, at 85.

exclusion of those outside his own immediate family causing further friction within the extended kin-group, which continued to surface after his death.

It could also be argued that long-term dynastic strategies were unsustainable in the unpredictable and volatile circumstances occasioned by the Scandinavian invasions into England in the ninth century.[8] But, conversely, it could be suggested that it was exactly because England was so politically unstable during the period under review that it was necessary for the West Saxons family of Ecgberht to introduce such strategic measures to protect what they had. That the Danish invasions of the ninth century eventually brought about the unification of England under the kings of the West Saxons is seemingly indisputable. Not only was Wessex the only independent kingdom of Anglo-Saxon England to survive intact these Danish invasions but it actually managed to expand its territorial boundaries because of them. However, it did not achieve this pre-eminence without external assistance.

A major part of the phenomenon of West Saxon expansion was provided by non-West Saxons. How these same West Saxon kings succeeded in securing loyalty from outside Wessex, in Mercia, in Kent and the south east will be extensively analysed. The presence of these external, not exclusively West Saxon, elements involved in the emergence of Wessex as the dominant 'English' power will form a major component of this study. West Saxon primacy was to a degree shaped by external factors, such as the associations they made with Mercia and with Kent. However, in order to gain the allegiance and subservience of these external influences, particularly the aristocracy, the West Saxon kings had to demonstrate a unique capacity to attract, maintain and exploit

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[8] For England and the Danes, see map 1, p. ii.

these loyalties. Pauline Stafford has offered us a striking image of the tenth-century aristocracy being drawn between, on the one hand, royal remuneration, and on the other, the appeal of conservatism, factionalism and even regionalism during succession disputes:

> Succession disputes were the crucibles of tenth-century politics. In them met the centrifugal tendencies of fluctuating regional feeling and the centripetal strength of royal largesse. The ealdormen, facing janus-like between the pull of continued royal gift and the representation of local feeling, were symbols of the new kingdom. Religious questions were drawn in; the battlefield was the [royal] court. Yet open conflict was virtually confined to the choice of successor. Opposition at other times appeared illegitimate. The pull towards the centre and the prestige of the monarchy was strong.[9]

But successive West Saxon kings were also evocative of the god Janus in so far as they offered respective generations of the West Saxon, Mercian and Kentish nobility opportunities to be involved in new and productive beginnings. This perceived pull towards the approbation of kingship was not confined to the tenth century; the West Saxon royal house had enticed loyalty from its own interconnected nobility and from external aristocracies throughout the ninth. All the West Saxon kings made prolonged attempts to encourage the smooth transmission of the kingship while simultaneously excluding ancillary royal lines from ascending the throne of Wessex by appealing for aristocratic loyalty both from within and from without.

Changing West Saxon inheritance customs

As an entity (as far as it can be described as such) the West Saxon dynasty had no prescriptive procedures for royal succession and was in consequence a kingdom prone to divisions and fragmentation. Ine (688-726) may have consolidated the kingship and

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[9] Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: a Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London, 1989), p. 40.

removed the *subreguli* that had afflicted Wessex but this did not put a complete end to the friction within the *stirps regia* and the kingdom remained fissile long afterwards.[10] It was sufficient for any male member of the royal kin-group to be considered as throne-worthy - i.e. an *ætheling* - to make a bid for royal recognition.[11] All this made securing the throne a matter of gaining supporters, securing loyalty and countering opposition claims. This lack of any settled structure for transmitting the kingship often led to a resulting free-for-all between members of the extended *stirps regia*, which included all of the nobility who could claim, or maintained they could, a descent from Cerdic, the semi-legendary founder of the dynasty, and there was always the possibility that this friction could escalate into violence and even bloody civil war. It was King Ecgberht who challenged and then changed the inheritance customs of Wessex and his innovation in procedure set a precedent which his direct descendants would later develop. It was his victory over Beornwulf of the Mercians at *Ellandun* (Wroughton) in 825 and his subsequent conquest of Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Essex that gave Ecgberht the room to manoeuvre. Victory at *Ellandun* not only ended the period of Mercian rule over the south east, it also brought Ecgberht a substantial increase in royal lands with which to reward his loyal followers. In 838, Ecgberht took what would prove a revolutionary step when he unified these formerly independent kingdoms into a single entity and entrusted its government to his son Æthelwulf as his *subregulus*. The magnitude of this event cannot be over-emphasised. The system was called appanage and it was Frankish in origin. It had been designed to lessen the possibility of civil war among throne-worthy contenders; literally, an appanage was a concession to a younger son of land or some other source of revenue for the maintenance of a member of the family of

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[10] Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1995), p. 92. Bede says that, after the death of Cenwalh in 672, '*subreguli* took upon themselves the government of the kingdom, dividing it up and ruling it for about ten years'; Bede, *HE*. IV. 12.

[11] The fundamental study is David N. Dumville, 'The *ætheling*: a study in Anglo-Saxon constitutional history', *ASE* 8 (1979), 1-33.

a ruling house.[12] Ecgbehrt's decision was inspirational and, with suitable modifications, variations of this strategy sustained all the West Saxon kings through the periods of dynastic conflict. A significant outcome of this system was the introduction of sons to the kingship while their father still lived and, most importantly, while he still ruled. This system and its developments protected the succession to the throne at the direct expense of collateral branches of the royal line.

Historiography: the allure of 'Alfredian' texts

When Æthelstan died in 939 he had taken kingship where his forebears had arguably aspired to go; he was the first West Saxon monarch to claim a polity that one might suggest is recognisable as 'England'. But this view is not shared by all scholars of West Saxon expansion and the creation of an overarching polity has also been perceived as an earlier phenomenon achieved by King Alfred. As Charles Plummer observed, 'every succeeding century has but verified more and more Alfred's vision of a united England.'[13] Because of the nature of the questions this thesis asks it means that a considerable proportion of the source material used belongs to the environment of the royal court of King Alfred and is dateable to the 890s; the work both focuses closely upon the life of King Alfred and draws heavily upon sources influenced by him. As the quotation from Plummer suggests, King Alfred's place in history has been assured for generations but his life and accomplishments still attract considerable scholarly

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[12] The system was used in 843 at the Treaty of Verdun, when Louis the Pious divided his empire between his sons Lothar and Louis the German.

[13] Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great: Being the Ford Lectures For 1901* (Oxford, 1902), p. 201.

attention today.[14] The way in which our knowledge of ninth-century events in England, and further afield, has been shaped by the influences of King Alfred is perhaps unquantifiable. The abundance of sources for his reign means that he stands in stark contrast to those who came before and those who came after. Much of the available information relating to ninth-century events in England and beyond emanated from the intellectual milieu of King Alfred's royal court, and many of these associated texts directly reflect the preoccupations of this close-knit community.[15] Moreover, a number of existing texts were 'improved' by Alfred's régime in order to reflect the abilities of the king in the most positive manner conceivable.[16] As Michael Wallace-Hadrill dryly observed, 'we hold that Alfred was a great and glorious king in part because he tells us he was.'[17] What Alfred did not tell us himself, however, his royal court advisors did, and it should be remembered that the court infrastructure did not disappear upon King Alfred's death in 899. It kept on producing the authorised version of West Saxon primacy for Alfred's son and successor, Edward the Elder. Though this thesis focuses heavily upon the texts attributable to the Alfredian and Edwardian courts, it must be stressed that this pre-occupation is not an uncritical one and, wherever possible, attempts have been made to separate what was and what was not 'Alfredian spin '.

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[14] Indeed, David Pratt's recent important book about King Alfred's political ideologies only serves to confirm the continuation of this trend and I regret that it was published too late for me to incorporate into this work. D. R. Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge, 2007). I have, however, consulted and referenced Dr. Pratt's similarly entitled Ph.D. Thesis (University of Cambridge, 1999).

[15] On the issue of Alfredian sources see Simon Keynes, 'The power of the written word, Alfredian England, 871-899', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 175-197.

[16] For instance, it appears likely that there was an existing version of the *Chronicle* extending to probably 842, which the Alfredian chronicler added some later material; A. J. Thorogood, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the reign of Ecgberht', *EHR* 48 (1933), 353 –363, at 361-362.

[17] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Franks and the English in the ninth century: some common historical interests', *History* 35 (1950), 202-18, at 216-7.

King Alfred has retained his prominent place in modern historiographical debates about the origins of England since the times of Plummer. Although there is an unavoidable crossover with this important topic, this thesis is not concerned with this issue *per se*. It does, however, owe a sizable debt to those scholars who have written on this subject and many works dedicated to searching out the origins of 'English' unity have proved invaluable in formulating the arguments contained herein. But historiographically this work is a departure from the main thrust of this particular debate. It is more concerned with the modes of transmission of royal power designed and perpetrated by successive West Saxon kings than the emergence of any 'imagined communities', whether created by them or not; it is more occupied with how the West Saxon dynasty of Ecgberht functioned on a family level. In consequence, one principal task was to attempt a degree of historiographical revisionism where the aim was to return the sources associated with the West Saxons kings back into a family or dynastic setting. This objective is most noticeable in the extended discussions of the sources relating to King Alfred's royal court and the architect of this particular historiographical repositioning is R. H. C. Davis. More than any other single work of historiography relating to King Alfred and the relevant source material, Davis' pioneering article 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth' published way back in 1971 demands to be singled out. As Davis suggested, the achievements of King Alfred's reign 'reads almost like the school report which every schoolboy would like to write about himself, and challenges us to re-examine where our information about Alfred actually comes from.'[18]

The prospect that Alfred dictated much of what was included and what was omitted from these sources still requires further analysis. In particular, the *Chronicle*

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[18] R. H. C. Davis, 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth', *History* 56 (1971), 169-82, reprinted in his *From Alfred The Great to Stephen* (London and Rio Grande, 1991), pp. 33-54, at 34.

and Asser's *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* are both products of the same Alfredian court environment and, as such, are laden down with a desire to magnify the king's achievements at the direct expense of others and they exhibit many of Alfred's anxieties stemming from his desire for loyalty. Arguing that Asser was in effect King Alfred's encomiast in emulation of Carolingian models, James Campbell defended Davis on the issue of 'propaganda' in these Alfredian texts. Building a firm platform from which to argue that Asser's *Life* of King Alfred was closely related to the compilation of the *Chronicle*, 'almost its Siamese twin', Campbell stressed that '*prima facie* the *Chronicle* does appear to be Alfredian propaganda, to the extent that the *onus probandi* would seem to lie principally upon those who hold it was not.'[19] This thesis follows these general sentiments about 'propaganda' within the 'Alfredian' *Chronicle* and related texts.[20] But it also contends that the majority of the West Saxon sources, not merely the Alfredian ones, were intended to display dynastic unity and as such they reveal much concerning the workings of a dominant but essentially apprehensive régime.

The work of Simon Keynes on King Alfred in particular, and the West Saxon royal dynasty in general, has also proved to be instrumental in framing the ideas that have led ultimately to the writing of this thesis. Keynes asked the dominant questions that guided the overall conception of this study and are encapsulated in the following quotation:

> Alfred takes his place at the end of a line of West Saxon kings, and at the beginning of a line of those who aspired to be kings of the English. He drew strength from all that had gone before, and he rose well to the challenge, yet he also had the vision which gave him, and his successors, an extraordinary sense of purpose and direction. It was Alfred who fastened on the importance of London, even if he was stuck for the time being in Winchester; it was

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[19] James Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', in C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (eds.), *The Inheritance of Historiography* (Exeter, 1986), pp. 115-35, at p. 124.

[20] Allen J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, 1986), p. 3, has argued that '"propaganda" has many meanings, of course, not all of them derogatory. To propagandize may mean to spread ideas and to indoctrinate without distortion. We can readily understand why Alfred and his helpers wished to portray their achievements in the most favourable light possible.'

> Alfred who invented the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons' in the 880s, and who was known to his admirers as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons', even if in some contexts he persisted in calling himself 'king of the West Saxons'; and it was Alfred who paved the way for the extension and transformation of the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons' into the 'kingdom of the English', during the course of the tenth century. ... [I]t remains a matter of great importance in our perception of late Anglo-Saxon state-formation whether it was Alfred who instituted everything, or whether some space should be left for his successors, most notably Edward the Elder, Æthelstan and Edgar, to introduce some further refinements.[21]

Was it indeed Alfred who 'instigated everything' in framing Anglo-Saxon state-formation, or is there, as Keynes has suggested, some space left for those who succeeded him? Not only did this specific question need considering but it also suggested that an appreciation of West Saxon strategies before Alfred came to the throne in 871 needed addressing. Keynes additionally recommended that King Alfred 'drew strength from all that had gone before and he rose well to the challenge' which leads to the quandary of just what it might have been that Alfred apparently drew his strength from. To put it simply, how much recognition for the successful policies pursued by the kings of Wessex in the ninth century should go to King Alfred's father, King Æthelwulf, and to his grandfather King Ecgberht, rather than to Alfred himself? A further guide was Nicholas Brooks who posed a similar question, when he asked 'was Alfred an innovator in government or merely an able transmitter of an old inheritance?'[22] So, while it might appear predestined for the personality of King Alfred to loom large in the construction of this thesis, there was an intention from the outset that he should not necessarily hold centre-stage. As Barbara Yorke has recently reminded us, between them 'Alfred and Asser constructed a carefully composed portrait of ideal kingship' and overall these sentiments suggest that the path through the Alfredian sources should be trodden warily.[23]

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[21] Simon Keynes, 'The cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 28 (1999), 225-356, at 355-6.
[22] Nicholas Brooks, 'Alfredian government: the West Saxon inheritance', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 153-173 at p. 153.
[23] Barbara Yorke, 'Alfredism: the use and abuse of King Alfred's reputation in later centuries', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 361-380, at p. 362.

Sources

The warning that together King Alfred and Asser assembled an idealised portrait of kingship should be cause for further reflection. But, King Alfred worked in collaboration with all his courtly-circle (not merely his biographer Asser) towards this ultimate goal and overall King Alfred's royal court provided the cohesion necessary for the maintenance of his existing power-base and for the further extension and enhancement of his royal authority. Indeed, projecting Alfred's royal persona formed one of its principal mandates and the royal court provided the nucleus for the expression and dissemination of the king's royal policies. Like its Carolingian inspiration, Alfred's court was a 'palace of political memory' from where the king and his councillors broadcasted his royal authority and legitimacy.[24] But as a centre it was also concerned with promoting the benefits of Alfred's kingship to different audiences and the royal court transformed much of what had gone before into idealised presentations of the past. In the late ninth century the West Saxon genealogical regnal list and the *Chronicle* 'together portray the political fiction of a lineal succession to a unified West Saxon kingship from the earliest times.'[25] One reason behind this re-invention of history was clearly dynastic and by the early 890s Alfred and his advisors were already planning for the future exclusion from the throne of Wessex of the sons of his elder brother, Æthelred.

King Alfred's concerns for issues of government, legitimacy, continuity, loyalty, law and more emerge from those texts attributed to him personally. These translations,

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[24] Stuart Airlie, 'The palace of memory: the Carolingian court as political centre', in Sarah Rees Jones, Richard Marks and A. J. Minnis (eds.), *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe* (York, 2000), pp. 1-19, at p. 10.

[25] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (revised edition, London, 2000), p. 39.

undertaken with varying degrees of authorial licence by Alfred, include the introduction to his Laws, the first fifty Psalms, Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Saint Augustine's *Soliloquies* and Orosius' *Historiarum adversus Paganos Libri Septem.* It is crucial to our understanding of these Alfredian texts, and of Alfred's motives for producing them, that we remember that there was much more to them than the ubiquitous overarching term 'King Alfred's educational programme' tends to suggest; for to King Alfred 'learning was an activity absolutely essential for those placed in positions of power.'[26] In order that those given influential positions in Alfred's government could understand what was expected of them, Alfred decreed that specific works should be written down in English rather than in Latin, traditionally the language of the learned. Alfred explains in his *Prose Preface* to his translation of Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis* why he took this approach. Musing over the loss of learning and the subsequent loss of wisdom, Alfred deliberates upon why he chose to make us of his native tongue for his own works:

> When I reflected on all this, I wondered exceedingly why the good, wise men who were formerly found throughout England and had thoroughly studied all those books, did not wish to translate any part of them into their own language. But I immediately answered myself, and said: 'They did not think that wise men would ever become so careless and that learning would decay like this; they refrained from doing it through this resolve, namely they wished that the more languages we knew, the greater would be the wisdom in this land.' Then I recalled how the Law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and thereafter, when the Greeks learned it, they translated it all into their own language, and all the other books as well. And so too the Romans, after they had mastered them, translated them all through learned interpreters into their own language. Similarly all the other Christian peoples turned some part of them into their own language. Therefore it seems better to me - if it seems to you – that we too should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know, and accomplish this, as with God's help we may very easily do provided we have peace enough, so that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning (as long as they are not useful for some other employment) until the time that they can read English writings properly. Thereafter one may instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and wishes to advance to holy orders.[27]

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[26] David Pratt, 'Persuasion and invention at the court of King Alfred the Great', in Catherine Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 189-221, at p. 190.

[27] King Alfred, *Prose Preface to Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 125-126.

A convincing case has been made that the Alfredian *Chronicle* should be set alongside those texts which embrace Alfred's programme of didacticism. Echoing Davis' earlier exemplar, Alfred P. Smyth argues that, unlike contemporary chronicles in Francia and elsewhere, the *Chronicle* was written down in the vernacular to address a more secular audience and that its overall intention was to promote the personality of King Alfred. 'What really matters is whether King Alfred did or did not have a say in which material was to be included and how that material was to be used. ... It was not in the interests of the chronicler to record anything which distracted our attention away from Alfred.'[28] Because the *Chronicle* was written in the vernacular, it seems eminently appropriate for it to be categorised alongside those books necessary for all men to know. Through the medium of the *Chronicle*, Alfred and his royal court made it indispensable that all should identify with the authorised narrative of King Alfred's reign, including his immediate family's unquestionable right to legitimate West Saxon kingship.

If the portrait of Alfred created through the lens of the *Chronicle* is the one meant for general consumption, then what of the representation of the king found within Asser's *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*? Although this image of Alfred's kingship is highly dependent upon the *Chronicle* for much of its own story-line, the *Life* also contains contradictory information and at times Asser's text is clearly at odds with its *Chronicle* counterpart. These inconsistencies will be discussed at length as the thesis seeks to explain why the Alfredian court was apparently concerned with constructing two inconsistent representations of the past. It will be suggested that Asser was expected to omit certain episodes but elaborate upon others. There are numerous possible audiences for Asser's *Life*, but one likely possibility is that it was meant to be read as a 'mirror for

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[28] Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: questioning Old English History and historians', *The Historian* 49 (Spring, 1996), 2-7, at 4.

princes' for the consumption of King Alfred himself and his immediate royal kin, and in consequence, parts of the narrative provide warnings against future discord and inter-family treachery. But the *Life* also frames a portrait of dynastic continuity projecting the image of King Alfred and his legitimacy above all else. Asser's text, written as it was in Latin, is therefore a book necessary for some to know but most decidedly not one that all men should know.

Further Alfredian sources are made use of, and these include other texts associated with King Alfred personally and those that emanated from his court, including his law codes, his will, charters and so-on. To counter some of the bias in the Alfredian texts, contemporary continental and Celtic parallels will be drawn upon extensively throughout, but particularly during the chapters dealing with King Alfred's ascendancy. This methodology is deliberate and is helpful in two ways. First, it situates Wessex into a Europe-wide background of Christian kingdoms and kingship, and second, it allows one to speculate legitimately around the significant gaps within the insular sources while countermanding the more obvious agendas of those texts produced in Wessex.[29] Works such as the Frankish *Annales Bertiniani*, *Annales Fuldenses*, *Annales regni Francorum* and other annalistic compilations and chronicles from Francia, Wales and Ireland allow the reader to make valid comparisons with the events taking shape in West Saxon-dominated England and those happening elsewhere, both in the ninth and the tenth centuries. To aid this intention, additional texts such as letters, capitularies and *Vitae* are also drawn upon. Some of these external sources have been previously neglected and two under-used Welsh texts provide the basis for an extended discussion in chapter four about the relationship between King Alfred, his son-

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[29] For England, Continental Europe and Danish activity in the ninth century, see map 2, p. iii.

in-law Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia and the Welsh princes during the period of 878-886. As far as it can be ascertained, no previous attempt has been made to situate one particular tenth-century Celtic text, the Latin colloquy known as *De raris fabulis* contained in Oxford, Bodleian, MS. Bodley 572, into a political framework before now. Additionally, for similar reasons that numerous Continental parallels are made use of in this dissertation, by analysing many later sources, further attempts are made to get away from the authorised West Saxon version (or versions) of their history. Indeed, this shift away from West Saxon-sanctioned historical perceptions provided one of the initial motives for the overall study.

As the discussion moves into the tenth century, the different recensions of the *Chronicle* provide contemporary and near-contemporary information and are used alongside the available charter evidence plus a number of other texts that emanated from Edward's and Æthelstan's court. However, the so-called *Mercian Register* is treated as an individual text and is not viewed as being synonymous with the main *Chronicle*; it is in effect considered to be an independent Mercian narrative account. Later sources are also taken into consideration throughout the thesis and pre-eminent among these are Æthelweard's *Chronicon*, a tenth-century Latin version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, produced sometime between 978 and 988; William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*; and; John of Worcester's *Chronicon Johannis Wigorniensis*. These sources provide much-needed information about the reigns of Edward the Elder and his eldest son, Æthelstan. But other later sources are also examined and a fourteenth-century transcript of a charter, allegedly from early in King Æthelstan's reign, provides an unexplored window into the life of King Æthelstan, and is interpreted in such a way as to compliment William of

Malmesbury's impressive claims about this king. This thesis is primarily textually based, but on occasions other forms of evidence (particularly coinage) have been considered when appropriate.

Summary of contents

West Saxon kingship of the ninth century evolved through necessity more than it did through idealism. This overarching theme forms the subject of the first two chapters. But West Saxon kingship was also conditioned by external influences. King Alfred (871-899) has been widely-revered for the originality of his kingship, but in some instances he followed the traditions and conventions inaugurated by his grandfather, King Ecgberht and continued by his father, King Æthelwulf. Some of these strategies were themselves modelled on continental procedures and this route was followed by Alfred. Internal threats to the security of West Saxon governance were uppermost and these had to be both considered and countered. All three West Saxon kings made arrangements to circumvent their own dynastic problems but a further common denominator was the threat posed by the Northmen to the stability and even to the very existence of Wessex. Ecgberht, Æthelwulf and Alfred all acquired the elevated status of a *rex Christanus* as they modified their individual kingships to cope with the menace from across the sea.[30] Faced with the prospect of internal destabilisation and a possibility of external conquest by the Danes, all three formulated original ideas of how to sustain their respective kingdoms when confronted by this increasing alien threat. But it will also be suggested that on occasions all three took advantage of the Danish

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[30] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Charles the Bald and Alfred', in his *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 124-151, at p. 141.

presence to enhance their respective power-bases and their rights to claim an extended influence or dominion over non-West Saxons.

Chapters three and four essentially deal with events outside Wessex; they are more concerned with the perception of Alfred and his West Saxons by their Mercian contemporaries. Chapter three forms an initial investigation into West Saxon/Mercian relations and it discusses the fate of the Mercian kingdom during the 860s and 870s, when both these allied but generally autonomous polities had to contend with the advent of the Danish *micel hæðen here*, which arrived in England in 865. It examines how loyalty was secured during this critical age and leads into a further discourse about the extent of Mercian allegiance to the West Saxon king. Chapter three also deals with the problems faced by Christian kings when confronted by armies of pagan Danes and it explores how arrangements between these religious protagonists were sealed.

Chapter four continues this theme of possible Mercian independence from the West Saxons, beginning with the Mercian acceptance of Alfred's authority over London in 886, and culminating at the watershed of 918 when King Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd, 'the Lady of the Mercians' died. One of the primary topics covered by this chapter is what became of the Mercian kings during the ninth century. Was Ceolwulf II – the foolish king's thegn of the *Chronicle* – the last legitimate king of the Mercians? Or was his successor, King Alfred's son-in-law, Æthelred, the last true Mercian king? To this end, the thesis offers an original way of interpreting some ninth-century charter evidence for Mercian aspirations. An additional investigation is made into how much independence the Mercian polity retained after Alfred's death in 899 and before Edward the Elder's complete absorption of the kingdom in 918. This particular issue has

polarised historical opinion. One school of thought suggests that the Mercian polity was absorbed by the dominant West Saxons in the mid-880s and formed a constituent part of a single kingdom under the overall control of the West Saxon king, first under Alfred and then his son, Edward the Elder. Against this view, has been the suggestion that the Mercians retained their autonomy until the death of Æthelflæd and perhaps beyond. These subjects are crucial to a further understanding of the delicate relationship that existed between the West Saxons and their Mercian allies.

The final two chapters cover in detail the succession disputes that surrounded the pathway to kingship for King Alfred's son Edward the Elder and his grandson King Æthelstan. Chapter five begins with an assessment of William of Malmesbury's possible lost tenth-century panegyric for Æthelstan and takes this particular debate some way further than has previously been considered. Two important claims made by William are analysed: the first is the elaborate account by him alleging that Æthelstan underwent a ceremony of royal suitability in the late ninth century, and, the second: that Æthelstan was raised at the Mercian court of his uncle and aunt. A so-far under-used later source for King Æthelstan's putative Mercian orientation is examined and located into a framework of European-wide artificial kinship ties. The second half of the chapter links Æthelstan's childhood ceremony and upbringing with Edward's problems over his own royal future inside Wessex. At his succession to the throne, Edward the Elder faced discontent at Winchester and was forced to counter a significant claim to the West Saxon kingship from his cousin Æthelwold, the son of King Alfred's elder brother, King Æthelred I. This thesis contends that this particular dynastic dispute had a later contributory effect upon Edward's eldest son's future succession.

The final chapter provides a detailed examination of the early years of King Æthelstan's reign. Æthelstan's was a difficult road to West Saxon acceptance and, in general, the chapter focuses upon the formative years of his kingship between 924 and 933. Æthelstan was not the popular choice at Winchester to succeed Edward on the West Saxon throne; according to both the *Mercian Register* and contemporary charter evidence he was initially made king only in Mercia. Wessex was to be inherited by Ælfweard, Edward the Elder's first son by his second wife, Ælfflæd. Ælfweard's death, shortly after Edward's, left the way open for Æthelstan and his supporters to claim this part of Edward's inheritance. But there was residual factionalism and between 924 and 933, Æthelstan had to contend with dynastic dissatisfaction based at Winchester where a powerful party remained opposed to his kingship throughout this entire period. It appears that many West Saxon nobles remained committed to Edward the Elder's original succession strategy and supported the claim of Æthelstan's dynastic rival, his half-brother, Eadwine, the surviving son of his father's second marriage to the West Saxon noblewoman, Ælfflæd. This was an intense family feud and one which lingered through the years following Æthelstan's coronation at Kingston in 925 and was only extinguished when Eadwine mysteriously died at sea in 933. This last chapter concentrates upon the strategies Æthelstan implemented to keep hold of royal power and, if possible, to extend this authority. By doing so the chapter focuses on the crucial, if underdeveloped, role played by his Kentish supporters and especially the part played by his Kentish step-mother, King Edward's third wife, Eadgifu. This final chapter additionally demonstrates the growing importance of queens in power-broking West Saxon succession to the throne. After Æthelstan died in 939, the dowager Eadgifu was the first West Saxon queen to play a high-profile role at court, but this thesis argues that

her pre-eminence can be viewed much earlier and that she was a leading participant in securing Æthelstan's kingship.

In situating the expansion of Wessex firmly into a family and dynastic context, this thesis forms a departure from previous works on the subject. By relegating the creation of 'imagined communities' to the periphery and concentrating upon the available source material produced for these West Saxon kings as texts written for the furtherance of one particular family, it allows the pre-occupations of a dominant, but essentially insecure dynastic régime, to emerge more clearly. Along the way, the dynasty forged by Ecgberht and his successors had to transform the inheritance culture of Wessex. In doing so they may have been responsible for the creation of the socio-political landscape we are now familiar with as England, but the primary intention of Ecgberht and all of his successors was not the establishment of a West Saxon-dominated united kingdom, it was the retention and transmission of the throne of Wessex intact within one single dynastic bloodline. This thesis is, therefore, an extended discourse about dynastic intrigue: about how the family of King Ecgberht achieved royal power and how his direct successors went about ensuring that their West Saxon authority was upheld and transmitted undiluted through the generations.

Chapter One

Kingship of the Ninth Century, Wessex and Kent: Consolidation and Innovation

King Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome. The lord Leo was then pope in Rome; he consecrated him king and stood sponsor to him at confirmation.[1]

Few events in Anglo-Saxon history have stirred up controversy quite like King Alfred's childhood 'royal anointing' in 853; opinions about the authenticity of this account of Alfred's papal consecration have varied from outright acceptance to utter disbelief.[2] In his magisterial synthesis *Anglo-Saxon England*, Sir Frank Stenton wisely reduced the event's impact upon his narrative to the level of a footnote.[3] One suspects though, that this form of wisdom would not have generated much enthusiasm at King Alfred's royal court, for wisdom was the principal virtue that underpinned Alfred's kingship. As presented in the *Chronicle*, Alfred's papal pre-ordination remains the central pillar of an Alfredian interpretation of history and it contains, as Janet Nelson has suggested, 'the truth of his legitimacy as one divinely-appointed and foretold to rulership.'[4] It is also a prime illustration of how fundamental the biblical model of King Solomon was in the

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[1] *ASC*, 853.

[2] Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1996), at p. 73 argued that 'it seems to me incredible that a four-year-old boy should have been sent on a perilous journey to Rome only for confirmation.' Contrast with A. P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), at p. 13 'the astonishing and bogus claim, therefore, was presumably inserted in the Chronicle sometime during Alfred's reign.'

[3] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971), at pp. 271-272, n. 3. 'In 853, when he was accompanied by a large retinue of his father's subjects, Pope Leo IV invested him with the honorary dignity of a Roman consul – an incident which the compiler of the *Chronicle* afterwards confused with ordination to kingship. In 855 he was taken to Rome by King Æthelwulf himself.' Of course, Stenton's reluctance to situate Alfred pre-ordination more prominently within his grand narrative may be a reflection of his earlier view that the *Chronicle* was not a court product, but was commissioned by a West Country ealdorman. See F. M. Stenton, 'The South-Western element in the Old English Chronicle', in D. M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: Being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 106-15. For an appraisal of Stenton's thesis and the development of the *Chronicle* see Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1995), pp. 103-105.

[4] Janet L. Nelson, 'Wealth and wisdom: the politics of Alfred the Great', in her *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 31-52, at p. 45.

construction of the Alfredian polity.[5] Solomon, like Alfred, was a younger son consecrated within the lifetime of a father whom he would eventually succeed.[6] Alfred's childhood consecration was publicised unambiguously as elevation to kingship by the *Chronicle* for dynastic considerations relevant to the 890s; it is, therefore, more than mere invention for it sets Alfred and his direct lineage apart from all other claimants to the kingship. But in 853 Alfred may have visited Rome during the initial phase in a series of interrelated dynastic policies activated by his father King Æthelwulf, which took three years to reach their conclusion. Besides Alfred's papal sponsorship, these policies and their possible consequences include Æthelwulf's so-called decimation of his kingdom; Æthelwulf's own pilgrimage; his meetings with Charles the Bald and the papacy; his marriage to Charles the Bald's young daughter, Judith, consolidated by her consecration as queen; supposed rebellion by Æthelwulf's son Æthelbald, either before or after Æthelwulf's return; and the division of the extended kingdom of Wessex.

Æthelwulf's actions were themselves developments of an earlier strategy designed by his father King Ecgberht. The contributions made by both of these kings were vital to the consolidation of West Saxon kingship and they allowed its later extension by Alfred. Æthelwulf's policies were originally designed to secure the power-base created by his father Ecgberht when he ended the period of Mercian hegemony within Kent with victory over the Mercian king Beornwulf at *Ellandun*

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[5] For King Alfred's debt to the rule of Solomon see Richard Abels, A*lfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 219-257; Patrick Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', *HSJ* 15 for 2004 (2006), 1-39, esp. 13-21; David Pratt, 'Persuasion and invention at the court of King Alfred the Great', in Catherine Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 189-221, esp. pp. 190-194.

[6] Anton Scharer, 'The writing of history at King Alfred's court', *EME* 5.2 (1996), 177-206, at 191.

(Wroughton) in 825.[7] This victory first brought Kent into an association with Wessex, an alliance that was later underpinned by both Ecgberht and his son Æthelwulf to ensure Kentish survival in the face of the first major wave of Danish expansion.[8] It was this association that Æthelwulf hoped to perpetuate and even develop further when he initiated his remarkable and farsighted policies between 853 and 855. The long-term success of Ecgberht's dynasty was to a large degree dependent upon the retention of their south-eastern resources.[9] The policies pursued by Ecgberht and Æthelwulf to protect these assets ultimately had a profound effect upon the later reign of King Alfred who promoted his own kingship through a re-telling of these events in his own words and through other texts composed at his royal court. Alfred chose to nullify the impact of some of his father's policies but others he appropriated for his own ends. This first chapter will consider all the repercussions of these complex dynastic strategies and locate them into the greater framework of West Saxon kingship of the ninth century. While King Alfred has been revered for his imaginative kingship, at times he obeyed the dynastic conventions previously orchestrated by his father and his grandfather.

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[7] *ASC*, 825. Ecgberht's career will be traced in chapter two of this thesis.
[8] K. P. Witney, 'The period of Mercian rule in Kent, and a charter of A. D. 811', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 104 (1987), 87-113, at 112.
[9] Richard Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability in ninth-century Wessex', *HSJ* 12 for 2001 (2005) 83-97, at 87.

Sources: problems and possibilities

More than any other Anglo-Saxon king Alfred has captured the imagination of historians for generations and the abundance of sources for his reign means that he stands in stark contrast to those who came before.[10] The Alfredian evidence includes: the *Chronicle*, the king's own writings, an ambitious vernacular translation programme inspired by Alfred, and, most unusually for this period, a contemporary biography of the king written by his close intimate and mass-priest, the Welshman Asser. Although further evidence exists, and will be used extensively, much of the available information relating to ninth-century events in England and beyond emanated from the intellectual milieu of King Alfred's royal court in and around the 890s.[11] Many of the relevant sources were therefore direct products of this particular environment but a number of others were 'improved' by Alfred's régime in order to reflect the abilities of the king in the most positive manner conceivable.[12] This has long been recognised and was most effectively pointed out many years ago by Michael Wallace-Hadrill who suggested that 'we hold that Alfred was a great and glorious king in part because he tells us he was.'[13] Twenty years on, in one of the most thought-provoking essays ever written about Alfred

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[10] For the way in which Alfred has been presented in the past see Eric Gerald Stanley, 'The glorification of Alfred King of Wessex', in his *A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (Toronto, 1987), pp. 410-441; Barbara Yorke, 'The most perfect character in history', *History Today* 49 (Oct. 1999), 8-14 and Joanne Mary Parker, 'The apocryphal Alfred', in Michael Brown and Steven Harrison (eds.), *The Medieval World and the Modern Mind* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 142-170.

[11] On the issue of Alfredian sources see Simon Keynes, 'The power of the written word, Alfredian England, 871-899', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 175-197.

[12] For instance, it appears likely that there was an existing version of the *Chronicle* extending to probably 842, to which the Alfredian chronicler added later material; A. J. Thorogood, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the reign of Ecgberht', *EHR* 48 (1933), 353 –363, at 361-362.

[13] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Franks and the English in the ninth century: some common historical interests', *History* 35 (1950), 202-18, at 216-7.

and the problems of bias within the sources attributed to him, R. H. C. Davis built upon these foundations and stated his own case for trying to liberate Alfred from what he conjectured was a literary straightjacket imposed on the king by this material:

> Those [sources] that were not written by him were written for him. It is pointless to try and control the *Chronicle's* bias by reference to Asser, for while the *Chronicle* tells us what Alfred wanted us to know, Asser (if genuine) merely tells us what Alfred wanted to hear. Somehow or other we must try to liberate ourselves from the Alfredian sources, so that we can see him, not as he wanted us to see him, but as he really was.[14]

Although a laudable intention, liberating Alfred from his own sources is a task that remains fraught with difficulties. The last serious attempt to conform to Davis' reasoning - at least in its broad outline - floundered because of the flawed approach taken by its author.[15] However, there seems no logical reason why King Alfred should be completely disentangled from his own sources. Although many are related both to the king and his royal court there is a clear sense that some of them exhibit a number of Alfred's personal apprehensions about kingship, and other related issues, and these may be retrievable. What the Alfredian sources do is to 'bring us uniquely close to their

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[14] R.H.C. Davis, 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth', *History* 56 (1971), 169-82, reprinted in his *From Alfred The Great to Stephen* (London and Rio Grande, 1991), pp. 33-54, at p. 41. However, see the reply by Dorothy Whitelock to both Wallace-Hadrill and Davis; 'The importance of the battle of Edington', Report for 1975, 1976 and 1977 of the friends of the priory church of Edington, Wiltshire, reprinted in her *From Bede to Alfred*, Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon History and Literature, 13 (London, 1980), 6-15. Cf. James Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', in C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (eds.), *The Inheritance of Historiography* (Exeter, 1986), pp. 115-35, at p. 124: '*prima facie* the *Chronicle* does appear to be Alfredian propaganda, to the extent that the *onus probandi* would seem to lie principally upon those who hold it was not.'

[15] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, at p. xxii; 'it has not been possible therefore to construct a historical narrative around the career of this king without first attempting to free the subject from the iron grip of its own historiography.' See also Smyth's 'Unmasking Alfred's false biographer', *British Archaeology* 7 (Sept. 1995), 8-9; 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: questioning Old English History and historians', *The Historian* 49 (Spring, 1996), 2-7 and *The Medieval Life of Alfred The Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002). This thesis has not the scope to counter all of Smyth's allegations against Asser's *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* but I must state that I consider this text to be a genuine ninth-century biography of King Alfred by his Welsh mass-priest Asser. Smyth's book was the subject of a large number of reviews and many of these can be found in my bibliography, but Janet Nelson's and Allan Frantzen's comments are among the most balanced and most useful in this particular context; Janet L. Nelson, 'Waiting for Alfred', *EME* 7.1 (1998), 115-24 and Allen J. Frantzen, 'Alfred's Alfred: the cultural meaning of Alfred P. Smyth's King Alfred the Great', at http://homepages.luc.edu/~afrantz/alfredc.html [accessed on 18th July 2002 with the author's permission]

protagonist [and] open an unexampled window on an early medieval king, on what he was.'[16] After all, Asser's self-professed objective was to give his readers - whoever they might have been - 'some idea of the character of King Alfred' and his portrayal captures much of the king's personality.[17] This, like the description of Alfred's 'papal anointing', exposes that the most informative analogy of King Alfred found within Asser's *Life* is with King Solomon.[18]

The *Life* is not the only Alfred-inspired text to exude such Solomonic parallels for King Alfred's vernacular version of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* does so too. In one of his additions to the original text, Alfred instructed his audience to 'study wisdom, and when you have learned it, do not disregard it ... for if you are only wise and good it will follow you.'[19] One question that requires addressing is how closely related were these two texts. Asser's portrayal of King Alfred as an ideal Christian king in the model of Solomon has encouraged Anton Scharer to look a little deeper into the origins of Alfred's version of Boethius. Demonstrating the influences of Sedulius Scottus' *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis* of *c.* 869-870 on Asser's text, Scharer has enquired does Asser 'consciously echo Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*' when he cites Alfred as following the kingly examples set by Solomon?[20] Alfred sought God's inspiration in his quest for wisdom so that he might better understand 'divine learning and knowledge of the liberal arts' for the organisation of his earthly

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[16] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', at 4.
[17] Asser, ch. 106.
[18] Keynes, 'The power of the written word', p. 182.
[19] *OEB*, p. 35.
[20] Scharer 'The writing of history', at 196; see also 191-193 where he also draws attention to the fact that both Asser's *Life* and the *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis* of Sedulius Scottus utilise the 'Dream of King Solomon'.

realm was not sufficient to satisfy all his needs.[21] According to Asser, it was 'as if he derived no consolation from all these things (*quasi nullam in his omnibus consolationem haberet*), and suffered no greater distress of any kind inwardly and outwardly.'[22] It has been demonstrated by Peter Godman that the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was a major influence upon the work of Sedulius Scottus and correspondingly it appears that the text may have a provided Asser with a similar stimulus.[23] It may also have been Asser who explained the importance of Boethius' text to King Alfred. According to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, Asser had a guiding hand in Alfred's translation of Boethius where the bishop 'expounded with greater lucidity the meaning of Boethius' book *On Consolation*, which the king himself translated into English.'[24] It may be that Asser had prepared a simplified commentary to aid the king with his translation of the Latin original, which Alfred was still struggling to master.[25] Further research undertaken originally by Diane Bolton, and more recently developed by Malcolm Godden, on the Welsh glosses contained in Ms. Vatican 3633 - a ninth-century Latin copy of the Boethius – demonstrates that Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was known to Welsh scholars of the ninth century.[26] This revelation has in turn enhanced the likelihood that

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[21] Asser, ch. 76.

[22] *Ibid.* See Scharer 'The writing of history', 196.

[23] Peter Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 160-163.

[24] *GR*, ii. 122.6; *GP*, ii. 80. William's statement that Asser helped Alfred with his translation of Boethius' original is not supported elsewhere. Thomson and Winterbottom, *GR Commentary*, at 102 suggest that this is not merely a supposition made by William because Asser was the king's 'tutor par excellence.' In the preface to Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* Alfred makes no mention of anyone providing him with help in this particular translation. See King Alfred, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, Early English Text Society, old series 45 and 50 (London, 1871), i. 7.

[25] Donald Bullough, 'The educational tradition in England from Alfred to Ælfric: teaching *utriusque linguae*', in his *Carolingian Renewal* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 297-335, at pp. 300-301.

[26] Diane K. Bolton, 'The study of the Consolation of Philosophy in Anglo-Saxon England', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 44 (1977), 33-78 and Malcolm Godden, 'Alfred, Asser

Asser both knew of Boethius' work and was responsible for drawing King Alfred's special attention to it, as William of Malmesbury implies. Paul Kershaw has also advanced the opinion that the influence of Sedulius Scottus upon Alfred's Boethius needs to be considered more thoroughly than it has; as he points out, both the *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis* and the OE *Boethius* place an emphasis upon royal self-determination, and that both share the similar view that only reconciliation with God will bring forth ultimate peace.[27] 'The rest is with God. Indeed it is God' declared Alfred.[28] The antithesis of this Alfredian perception of righteous authority is upheaval and civil war. By combining certain extracts of Asser's *Life* with elements of Alfred's Old English Boethius, it might be possible to draw to the surface, not just some of King Alfred's more intimate apprehensions concerning kingship in general, but more specifically those regarding filial treachery and betrayal within Alfred's own family. The events that unfolded between 853 and 856 greatly influenced King Alfred's future sovereignty. Asser's account of internal friction and dynastic discontent in 856 is arguably mirrored by Alfred in a number of the more personal contributions to his translation of Boethius' work. Examining the account of King Æthelwulf's homecoming in 856 through the twin lenses of Asser's narrative and King Alfred's own verdicts on unlawful kingship from his Boethius may allow more of Alfred's personal anxieties to emerge. This will possibly demonstrate that if Asser's text was, at least in

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and Boethius', in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and Andy Orchard (eds.), *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, vol. 1 (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2005), 326-348.

[27] P. J. E. Kershaw, 'Rex Pacificus. Studies in royal peacemaking and the image of the peacemaking king in the early medieval West', (University of London Ph.D. Thesis, 1998), pp. 180-181.

[28] OEB, p. 61.

parts, what Alfred himself wanted to hear, these personal views conflicted with what he, or those around him, wanted people to see.

Alfred's version of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was heavily influenced by the reign of Solomon and the twin ideals of wisdom and justice pervade the work.[29] The text is, moreover, committed to an examination of the relationship between legitimate and illegitimate kingship; between righteous lordship and immorality. Although set in the Rome of the sixth century, Alfred's text also forms a commentary for his own age.[30] For example, the *Lays* of Boethius begin with a dedicatory passage of Alfred's own composition, theoretically in praise of Boethius, through which Alfred's deliberates over the salvation of his own kingdom. Alfred, adapting Boethius' text to fit his personal view of history, maps out his own obligations as the redeemer of his people and he contrasts the endangered kingdom of Wessex that he inherited with the vibrant new one he has recently brought into existence. Parallels are visible between this view and Alfred's famous lament from his vernacular translation of Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, when Alfred 'recollected how – before everything was ransacked and burned … our ancestors, who formerly maintained these places, loved wisdom, and through it obtained wealth and passed it on to us.'[31] In both of these texts Alfred ponders over the problems of past, present and future.

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[29] Scharer 'The writing of history', 196.

[30] Malcolm Godden, 'The player king: identification and self-representation in King Alfred's writings', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 137-150, at p. 141 has suggested that king Alfred's version of Boethius 'represents a people who had a long history of resistance to the tyranny of kingship.'

[31] King Alfred, *Prose Preface to Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 125. For the relationship between Alfred's version of Gregorian society and rulership and the views expounded in his translation of Boethius see Nicole Guentha Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius* (Albany, 2005), p. 7.

Through the medium of his Boethian text, Alfred informs his audience how this redemption has come about in England:

> That mighty island,
> Rudely the Roman
> The shieldmen sacked
> Rome was ravaged;
> In those days a leader
> A high born chieftain
> While that the high-seat
> A man most righteous.
> A giver of treasure
> Wise towards this world,
> Learned in booklore;
> That this hero had,
> Time after time
> The evil and insult
> Grievously given.[32]
>
> most famous of lands.
> rule was shattered;
> the glorious city;
> …
> in Rome was living,
> cherishing his lord,
> was held by the Greeks;
> He was 'mid the Romans
> glorious ever,
> wistful of honour,
> Boethius his name was
> that so highly was famed.
> he turned in his mind
> by alien princes

Alfred's contention that a righteous lord is someone to be cherished finds a recurring voice elsewhere. The king's version of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis* contains the following obligations that 'all those who are under the yoke of lordship, shall hold his lord, each one of them in reciprocal honour, worship, dignity and worth.'[33] Similar moral messages are also evident throughout Asser's *Life* which, like another of its major influences Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*, is concerned with the king's care for law and for legality in general.[34] The twin issues of legitimacy and betrayal are prominently situated in Asser's text and these values comprise a constant *leitmotif* visible in Alfredian political thought in general. These concerns are especially discernible in Asser's narrative of rebellion, anarchy and family treachery following King Æthelwulf's return from the Continent.

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[32] *OEB*, Lays of Boethius, 1, pp. 178-179.

[33] King Alfred, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, Early English Text Society, old series 45 and 50 (London, 1871), i. 23. See John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Florida, 2000), p. 87.

[34] Anton Scharer, 'König Alfreds Hof und die Geschichtsschreibung', in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (Munich, 1994), pp. 443-458, at p. 454. See also Marie Schütt, 'The literary form of Asser's *Vita Alfredi*', *EHR* 72 (1957), 209-220.

Although completely omitted, or suppressed, from the narrative of the *Chronicle*, the alleged rebellion by Æthelbald against his father is conspicuously displayed as outright dynastic discord in Asser's work. Asser conveyed the details of this revolt in such a way as to suggest that this particular section of the biography was written for Alfred's personal endorsement. It was an attempt to perpetrate a 'terrible crime'; it was a time of 'civil strife … with father and son at war', claimed an indignant Asser.[35] Asser emphatically emphasised that the rule of Æthelbald was illegitimate suggesting that this section of the *Life* was intended to fulfil a role in educating Alfred's children and his councillors alike against treachery. Moreover, Wessex is said to have been plunged into a state of anarchy of Æthelbald's making when he 'controlled the government of the kingdom of the West Saxons for two and a half lawless years.'[36] This is quite clearly an exaggeration, but Asser's vitriolic account mirrors Alfred's own sentiments about the spectre of sedition as he frequently expressed them in his translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*; at times the two texts display similar agendas. They may not be unconnected either. Boethius may have provided the inspiration behind Asser's composition of chapters 12 and 13, those which detail Æthelbald's rebellion and King Alfred's version of Boethius' original and these extracts within Asser's *Life* may have stemmed from an associated intellectual 'think-tank'. The claim that Asser merely recited what Alfred himself wanted to hear is an over-simplification of the numerous possible audiences for this intimate biography but, nevertheless, it still remains a central contention. Asser dedicated his work specifically to his 'most esteemed and holy lord King Alfred', and one key motive behind its

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[35] Asser, ch. 12.
[36] *Ibid.*, ch. 17.

production was that it was meant for the king's own consumption.[37] Asser's narrative of King Æthelwulf's reign is therefore extremely important but it should be examined circumspectly. At times the language used by Asser should also be compared with Alfred's own opinions concerning conspiracies initiated by sons against their fathers as revealed in his version of Boethius.

Precarious Kingship: the reign of Æthelwulf

In many ways the Danish invaders who were becoming increasingly committed to campaigns of conquest throughout Western Europe were instrumental in shaping the English political landscape. They also made a vital contribution to the formulation of West Saxon dynastic policies. 'But for the Vikings', wrote Patrick Wormald, the independent English kingdoms 'might have generated the sort of rivalry that left the struggle for kingship of Ireland far from resolved by the time of the fateful English intervention of 1169.'[38] And, as Alfred P. Smyth has suggested, it was 'ironically the Danish invaders who eventually brought about the unification of England under West Saxon kings.'[39] The vikings and their capacity for nonconformist warfare did not merely threaten the West Saxon kings tangibly though the prospect of looming military

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[37] *Ibid.*, dedication. Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', 5-6 argued that Alfred may not have endorsed Asser's text which may account for both its very limited circulation and that it seemingly remains an unfinished work. For the limited transmission of Asser's text, see D. R. Howlett, *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* (Dublin, 1995), pp. 273-274. Moreover, as Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', at p. 115 has noted, 'the nature of the book is by no means fully understood' and it remains a multifaceted work that has yet to be completely explored.

[38] Patrick Wormald, 'The making of England', *History Today* 45 (Feb, 1995), 26-32, at 27-28.

[39] Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Emergence of English Identity', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Medieval Europeans: Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe* (London, 1998). pp. 24-52, at p. 42.

conquest, however, their very existence also had a profound psychological impact upon the collective Christian ethos of European society.[40] The ninth century was an age when many writers in the Christian West were morbidly preoccupied with the castigation of sins and the *pagani* were understood to be the agents of divine retribution for religious and moral decay.[41] The entire fabric of Western Christian society was perceived by some to be in danger of unravelling before these instruments of God's displeasure, as various contemporary texts illustrate. One notable author of such religiously-motivated writing was King Alfred himself. Alfred, was not, however, the first West Saxon king to find himself at the mercy of the Northmen; nor was he the first to engage them in warfare and to inflict a considerable defeat upon them. Alfred was not even the first West Saxon king who moralised about the possibility of divine retribution for the neglect of spiritual observance.[42]

In a frequently-quoted extract from Alfred's *Prose Preface* to Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, the king admonished his people and urged them to cherish Christian values. 'Remember' wrote Alfred 'what punishments befell us in this world when ... we were Christians in name alone, and very few of us possessed Christian virtues.'[43] This powerful religious rhetoric has been much commented upon and has

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[40] For Danish methods of warfare see Guy Halsall, 'Playing by whose rules? A further look at Viking atrocity in the ninth century', *Medieval History* 2.2 (1992), 2-12.
[41] On the subject of divine retribution and the role played by the Danes see Sarah Foot, 'Violence against Christians? The vikings and the church in ninth-century England', *Medieval History* 1.3 (1991), 3-16 and Simon Coupland, 'The rod of God's wrath or the people of God's wrath? The Carolingian theology of the Viking invasions', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991), 535-554. This perception of the vikings continued throughout the tenth century; Malcolm Godden, 'Apocalypse and invasion in late Anglo-Saxon England', in Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray and Terry Hoad (eds.), *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 130-162.
[42] Sarah Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series (1996), 25-49, at 37-38.
[43] King Alfred, *Prose Preface*, transl. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred* p. 125.

been generally recognised as one of the key features of King Alfred's reign.[44] There exists, however, an earlier warning from a West Saxon king which expresses very similar sentiments to those endorsed by Alfred that has been less well documented. Significantly, this earlier direct plea to spiritual observance is not found within the insular sources, but in the Frankish. In 839, the year the *Chronicle* reported that King Ecgberht died; an unnamed king of the West Saxons appealed to the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious and urged him to 'devote even more careful attention and concern to the salvation of the souls of those subject to him.'[45] A detailed, but anonymous, account of a cataclysmic vision was also despatched to the emperor's court to reinforce this impassioned plea for Frankish vigilance. This vision conveyed the disturbing message that a decline in Christian standards could only lead to divine retribution by God's agents the heathens:

> The lines of blood you can see in those books are all the various sins of Christian people, because they are so utterly unwilling to obey the orders and fulfil the precepts in those divine books. If Christian people don't quickly do penance for their various vices and crimes … then all of a sudden pagan men will lay waste with fire and sword most of the people and land of the Christians along with all they possess.[46]

These sentiments are comparable to Alfred's later concerns, as are the chilling consequences of failure. As Alfred reminded his people, their neglect of spiritual observance and wisdom had already led to the implementation of divine retribution:

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[44] Dorothy Whitelock, 'The prose of Alfred's reign', in Eric G. Stanley, (ed.), *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English literature* (London, 1966), pp. 67-103, esp. pp. 68-70; Nicholas Brooks, 'England in the ninth century: the crucible of defeat', *TRHS* 5th series 29 (1979), 1-20, at 13-14 has pointed out that concern for religious observance in the face of an external pagan threat may have been behind the decision to translate Orosius' *Historiarum adversus Paganos Libri Septem* into the English vernacular. On the Orosius and the construction of an 'English' Christian identity see Steven J. Harris, 'The Alfredian *World History* and Anglo-Saxon identity', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001), 484-510 and Stephen J. Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (New York and London, 2003), pp. 83-105.

[45] *AB*, 839.

[46] *Ibid.*

> When I reflected on all this, I recollected how – before everything was ransacked and burned – the churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and books. Similarly, there was a great multitude serving God. … Here one can still see their track, but we cannot follow it. Therefore we have lost the wealth as well as the wisdom, because we did not wish to set our minds to the track.[47]

The extraordinary entry in the West Frankish annals for 839 should be fixed into a context of spiritual and moral decadence, where fears for the very existence of the West Saxon realm were being invoked, and where the obvious remedies were penance and prayer.[48] But additionally, it should be set into a broader Continental background of spiritual renewal. For instance, the *Capitulary of Pîtres* issued in June 862, may have exhorted that God 'promised through the scriptures to inflict upon us if we did not do His will.' But the capitulary also promised a pathway to salvation: 'And in the destruction around us He has revealed to us what we should understand about the devastation within us, so that, having understood, we should return to Him and believe.'[49]

It is also in this specific environment that the remarkable series of events apparently instigated by Alfred's father King Æthelwulf appear to belong. The policies constructed by Æthelwulf demonstrate his deep concerns for the maintenance and extension of the West Saxon kingship; ones that challenge Stenton's description of him as 'a religious and unambitious man.'[50] The historiographical perception of Æthelwulf

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[47] King Alfred, *Prose Preface*, transl. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 125. For King Alfred's lament about the loss of wealth and wisdom see Bernard F. Huppé, 'Alfred and Ælfric; a study of two prefaces', in Paul E. Szarmach and Bernard F. Huppé, (eds.), *The Old English Homily and its Background* (New York, 1978), pp. 119- 137 and P. R. Orton, 'King Alfred's Prose Preface to the Old English Pastoral Care', *Peritia* 2 (1983), 140-148.

[48] Paul Edward Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London, 1994), pp. 107-109.

[49] *Capitulary of Pîtres*, eds. A. Boretius and V. Krause, *MGH Capitularia* II (Hanover, 1897); trans. Simon Coupland (Unpublished).

[50] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 245

as an excessively devout king has been a difficult one to dislodge, along with the negative connotations that invariably follow.[51] For instance, Michael Enright has described Æthelwulf as 'more than anything an impractical religious enthusiast.'[52] Æthelwulf may well have been pious, but if he is distanced from the vision story that appears in the Frankish annals for 839, then this excessively religious appraisal of his character shifts dramatically. The king responsible for the vision was most probably not Æthelwulf but his father King Ecgberht, who was at this time making provisions to end his days in Rome.[53] Æthelwulf's demeanour in the 850s was politically assertive rather than religiously passive. More emphasis should be placed on the reputation Æthelwulf acquired as a statesman in England outside Wessex and at both the Frankish and papal courts.[54] Æthelwulf's munificence is duly commemorated in an inventory found in the *Liber Pontificalis* and, even judged by the standard of gifts the papacy customarily received, this was an extreme display of kingly opulence.[55] Æthelwulf had also cultivated continental political exchanges, beginning in the 850s, and these culminated with his marriage to Charles the Bald's daughter Judith on 1st Oct 856; an event that changed the complexion of West Saxon inheritance patterns all the way into the tenth

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[51] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, revised edition, 2000), at p. 166 has pointed out that hagiographical legend has it, that as a young man, Æthelwulf entered minor orders. Perhaps Æthelwulf's overly-pious reputation has very early origins?

[52] Michael J. Enright, 'Charles the Bald and Æthelwulf of Wessex: the alliance of 856 and strategies of royal succession', *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979), 291-302, at 295.

[53] Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c 750-870* (Aldershot, 2003), at p. 228 has distanced Æthelwulf from this dream, suggesting that the king responsible was Ecgberht. This appeal to the Frankish emperor is part of the same annal where a king of Wessex asks permission to cross through Frankish territory on route to Rome. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*, pp. 107-109, has argued that the dream is associable with Æthelwulf.

[54] Janet L. Nelson, 'The Franks and the English reconsidered' in her *Rulers and ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 141-158, at p. 144.

[55] *Liber Pontificalis, Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte Introduction et Commentaire,* ed. L. Duchesne, 3 vols. (Paris, 1886-92, second edition, 1955-7), book 106, ch. 34. The inventory is found in the *Vita* of Benedict III. See *Liber Pontificalis, The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes, The Ancient Biographies of Ten Popes from A.D. 817-891*; ed. and trans. Raymond Davis (Liverpool, 1995), pp. 164 and 186-7.

century.[56] Æthelwulf, as Nelson has so recently reminded us, deserves much more respect and he is a greatly underestimated King of the West Saxons.[57]

Wessex under threat: Æthelwulf's response

The pagan menace was intensifying through the ninth century changing in character from isolated raids to outright invasion as exemplified by the arrival in England of the *micel hæðen here* in 865. But the earlier Danish forays into England had themselves eventually reached a crescendo in 851. According to the *Chronicle*, in this year the pagans had over-wintered in England and this unwelcome situation was compounded by the storming of both Canterbury and London by a hostile fleet of unprecedented size.[58] The *Chronicle* reported that the Danes had defeated the Mercians but it also publicised that the West Saxons forces had rallied behind their king and his son foiling this invasion of:

> Heathen men [who had] stayed throughout the winter on Thanet. And that same year 350 ships came into the mouth of the Thames and stormed Canterbury and London and put to flight Brihtwulf, king of the Mercians, with his army, and went south across the Thames into Surrey. And King Æthelwulf and his son Æthelbald fought against them at *Aclea* with

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[56] Æthelwulf's reputation inside Francia is reflected in the spurious charter issued in his name at St. Denis. See Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 225-226. For placing King Alfred's reign into a wider, European perspective, see also J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Charles the Bald and Alfred', in his *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 124-151 and Janet L. Nelson, 'A king across the sea: Alfred in continental perspective', *TRHS* 6th series 36 (1986), 45-68. Æthelwulf's military prowess prompted King Burgred of Mercia to request West Saxon intervention against the Welsh in 853 and two years earlier Æthelwulf's victory at *Aclea* was proclaimed widely by the Franks.

[57] Janet L. Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: III, rights and rituals', *TRHS* 6th series 14 (2004), 1-24, at 14.

[58] The Danes were also becoming more threatening on the Frankish side of the Channel in the 850s. A large Danish army had encamped at Jeufosse in 856, within striking distance of Paris. They were confronted by Charles the Bald who was unable to dislodge them and they 'quietly passed the winter'; Janet L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London, 1992), p. 181.

> the army of the West Saxons, and there inflicted the greatest slaughter [on a heathen army] that we ever heard of until this present day, and had the victory there.[59]

Even taking into account the possible hyperbole, Æthelwulf's success at *Aclea* was clearly a considerable triumph. Victory over the heathens also provided Æthelwulf with the necessary catalyst to change West Saxon inheritance patterns. Faced with a possible fragmentation of the West Saxon kingship between his four surviving sons, Æthelwulf decided upon an imaginative course of action to ensure the long-term stability of Wessex and of Kent. The driving-force behind Æthelwulf's strategy may appear to have been the external pressure exerted upon the West Saxons by the Northmen, but Æthelwulf's initiatives also suggest that he used their presence for his own dynastic purposes, to bring future stability to West Saxon inheritance procedures.

When news of King Æthelwulf's triumph over the Danes reached a concerned Western Francia it was almost immediately reported in the *Annals of St-Bertin* as a victory for 'the English with the aid of our Lord Jesus Christ.'[60] Elation over Æthelwulf's victory at *Aclea* is also voiced by Abbot Lupus of Ferrières. Lupus wrote to Æthelwulf requesting lead for the refurbishment of his monastery and praised the West Saxon king's military achievement where: 'God has granted you strength to oppose the enemies of Christ; we pray that Almighty God who has given you that strength will make you invincible against all the enemies of the Christian faith.'[61] By mastering the Danes, the West Saxons had provided themselves with a temporary

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[59] *ASC*, 851. Even taking into account any probable exaggeration by the annalist, the reported size of the Danish fleet of some 350 ships, suggests that this was an imposing Danish fleet that arrived in Kent in 851. On the size of Danish fleets and the question of exaggeration see Brooks, 'The crucible of defeat'.

[60] *AB*, 850.

[61] Lupus of Ferrières, *The Letters of Lupus* of *Ferrières*, ed. and trans. Graydon W. Regenos (The Hague, 1966), letter no. 84.

breathing space and Æthelwulf used this time decisively. Although the triumph of *Aclea* has tended to be overshadowed by the later achievements of Alfred – which as the retrospective reporting demonstrates was indeed the primary intention of the annalist here – the importance of Æthelwulf's success should not be underestimated.[62] Without this spectacular victory it is unlikely that Æthelwulf's overall strategy could have been even attempted therefore leaving Wessex weaker in the longer-term. Æthelwulf built upon his triumph at *Aclea* using his newly-acquired kudos as a victorious Christian warrior to gather support for his scheme across the continent.

In 853, King Æthelwulf sent an embassy to Rome. This delegation may have included his youngest son Alfred and the young *ætheling* may have been the recipient of some form of ritual blessing performed by Pope Leo.[63] Whether Alfred was in attendance or not, however, this delegation should be approached as a preliminary diplomatic mission initiated to gain papal dispensation for Æthelwulf's dynastic intentions. Two years later, Æthelwulf took what would prove to be a fateful decision and journeyed to Rome himself, and according to Asser, the king was accompanied on this pilgrimage by Alfred. Before Æthelwulf returned from Rome to Wessex, however, he paused for a while at the Carolingian royal court and in an elaborate ceremony married Charles the Bald's young daughter Judith. Æthelwulf's pilgrimage and subsequent marriage set in motion a chain of events that would ultimately revolutionise

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[62] Note the retrospective reporting of the entry for 851. The phrase 'until this present day' is omitted in Mss. 'D', 'E' and 'F'. On the other hand, the words that the defeat was inflicted 'on a heathen army' must have been in the original manuscript. Dorothy Whitelock, with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Revised Translation* (London, 1961), p. 42, ns. 17 and 18.

[63] Janet L. Nelson, 'The problems of King Alfred's royal anointing', in her *Politics and Ritual in Medieval Europe* (London and Ronceverte, 1986), pp. 309-327 and Nelson, 'The Franks and the English reconsidered', esp. pp. 143-8.

the conditions of West Saxon kingship, but not necessarily as they were intended to be transformed. According to Asser, a short time before Æthelwulf's return from the Continent (*tantillo tempore*), his eldest son Æthelbald and some influential West Saxon magnates fermented insurgency within the West Saxon heartlands.[64]

> For King Æthelbald and Ealstan, Bishop of Sherborne, along with Eanwulf, ealdorman of Somerset, are reported to have plotted that King Æthelwulf should never again be received in the kingdom on his return from Rome. ... When King Æthelwulf was returning from Rome, his son Æthelbald, with all his councillors – or rather co-conspirators – attempted to perpetrate a terrible crime; expelling a king from his own kingdom; but God would not allow it to happen, nor would the nobles of the whole of the Saxon land have any part in it.[65]

To some, it appears that Æthelwulf had neglected the running of his kingdom in order to fulfil his personal, dynastic and spiritual ambitions and so by going to Rome Æthelwulf had planted the seeds of rebellion.

Æthelwulf's 'decimation' of the Kingdom

Æthelwulf's actions before his departure for Rome suggest that he was aware that his plans would not be universally applauded and, before embarking on his expedition, he safeguarded his continental venture by making an offering to God of a substantial portion of land and related revenues, an issue that has occasioned much debate.[66] Even Æthelwulf's motives for his decimation have come under scrutiny. It has been rightly

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[64]Asser, ch. 12; Pauline Stafford, 'Charles the Bald, Judith and England', in Margaret T. Gibson and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom* (2nd revised edition, Aldershot, 1990), pp. 139-153, at p. 149.

[65] Asser, ch. 12.

[66] W. H. Stevenson, ed. *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (new impression, Oxford, 1959), pp. 186-91, at p. 186; 'few things in our early history have led to so much discussion as the famous "Donation of Æthelwulf.' For a further discussion of the problems associated with both 'decimations' see H. R. P. Finberg, ed. *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester, 1964), pp. 187-213.

suggested that Æthelwulf's decimation was 'conceived as an act of piety.' [67] But this was piety with a political slant. Editing Asser's version of events, W. H. Stevenson doubted that there were any political motives behind the decimation; he suggested 'if Æthelwulf had any political purpose ... his object was imperfectly obtained if the story of the rebellion of his son and many of his subjects told in the next chapter is true.'[68] The possibility that the implementation of dynastic politics were to some extent behind the decimation enterprise cannot be not ruled out merely because they did not come to fruition as Æthelwulf may have planned they would, however. More recently, Richard Abels has argued in favour of a political dimension to Æthelwulf's decimation, suggesting that in a modern idiom the ploy might be interpreted as blatant 'electioneering.'[69] Æthelwulf's policy of decimation should be interpreted as a judicious move which secured the allegiance of many nobles upon the king's return to England from the continent. But it did not secure the loyalty of everyone. That Æthelwulf ultimately avoided outright civil war through the intervention of many of his nobles - not merely the West Saxon aristocracy - after his return from the Carolingian royal court is also worth exploring.[70] The distribution of wealth, including land, provided a stipulation of future loyalty suggesting strongly that the decimation was related to the political circumstances in both Wessex and in Kent at the time of Æthelwulf's departure for Rome. Æthelwulf's decimation was intended to secure the fidelity of not just the West Saxon nobility but the Kentish as well and to achieve this

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[67] Simon Keynes, 'The West-Saxon charters of King Æthelwulf and his sons', *EHR* 109 (Sept, 1994), 1110-1149, at 1120.
[68] Stevenson, *Asser's Life of Alfred*, p. 191,
[69] Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability', 89.
[70] Richard Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1988), pp. 61 and 232, n. 18 and Abels, A*lfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, pp. 68-71.

Æthelwulf designed two distinct decimations; the first in Wessex in 854 and a second in Kent in 855.[71] How successful Æthelwulf's scheme was overall remains a moot point, however. For while Æthelwulf avoided the ignominy of complete anarchy, it seems undeniable that his *witan* compelled the king to relinquish control over the most important and valuable portions of his kingdom and concede these to his son Æthelbald.

If doubts persist about the exact reasons behind the decimation, there are similar concerns about what constituted the donations. The *Chronicle* for 855 states that 'King Æthelwulf conveyed by charter the tenth part of his land over all his kingdom (*gebocude Æþelwulf cyning teoþan dęl his londes ofer al his rice*) to the praise of God and his own eternal salvation.'[72] Nelson has suggested that this *Chronicle* claim as it stands 'sounds clear enough, once we discount subsequent confusion between "his land" and "his kingdom": he gives "his land" that is, his personal lands, not the royal lands.'[73] However, the problem relating to this 'subsequent confusion' has early origins. Asser's version of the decimation is subtly different from the *Chronicle*'s. Asser wrote that: 'Æthelwulf, the esteemed king, freed the tenth part of his whole kingdom (*decimam totius regni*) from every royal service and tribute, and as an everlasting inheritance he made it over on the cross of Christ to the Triune God, for the

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[71] Keynes, 'The West-Saxon charters', 1114-1123 and Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: III, rights and rituals', at 16. A Kentish charter, S 316, issued by King Æthelwulf in his capacity of *rex occidentalium Saxonum nec non et Cantuariorum* dated to 855 granted land to Ealdhere 'for his humble obedience and his fidelity in all things to be free of all royal service with the exception of the three charges.' Abels, *Lordship*, p. 61 and *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, p. 69 has attempted to link this diploma with the decimation charters. However, S 316 is not without its problems. There is not much doubt that it is a genuine charter of King Æthelwulf's, but the date is problematic. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of Alfred*, p. 193, n. 3 was sceptical about the given date of 855 and suggested that there may be an error in the indiction, meaning that the text may belong to 853 rather than 855.

[72] *ASC*, 855 and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 3 MS. 'A', ed. Janet Bately (Cambridge, 1986), 45.

[73] Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: III, rights and rituals', 15.

redemption of his soul and those of his predecessors.'[74] Nelson is not alone in arguing that the land booked by Æthelwulf came from his hereditary estates, rather than the royal demesne, and this is the most likely scenario.[75] But it is not the only option and a further possibility needs to be addressed; that Æthelwulf donated lands belonging to his royal fisc. Alfred's later declaration in his will of 'whichever of us lived the longest was to succeed to everything' suggests that Alfred himself believed the kingship to have been included in his inheritance from his father.[76] Eric John took up this point and pointed out that 'it is inconceivable that the kingship was not included in the "everything," otherwise we should have to believe that Æthelwulf thought one of his grandsons might be king whilst one of his younger sons held the property.'[77] Ann Williams has also argued from a similar slant and she suggests that there is no evidence that that kingship was regarded as anything other than 'the hereditary property of the West Saxon royal kin.'[78] More recently, this argument has been addressed by Susan Kelly, who has argued that Æthelwulf, driven by devout religious impulses, gave away royal lands to improve the general state of his kingdom and that the decimation was intended to have 'national consequences, to improve the situation of the West Saxon people at a time of great stress.'[79] But overall, perhaps the question of whether this land was Æthelwulf's hereditary estates or land that constituted part of his *regnum* has

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[74] *Asser*, ch. 11.

[75] For instance Kirby, *Earliest English Kings*, pp. 168-170. Contrast with Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred The Great*; who at p. 213, n. 24 who suggests that Pseudo-Asser wrongly interpreted the *Chronicle* entry as '*totius regni.*' However, in his earlier *King Alfred the Great*, at pp. 382-3 he argued that the decimation by King Æthelwulf mirrors the language of the tenth-century Benedictine Reformation.

[76] *Will of King Alfred*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred* p. 174.

[77] Eric John, '*Orbis Britanniae* and the Anglo-Saxon kings', in his *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), pp. 1-63, at pp. 40-41.

[78] Ann Williams, 'Some notes and considerations on problems connected with the English royal succession, 860-1066', *ANS* 1 (1978), 144-167, at 153.

[79] S. E. Kelly, 'King Æthelwulf's decimations', *Anglo-Saxon* 1 (2007), 285-317, at 288-289 and 314.

been somewhat over-emphasised and what has been perceived as a major demarcation is actually something of an illusion.

Unfortunately, the majority of the surviving Æthelwulf decimation charters are not particularly trustworthy and since both the *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life* were compiled in the 890s they may merely reflect Alfred's then political thinking.[80] To King Alfred, with his kingship secure, inherited land and royal demesne, while not quite amounting to much the same thing, were becoming ever more difficult to separate. A statement Alfred makes in his will is worth looking at. Alfred writes that:

> Now I had previously written differently concerning my inheritance, when I had more property and more kinsmen, and I had entrusted the documents to many men, and they were written with the same witness. Accordingly, I have burnt all the old ones I could discover. Should any of them be found, it stands for nothing. [81]

The replacement will was most probably drafted in the late 880s and may reflect the period of Alfred's political ascendancy and expansion. Moreover, as Sean Miller has pointed out, although the lands Alfred inherited comprised King Æthelwulf's personal estates, these were expected to descend along with the kingship to the beneficiary.[82] This is an important observation and Alfred would take this inheritance procedure further. Alfred, who could not designate his son Edward as his sole heir, would, however, virtually ensure his eldest son's succession by the provision of extensive swathes of *bocland*. To do this Alfred extended the base requirement of Æthelwulf's will, which included the preservation of the union between West Saxon royal property and kingship, creating in effect a larger nucleus of landed estates that were indivisible

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[80] For obvious reasons the 'decimation' was attractive to later medieval monastic forgers.
[81] *Will of King Alfred*; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 177.
[82] *Charters of The New Minster, Winchester*, ed. Sean Miller (Oxford, 2001), p. 11.

and with it an extended royal demesne.[83] Only a bare trickle of the land that Alfred husbanded after he became king in 871 appears to have found its way outside the royal kin-group well into the tenth century.[84] Alfred could also expand his own lands by other means. The king retained the power to confiscate booked land from disloyal retainers, whether lay or ecclesiastic, since charters were in essence material manifestations of a concession to economic rights over land that had previously belonged to kings.[85] Alfred confiscated the lands of Wulfhere his ealdorman of Wiltshire following the latter's desertion to the heathens in 878.[86] The question of which land Æthelwulf donated at his decimation will doubtlessly continue to be debated, and it may well be that Charles Plummer's words on this topic were prophetic. Doubting that Æthelwulf willed his kingdom, Plummer warned that whether Æthelwulf actually did or not 'must remain uncertain.'[87]

Either way, Æthelwulf lavishly granted land in perpetuity to both ecclesiastical beneficiaries and, significantly, to a number of his loyal, lay-followers. This was unprecedented generosity and led to an eventual erosion of the royal revenues in favour of some of his aristocracy as indicated by an additional clause within the one remaining moderately reliable charter. This provision gave the recipient – in this case the king's

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[83] John, '*Orbis Britanniae*', pp. 41-42.
[84] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', at 9.
[85] Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005), p. 318. Wickham has an extended discussion about land tenure in Anglo-Saxon England, pp. 314-325. Cf. Eric John, *Land Tenure in Early England: A Discussion of Some Problems* (Leicester, 1960).
[86] Janet L. Nelson, 'Power and authority at the court of Alfred', in Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, King's College London Medieval Studies, xvii (London, 2000), pp. 311-337, at p. 325. Wulfhere's duplicity will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three of this thesis.
[87] C. Plummer and J. Earle, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892 and 1899), ii. 82-83.

thegn Dunn – the legal rights to this land 'to have and possess, and you are to have the power to leave it with full liberty after your days to whatever heir you please.'[88] Dorothy Whitelock, following an earlier argument put forward by Stevenson, argued that this clause specifically meant that the beneficiaries should later leave any land that they had been granted by the king freely to religious houses.[89] Although in this particular instance, the land was eventually bequeathed to the religious community at Rochester, an ultimately spiritual benefaction may not always have been the end result.[90] It has been pointed out by Kelly, that one base requirement of a royal diploma was the inherent 'freedom to alienate and to bequeath.'[91] Additionally, she has suggested, that the pattern of survival for royal charters has led to a misapprehension concerning the future of booked lands, since those charters which have survived are the ones that ended up in ecclesiastical archives.[92] It may well be that Æthelwulf hoped that his gifts of *bocland* to his lay magnates would lead to subsequent donations in favour of the Church but the relevant clause does not state this explicitly and with reason.[93] As argued above, the stipulation allowed the beneficiary the legal rights to donate his gift from the king as personal property. Wormald, explaining the principal mandate behind *bocland*, wrote: that 'in essence the land invested in a charter (*boc*) was that it was not hereditary … the land in question is granted in perpetuity … the recipient

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[88] *EHD*, no. 89.
[89] Dorothy Whitelock, ed. *English Historical Documents c 500-1042* (2nd edition, London, 1979), p. 484; Keynes, 'The West-Saxon charters', 1119, n. 5.
[90] *The Charters of Rochester*, ed. A. Campbell (Oxford, 1973), no. 23; see also Campbell's comments at xxiv, on the confusion of tenses by the scribe and that information concerning the king's pilgrimage to Rome may have been a later addition. The additional bequest to Rochester is found in S 1514.
[91] *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, ed. S. E. Kelly (Oxford, 2005), p. 68.
[92] Kelly, 'King Æthelwulf's decimations', at 288-289.
[93] Finberg, *Charters of Wessex* at pp. 205-6 suggested that the decimation itself was also used as a model to strengthen the fashionable notion of one tenth as the appropriate figure to be given to the church.

is free to dispose of the land as he (or not infrequently she) chooses, permitting its alienation to the Church.'[94] There are a number of possibilities for the further distribution of Æthelwulf's former wealth. The timing of the later donation was left open and the grant could plausibly end up as a layman's lifetime preservation, or even, conceivably three lives' retention by the beneficiary.[95] These donations were to all intents and purposes benefices arranged by King Æthelwulf to secure the loyalty of those indebted to him. The escalation of events after 855 suggests overall that the king's policy of decimation caused heated dissatisfaction in certain quarters at the royal court, indicating that some nobles benefited from the king's largesse where others did not. Because of this apparent favouritism, Æthelbald's subsequent rebellion found numerous supporters from the ranks of the higher nobility, especially within Wessex, and even Æthelwulf's later apologist Asser admitted as much. As has been suggested, 'a king who dealt out land and treasure without regard for existing bonds and obligations already derived from those same properties would erode the basis on which the early medieval polity survived.'[96] A similar argument can be made concerning future obligation; Æthelbald was able to rebel against his father primarily because the decimation policy had generated sufficient aristocratic unrest to make insurrection a viable option.

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[94] Patrick Wormald, '*On ÞA WÆPNEDHEALFE*: kingship and royal property from Æthelwulf to Edward the Elder', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 264-279, at p. 265.

[95] Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: III, rights and rituals', at 16.

[96] Mark William Rabuck, 'The imagined boundary: borders and frontiers in Anglo-Saxon England', (Yale University Ph. D. Dissertation, 1995), p. 82.

Early impressions of kingship

The complex insurance policy initially designed by Æthelwulf to secure his kingdom during his absence was ironically one of the primary factors that led to friction within his own government and his subsequent loss of complete authority. In the retrospective milieu of the 890s, Æthelwulf's extravagance in granting land to a large number of inheritors, both religious and secular, appears to have been viewed by his youngest son Alfred as an imprudent act by which his father had alienated himself from important factions at court and laid himself wide open to revolt. Alfred perceived this as disruption to the solidity of the greater West Saxon realm and this prejudicial outlook should be construed overall as a negative consequence of the King Æthelwulf's policy of decimation. A further dubious outcome can be discerned from the writings of both King Alfred and his close confidante Asser. Æthelbald's premature elevation to the kingship of the West Saxons may have been partially responsible for Alfred's apparent fixation on filial and aristocratic treachery. In Alfred's translation of Boethius, Wisdom poses the question:

> Dost thou think that companionship of a king and the wealth and power he bestows on his darlings [his favourite courtiers] can make a man really wealthy or powerful?" Then I answered, saying, "Why can they not? For what is more pleasant and better in this life than the service and neighbourhood of a king, as well as wealth and power?[97]

The repercussions of Æthelwulf's pilgrimage appear to have had a considerable impact upon his youngest son's perceptions of kingship, when he took control of the West Saxon realm and, more importantly, when he was able to influence past events through the medium of writing. Asser's condemnation of the decision to let Æthelbald rule over

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[97] *OEB*. p. 70.

the West Saxon patrimony, 'so that the iniquitous and grasping son ruled where by rightful judgement the father should have done' is clearly an exaggeration penned for the furtherance of West Saxon solidarity in the 890s, but the primary considerations remain; was this anarchy and was this deliberately censored from the *Chronicle*, perhaps even under Alfred's instructions?[98]

The *Chronicle* is silent about Æthelbald's rebellion but there is an insinuation that all was not well upon Æthelwulf's return when he 'came to his people and they were glad of it.'[99] Too much has been made of how, in later life, Alfred drew great inspiration from his trip, or trips, to Rome, whilst not enough has been mentioned about how his kingship was also motivated by the constitutional disorder inside Wessex following his father's homecoming in 856. If Alfred accompanied his father on this pilgrimage, as seems likely, then he would have witnessed the turmoil first-hand. It is possible that the insurrection by his elder brother influenced Alfred heavily since, among other things, it may have forced him into a spell of eastern exile alongside his father. Asser relates how Alfred as a young *ætheling* was 'always brought up in the royal court and nowhere else', which as a biblical *topos*, invokes David, Joseph and once more Solomon.[100] But it also raises the possibility that Alfred spent a fraction of his childhood away from the political hub of the West Saxon kingdom amidst much political wrangling. The disruption brought about by Æthelwulf's Roman enterprise may have been, moreover, responsible for Alfred's conviction that a Christian king

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[98] Asser, ch. 12.
[99] *ASC*, 855.
[100] Asser, ch. 22. Scharer, 'The writing of history', esp. 193-197.

needed to remain in situ and firmly in control of his kingdom's destiny; a theme Alfred would later advocate from his interpretations of Gregory the Great's writings.[101] It may also help to explain why the obviously devout Alfred never again journeyed to Rome himself.[102] One further direct consequence of the rebellion may be that Alfred harboured suspicions about the fickle nature of kingship that ultimately stemmed from his childhood memories of brotherly betrayal.[103]

After Alfred became king, he endeavoured to redeem his father's tattered reputation through a politically advantageous tale relating how King Æthelwulf had acquiesced 'with indescribable forbearance' to the unlawful division of his kingdom.[104] Asser's description of how Æthelwulf retained sufficient royal dominion over the 'entire nation' with which to 'eject his grasping son Æthelbald from his share of the whole kingdom, along with all his councillors' is a tale that further stretches credulity.[105] Asser's version of the resulting division, with the rebellious faction in control of the essential western districts, bears the hallmarks of a successfully implemented political coup; but things may not have been quite as straightforward as

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[101] Alfred also took his inspiration from Gregory the Great on the theme. Claire Stancliffe, 'Kings who opted out' in Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 154-76, at p. 175.

[102] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, pp. 72 and 87.

[103] Asser, chs. 22 and 23 describe the famous example of Alfred winning the book of poetry from his mother. For Alfred's love of memorising poetry, see Peter Clemoes, 'King Alfred's debt to vernacular poetry: the evidence of *ellen* and *cræft*', in Michael Korhammer (ed.), *Words, Texts and Manuscripts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture presented to Helmut Gneuss on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 213-238. Simon Keynes, 'The cult of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999), 225-356, 317, 337 and 340 has recently demonstrated that earlier scholars assumed that the 'mother' who encouraged Alfred to read was actually Judith rather than Osburh. This point has been developed by Janet L. Nelson, 'Alfred's Carolingian contemporaries', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 293-310, pp. 296-297.

[104] Asser, ch. 12.

[105] *Ibid.*, chs. 12-13.

even Asser's text implies. Pauline Stafford and David Kirby have both suggested that the land partitioned was purely West Saxon territory, with Æthelbald ruling beyond Selwood and his father continuing to rule over the eastern parts of Wessex.[106] This allows for the silence within the sources about the fate of Æthelberht's rule over Kent.

A further problem surrounding Asser's account is how to determine when any uprising actually took place. Æthelbald's rebellion most probably happened after Æthelwulf had, 'contrary to the (wrongful) custom of that people', enthroned Judith, as queen.[107] It has been suggested that Æthelbald was already inciting rebellion as soon as his father left Wessex, and that Æthelwulf, hearing rumours of this upheaval at home married Judith as a safety measure against further possible insurrection.[108] This seems unlikely, however, since it suggests that Charles the Bald sanctioned a risky union between his young daughter and a king whose very authority was known to be in jeopardy. Rather, Judith provided the catalyst for insurgency and her enthronement beside Æthelwulf as his queen was the deciding element that took dissatisfaction to the level of royal rebellion.[109] As Joanna Story has pointed out, the most surprising thing is not that Æthelwulf brought a Carolingian princess back to England with him, but that

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[106] Stafford, 'Charles the Bald, Judith and England', pp. 149-50 and Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, pp. 166-167.

[107] Asser, ch. 13. It was not only Asser who knew that West Saxon royal women were not called queens. Prudentius, the St. Bertin annalist, was also aware of this fact. He wrote that, 'Æthelwulf formally conferred on her [Judith] the title of queen, which was something not customary before then to him or to his people.' *AB*, 856.

[108] Enright, 'Charles the Bald and Æthelwulf of Wessex', 295-296.

[109] Stafford, 'Charles the Bald, Judith and England', pp. 144 and 150 at p. 149, has also suggested that Æthelbald had witnessed the ceremony of queen-making first-hand when he attended the marriage in 853 of King Burgred and Æthelswith. That Æthelswith was invested as queen (*regina*) see Asser, ch. 9, and the *Chronicle* for 888, where the annal has the word 'queen'. There is also a gold finger ring of Æthelswith that carries the insciption *regina*; Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1996, reprinted 1997), p. 82, n.1.

Æthelwulf had taken Judith as his own bride. The affair surrounding Judith would be more readily comprehensible had Æthelwulf returned to England with a prospective Carolingian bride for his eldest son Æthelbald, as King Offa of Mercia had earlier tried to do for his own son Ecgfrith.[110] The motives behind Æthelwulf's marriage to Judith remain perplexing. It may be explicable, however, if seen as an example of opportunistic power-broking and the match may have been instigated by Charles, or more probably by his leading councillor, Hincmar of Rheims. It is tempting to visualise Hincmar manipulating a marriage between Æthelwulf and Judith with an intention to bring West Saxon kingship even closer to Carolingian examples.[111] The Carolingians imbued kingship with high-church spirituality and Hincmar, like 'the most reform-minded of the high clergy in the Frankish realm saw Frankish kingship as the great instrumentality by which ... the Church would consequently be strengthened.'[112] The role of Judith and her elevation to the status of queen should not be underestimated in the resulting rebellion inside Wessex. Alfred may have later blamed the arrival of the Carolingian princess Judith for much of what happened subsequently. It is therefore

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[110] Story, *Carolingian Connections*, p. 243.

[111] The queen's royal *ordo* that underpinned Judith's exalted status was composed by Hincmar of Rheims. It stemmed originally from an Anglo-Saxon king's *ordo* that Æthelwulf may have taken to the Frankish court. See Janet L. Nelson, 'Early medieval rites of queen-making and the shaping of medieval queenship', in Anne J. Duggan (ed.), *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1995 reprinted 2002), pp. 301-315, esp. 306-308. Hincmar did not have an existing queen's *ordo* so he adapted the king's *ordo* to fit the ceremony. The *ordo* itself has survived; see *MGH Cap* II, no. 296, 425-7 and it is printed in Richard A. Jackson, ed. *Ordines Coronationis Franciae: Texts and Ordines for the Coronation of Frankish and French Kings and Queens in the Middle Ages*, vol. I (Pennsylvania, 1995), 73-79.

[112] Henry A. Myors, in co-operation with Herwig Wolfram, *Medieval Kingship* (Chicago, 1982), p. 127. This perception of heavenly kingship continued long after the Carolingians. Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca and London, 1992), pp. 77-103, at p. 77 has suggested that the new French monarchy, 'having taken over their predecessors' formulas and rituals, they took over their political theory as well.'

against a backdrop of threats to the integrity of West Saxon kingship that the later representations of King Æthelwulf's reign by Alfred and by Asser should be examined.

Asser appears to have sanitised the impact of these events in order that Alfred could defend his father's damaged integrity at the same time as he guarded his own kingship against future sedition. Asser's version of this episode forms a direct plea for filial and aristocratic obedience in the 890s.[113] Æthelbald's rebellion, moreover, seems to have rankled with King Alfred throughout his life. When Æthelwulf died in 858, Æthelbald was the legitimate heir to the West Saxon kingship, as even Alfred later acknowledged in his will.[114] Yet, King Æthelbald's subsequent epitaph found within Asser's pages is not a dignified one. Asser, moralising over the legality of Æthelbald's later marriage to Judith, condemned Æthelbald to the point of eternal damnation, for taking his former mother-in-law as his wife, 'against God's prohibition and Christian dignity.' That Æthelbald 'took over his father's marriage-bed' was, Asser fumed, behaviour even 'contrary to the practice of all pagans.'[115] Asser's sentiments concerning Æthelbald's unlawful usurpation of his father's conjugal rights are arguably mirrored by Alfred himself and he too moralised that unrighteous kings cannot beget children:

The unrighteous Kings	that rule the earth
To no good ever	Can give an issue
By reason of the sin	whereof I have spoken;
Nor is that a marvel,	for they ever are minded

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[113] Nelson, 'Power and authority', p. 317, n. 26.
[114] The will of King Alfred, *EHD*, no. 96. 'King Æthelwulf bequeathed to us three brothers, Æthelbald, Æthelred and myself; that whichever of us should live longest should succeed to the whole.'
[115] Asser, ch. 17.

Themselves to abase, and bow to the power
Of each of the evils named already.[116]

Alfred also condemned conspiracies by sons towards their father and further unnatural evils as he stamped his personality upon the Boethian original:

> Very pleasant it is for a man to have a wife and children, *and yet many children are begotten to their parents' destruction, for many a woman dies in childbirth before she can bear the child*; and moreover we have learned that *long ago there happened a most unwanted and unnatural evil, to wit that sons conspired together and plotted against* their father. *Nay, worse still, we have heard in old story how of yore a certain son slew his father; I know not in what way, but we all no that it was an inhuman deed.*[117]

Dwelling upon the same theme of treachery and usurpation, another classical tale was utilised by Alfred, for its sentiments perhaps once more invoked memories of his own troubled past. Alfred, in his version of the *Sword of Damocles*, reflects upon the ever-present perils faced by those in positions of power. Alfred did not need to make many amendments to the original for this is a tale that reverberates with barbed comments aimed pointedly at treacherous conduct against rightfully anointed kings. The story warns of the dreadful consequences that befall those who dare to usurp the kingship and abuse the power invested in the office:

> It was for this that a king who in old times unjustly seized the kingdom said, "Oh, how happy the man over whose head no naked sword hangs by a fine thread, as it has been hanging over mine!" How thinkest thou? How do wealth and power please thee, seeing they never exist without dread and misery and sorrow?[118]

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[116] *OEB*, the Lays of Boethius, xxv. p. 226.
[117] *OEB*, pp. 76-77.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Æthelwulf's dynastic intentions

Over a number of years Eric John refined an argument that King Æthelwulf transformed the West Saxon laws of inheritance through a series of interconnected policies that were, he claimed, in essence 'all very Carolingian.'[119] This remains an attractive thesis, even if John took it a stage too far with his apparent belief that Alfred had actually been set apart by his father for future kingship at the direct expense of all his elder brothers' own claims to the West Saxon throne.[120] The myth of Alfred's royal pre-ordination will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, but that it was still being perceived as essentially authentic in 1996 lays testament to the power and durability of the illusion, if not the authenticity of the *Chronicle* account. There is a slightly different way of interpreting Æthelwulf's strategy, however. The *Liber Vitae* of Brescia suggests that Alfred may not have been the only son of King Æthelwulf to have accompanied his father on his pilgrimage to Rome. In this confraternity book Æthelred's name appears to precede that of his younger brother Alfred (as would be expected) and it may be that the *Chronicle* account, concentrating as it does on Alfred as the sole beneficiary of papal approval, 'exemplifies the prejudices of an interested party writing forty years

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[119] John, '*Orbis Britanniae*', at pp. 36-44. John later refined his arguments in his *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, at pp. 71-81 and the quotation is at p. 73. See also John's discussion at p. 81, concerning the issue of partible inheritance and its importance to the West Saxon kingdom. John pointed out that Stenton was also of the opinion that Wessex was a kingdom subject to such inheritance laws.

[120] John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 81, n. 14, accepted Alfred's 'papal anointing' in 853 at face-value; arguing that 'once Ælfred had succeeded to the crown he had no motive for distorting what had occurred in Rome.' Yet, especially once Alfred had ascended the West Saxon throne, he had ample motives for magnifying his papal experience; a principal one being the consolidation of the kingship by his direct descendents. John, at p. 80, n. 3 in response to Smyth's allegation that King Alfred could not have been born at Wantage in Berkshire as Asser claimed because 'Æthelwulf had several mature sons: Alfred was expendable.' This argument appears slightly contradictory, for if Alfred was expendable to King Æthelwulf when an infant it must be asked what had altered his father's perception of his youngest son over such a short period of time?

after the event, and happy to create the impression that Alfred [alone] had been marked out for kingship from the start.'[121] Whilst not conclusive, the quality of the *Liber Vitae*'s evidence is strengthened by the appearance of Abbot Marcward's name in the list. Marcward, who was formerly abbot of Prüm from 829 to 853, was possibly already known to Æthelwulf through their mutual acquaintance Lupus of Ferrières.[122] Marcward would have been an ideal choice to accompany such an important delegation to Rome and he may have been provided by Charles the Bald, or possibly by Lothar, as a guide and companion for the West Saxon embassy.[123] Æthelred may have set out on the journey to Rome with his father only to return prematurely to Wessex. Or, it may be that Æthelred underwent a similar ritualistic display as his younger brother, but by the 890s neither the papacy, nor especially the court of King Alfred, would have been interested in reporting this.[124] This point becomes particularly appropriate if fixed into a context of securing the royal succession of Alfred's son Edward. By the 890s, when Alfred was attempting to ensure the continuation of his direct line, remembering any papal blessing conferred upon his elder brother would be counter productive, perhaps even embarrassing.

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[121] Simon Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon entries in the "Liber Vitae" of Brescia', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 99-119, pp. 112-113. Of course, it does not necessarily follow that the names in the *Liber Vitae* correspond with those who actually travelled. More views on the evidential value of *Liber Vitae* can be found in Simon Keynes, 'The *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster, Winchester', in David Rollason, A. J. Piper, Margaret Harvey and Lynda Rollason (eds.), '*The Durham Liber Vitae and its Context* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 149-163, esp. pp. 152-153.

[122] Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon entries in the "Liber Vitae" of Brescia' p. 114; see also the *Letters of Lupus of Ferrières*, letter no. 77.

[123] For Lupus see Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 230-235.

[124] Nelson, 'Power and authority', p. 319.

There are numerous Frankish parallels for Æthelwulf's actions but one event in particular stands out as a model for the intended appearance in Rome of King Æthelwulf and both his youngest sons. The *Royal Frankish Annals* report that in 781 Charlemagne brought his two young sons Pippin and Louis to Rome where they were baptised and anointed by Pope Hadrian I as kings of Italy and Aquitaine respectively.[125] Æthelwulf's strategy may have been further influenced by Carolingian succession policies. The Carolingians had secured their power by tonsuring the last Merovingian king, Childeric III in 751, as reported by Einhard in his *Vita Karoli Magni*.[126] Æthelred and Alfred were significantly younger than their elder brothers and were thus vulnerable to anyone with power and with vested interests.[127] It may be that Æthelwulf took his two youngest sons with him to Rome, both to confirm their royal suitability by summoning papal blessing, and, to keep them out of the clutches of their elder brothers and their respective supporters. It has been suggested that either, or both, might have been subjected to tonsure and left bereft of future rights to kingship and that Æthelwulf nullified this possibility by invoking a papal endorsement of their future royal credentials.[128] Although generally seen as a Frankish phenomenon, the idea of forcible

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[125] *Annales regni Francorum*, ed. F. Kurze, *MGH SRG* 6 (Hanover, 1895); trans. B. W. Scholz with B. Rogers, *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1970), pp. 37-125, *s.a.* 781, p. 59. Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Basingstoke and London, 1998), at p. 157 has argued that Charlemagne's eldest son remained behind in Francia as it was expected that he would succeed his father to the Frankish kingdom and therefore his two youngest sons received 'nominal kingdoms' in 781.

[126] Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. G. Waitz, *MGH SRG* 25 (Hanover, 1880); trans. L. Thorpe, *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: The Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London, 1969), ch. 1.

[127] Nelson, 'A king across the sea', 55 and Janet L. Nelson, 'The queen in ninth-century Wessex', in Simon Keynes and Alfred P. Smyth (eds.), *Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Cyril Roy Hart* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 69-77, p. 73, n. 22.

[128] Nelson, 'Power and authority', p. 320.

tonsure can be set into a wider European context of kingship and was certainly not unknown to the Anglo-Saxons.[129]

King Alfred's later claim that he had been set aside for kingship from childhood, may have been too readily accepted by John, but as part of his extended discussion, he also challenged scholars to examine the dangers posed by partible inheritance, including fraternal succession, to the stability of the extended West Saxon realm.[130] Partibility of inheritance inevitably provoked fragmentation and could usher in a complete breakdown within an organised polity, sometimes permanently. Wessex had in the past been prone to divisions and fragmentation. Ine (688-726) may have consolidated the kingship and removed the *subreguli* who had afflicted Wessex but this did not put a complete end to the friction within the *stirps regia* and the kingdom remained fissile long afterwards.[131] As the *Chronicle* reveals, no king between Cenwalh and Æthelwulf succeeded his father on the throne of Wessex.[132] Æthelwulf's own succession, following his father Ecgberht, brought stability to the extended kingdom and Æthelwulf intended that it should remain that way by ensuring that his own sons should succeed to

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[129] Susan J. Ridyard, 'Monk-kings and the Anglo-Saxon hagiographic tradition', *HSJ* 6 (1994), 13-27, at 22-23 and n. 46 has pointed out that the Thirteenth Council of Toledo in 683 includes a plea by King Ervig to protect the rights of the royal family after his death by observing that 'neither the queen, nor her relatives by marriage could be killed, mutilated, deprived of their property, exiled or forced into religion.' On Carolingian monastic 'prisoners' see Mayke de Jong, 'Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms', in Mayke de Jong, Franz Theuws with Carine Van Rhijn (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 291-328.

[130] John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 81, n. 9. Pauline Stafford, 'The king's wife in Wessex', 800-1066', *Past & Present* 91 (1981), 5-27, at 12 has argued that fraternal succession 'encourages rebellion at all times.'

[131] Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 92. Bede says that, after the death of Cenwalh in 672, '*subreguli* took upon themselves the government of the kingdom, dividing it up and ruling it for about ten years'; Bede, *HE*. IV. 12.

[132] As pointed out by Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597-1066* (Leicester, 1984), p 147.

the kingship; one in the east and one in the west replicating the earlier model inaugurated by Æthelwulf's own elevation to the level of *subregulus* over Kent and the south east.[133] There is an additional element of symmetry about Æthelwulf's papal mission; for it is also reminiscent of another of Charlemagne's policies, the division of his kingdoms promulgated in February 806. Charlemagne's plan was also precipitated to avoid the pitfalls of partibility, and the Frankish emperor was also changing existing inheritance patterns.[134] Æthelwulf divided his kingdom between his two eldest sons before he departed for Rome probably taking with him his two youngest sons.

Æthelwulf made extensive preparations before his departure for Rome including the division of his kingdom. Asser's version of Æthelwulf's dissection of greater-Wessex opens up scope for further investigation:

> King Æthelwulf lived two years after he returned from Rome; during which time … he had a testamentary – or rather advisory document drawn up (*hereditariam, immo commendatoriam, scribi imperavit epistolem*), so that his sons should not quarrel unnecessarily after the death of their father. In this document he took care to have properly committed to writing a division of the kingdom between his sons (namely the two eldest).[135]

Although Asser places this advisory document (whether this was a copy of the will King Alfred later mentions is unclear) after Æthelwulf's return from Francia, this too may be a deliberate distortion of events.[136] As Stafford has noted, it is difficult to see

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[133] However, Simon Keynes, 'The control of Kent in the ninth century', *EME* 2 (1993), 111-131, at 125 has argued that Æthelwulf may not have given any of his sons a similar royal status that he himself had enjoyed post 838.

[134] Charlemagne's Division of his Kingdoms, in Paul Edward Dutton, ed. *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Ontario, 1993), pp. 129-133; for comments about partibility, p. 129, n. 22.

[135] Asser, ch. 16.

[136] Contrast Alice Sheppard, 'The king's family: securing the kingdom in Asser's *Vita Alfredi*', *Philological Quarterly* 80 (2001), 409-439, 412 who has suggested 'in the *Vita Ælfredi,* Æthelwulf does not simply accept the situation, he uses his will (like Frankish kings) to try to prevent the situation [rebellion by one of his sons] from happening again. This disposition of the kingdom, as Asser records it, bypasses the language of royal election. Indeed, the inclusion of the will's details has textual significance, though it may not comport with historical practice. By arranging for a horizontal system of fratrilineal succession, Æthelwulf relocates the idea of power from an uninterrupted vertical line of

how Æthelwulf was in any position to make such sweeping succession arrangements after 855 and the evidence (such as it is) suggests that Asser is describing the precautions taken before Æthelwulf's departure and not those constructed upon his return.[137] Asser also writes that the deal was struck so that his sons should not quarrel unnecessarily which tacitly implies that there had been some bickering between the elder brothers before their father's departure. The division between Æthelbald, who was to rule over Wessex during the king's absence, leaving Kent to his younger brother Æthelberht, was enacted both to ensure their later support and that they should not squabble over the kingship during their father's absence. Æthelwulf was underpinning his dynastic ambitions while he made arrangements to increase his youngest and thereby least secure sons' chances of future inheritance.[138] However, rebellion by Æthelbald and his supporters left the West Saxon kingdom divided and curtailed for the time being any further consolidation in this direction. The two kingdoms remained separate at Æthelwulf's death in 858 when: 'Æthelbald [succeeded] to the kingdom of the West Saxons and Æthelberht to the kingdom of the people of Kent [and the kingdom of the East Saxons].[139] But when Æthelbald himself died prematurely in 860, the three surviving brothers, probably driven by a necessity for dynastic unity, made a pact

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descent and situates it, horizontally, in the group of people related by blood.' While this system takes the pressure off father-son relationships, it does not prevent disloyalty among the brothers. Nonetheless, the kingdom has been divided, and it remains that way until after Æthelwulf dies.' Sheppard seems to be accepting Asser's evidence too readily. King Æthelwulf's will is no longer extant and we only know of its existence from the will of King Alfred. Asser, ch. 16 refers to 'a testamentary – or rather advisory document drawn up (*hereditariam, immo commendatoriam, scribi imperavit epistolem*), so that his sons should not quarrel unnecessarily after the death of their father. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, at pp. 236-237, n. 33, following Stevenson, have suggested that this may have been a copy of Æthelwulf's will but it could conceivably have been a different document.

[137] Pauline Stafford, 'Succession and inheritance: a gendered perspective on Alfred's family history', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 251-264, at p. 256, n. 17.

[138] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', 7.

[139] *ASC*, 858.

whereby Æthelberht succeeded to the entire composite realm. The *Chronicle* entry for 860 records that 'Æthelberht succeeded to the whole kingdom (*allum þam rice*)' and two charters of Æthelberht's, dated to 860-861 reflects the enormity of this development.[140] In one of these documents, Æthelberht granted land in Kent to Abbot Diernoth and the community of St. Augustine's, in return for their continuing loyalty, both to the king and to his brothers.[141] A further document relates how King Æthelberht, styled as *Aeðelbearht rex Occidentalium Saxonum seu Cantuuariorum*, summoned his high-ranking ecclesiastics to the royal court including the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishops of Rochester, Sherborne, Winchester, Selsey and, as Keynes has pointed out, 'most remarkably' London.[142] These were joined by the king's brothers Æthelred and Alfred along with senior ealdormen from both Wessex and Kent.[143] This assembly has been linked with Æthelberht's succession to the re-united kingdom and the witness list may denote a congress that underscored a collective decision to renounce King Æthelwulf's intentions.[144] A primary consideration for all this political manoeuvring must be that Æthelwulf had tried to extend those policies initiated by King Ecgberht, which had transformed the framework of rulership by allowing sons to be associated with the kingship whilst their father still lived.

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[140] *Ibid.*, 860.

[141] The charter is S 330; *Charters of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury and Minster in Thanet*, ed. S. E. Kelly (Oxford, 1995), no. 22; and for the historical background see pp. 89-91 and Keynes, 'The control of Kent', at 129-130.

[142] Keynes, 'The control of Kent', at 127-130.

[143] The charter is S 327 from the Archive of Rochester. It is number 24 in Campbell, *Charters of Rochester*. This charter is an original, though later tampered with document. Its witness-list appears to be genuine, however.

[144] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, pp. 93-94; Keynes, 'The West-Saxon charters of King Æthelwulf and his sons', 128-9; and Williams, 'English royal succession', 146-147.

West Saxon primacy over Kent

The sixty-year period of Mercian rule over Kent was frequently marked by acrimony that laid down certain preconditions for the later governance of the kingdom and its surrounding environs by the West Saxons. The principal Kentish religious see at Canterbury had suffered from Mercian attempts to trim back its influence, or even to re-locate it elsewhere.[145] King Ecgberht's victory over Beornwulf's Mercians at *Ellandun* in 825 marked a watershed in Kentish history and one crucial result of this decisive battle was the removal of the internal threat to Canterbury's primacy. The West Saxons seem to have taken an interest in Coenwulf's clashes with Archbishop Wulfred between 815 and 821, quarrels left unresolved at his death in 821, and following the dispersal of the Mercian forces, Ecgberht now undertook extensive measures to promote the archbishop's loyalty.[146] Having secured the domestic allegiance of Canterbury this left the escalating external threat from the marauding Danes to be considered. It is this framework of co-operation between Ecgberht, his later descendants and Canterbury, including their mutual defiance in the face of an escalating Danish offensive, on which the following discussion will concentrate.

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[145] Witney, 'Mercian rule in Kent', 112.

[146] Keynes, 'The control of Kent', 119-121 at 117 has observed that the Kentish nobility seem to vanish from the charter evidence from 810 'as if they no longer had any role to play in their own affairs.' This would also change under the West Saxons.

Kent in the frontline

From the beginning of the ninth century Kent bore the brunt of more openly confident assaults on the English mainland by Danish raiders who had become a significant threat to the security of Kent even before this date.[147] An authentic Kentish charter of King Offa carries the obligation to mount expeditions against the pagan seamen (*contra paganos marinos*) and to construct bridges against their attacks against Kent.[148] Although the *Chronicle* is somewhat reticent about the problems facing Kent, it does relate that in 853 'heathen men raided across Sheppey' and it reports their presence in the region in 841, 851, 853, 855 and 856.[149] Despite the comparative silence of the *Chronicle*, there is sufficient evidence that demonstrates graphically how the Danish onslaughts against the religious houses of Kent had begun to bite long before the reported raid on Sheppey. A charter relates that in 804, Abbess Selethryth and her community of the minster at Lyminge, when confronted by pagan aggression fled and

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[147] For the seriousness of Danish forays into Kent very early in the ninth century, see Nicholas Brooks, 'Development of military obligations in eighth and ninth century England', in Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (eds.), *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 69-84, at pp. 79-80, and 80, n. 2; Nicholas Brooks, 'The administrative background to the Burghal Hidage', in David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble (eds.), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 128-150 and Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597-1066* (Leicester, 1984), p. 150. Contrast, Patrick Wormald, 'The ninth century', in James Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (Harmondsworth, first published in 1982, 1991 reprint), pp. 132-159, at p. 132; 'The England of Offa and Coenwald was 'not much disturbed by the Vikings. Little is heard of the Danes in the narrative sources until 835. On balance, it seems improbable that there would be written obligations to destroy pagan fortifications without justifiable reasons.

[148] S 134; *Cantiam contra paganos marinos cum classis migrantibus uel in australes Saxones si necessitas cogit ac pontis constructionem et arcis munitionem contra paganos iterumque intra fines Cantwariorum, sed et hec est mea petitio atque doctrina ut hec tria consentiatis, que doceo ut eo stabilior hec mea libertas permaneat, si uestra spontanea uoluntate hoc non negatis.* On the importance of this particular charter, see Abels *Lordship*, at pp. 52-54. and Daniel G. Russo, *Town Origins and Development in Early England, c. 400-950 A.D.* (Westport, Connecticut and London, 1998), p. 223, n. 78.

[149] *ASC*, 835; 841; 853; 855 and 856.

sought safety behind the walls of Canterbury.[150] As early as 811 concerns for the security of Kent had reached ominous proportions and further proof that the raids were escalating can be viewed from within a number of Kentish charters. Specific clauses were being introduced that sanctioned additional expensive military obligations, formulated in direct response to a new and orchestrated strategy of fortress construction by the heathens. Further charters of 811 and of 822 have clauses stating an obligation to destroy heathen fortifications inside Kent and also contain a requirement to construct bridges across rivers to provide bulwarks against this unpredictable maritime enemy.[151] The creation of fortifications by the pagans inside Kent as early as 811 predates by forty years the first *Chronicle* report of the Danes over-wintering on Thanet in 851. This raises the possibility that some of the raiders may have actually remained encamped inside Kent before this time, if only in limited numbers. Supplying an adequate system of defence for the exposed religious houses of Kent was a major factor in the politics of the region, one that would become ever-more significant once the Danes could remain safely inside the territory. These new Danish tactics required a vigorous military and political response and now that the West Saxons had become the *de facto* rulers of the region, an inadequate resistance on their part could have increased the chances of a

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[150] *Charters of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury and Minster in Thanet*, pp. xxvii-xxix; the charter relating to the retreat by Abbess Selethryth and her community is S 160. See also Susan Kelly, 'Lyminge minster and its early charters', in Simon Keynes and Alfred P. Smyth (eds.), *Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Cyril Roy Hart* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 98-113, esp. pp. 112-113.

[151] S 1246; *id est expeditionem arcis munitionem pontis instructionem adversus paganos* and S 186: *expeditione contra paganos ostes et pontes constructione seu arcis munitione vel destructione in eodem gente et singulare pretium foras reddat.* The obligations for bridge-work and fortress-work in charters date from the reign of Æthelbald of Mercia and the system was introduced into Kent by Offa; see Gareth Williams, 'Military institutions and royal power', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 295-309, at p. 297.

separatist revolt. In direct response to this growing Danish intimidation a covenant was agreed between Wessex and Kent.[152]

In 838, a plan was formulated whereby the ecclesiastical community of Canterbury and the Kentish nobility pledged their lasting allegiance directly to Ecgberht and his personal descendants and against any opposing claimants to the West Saxon throne.[153] In return for their continuing loyalty, the Canterbury community and the Kentish lay nobility received a firm and unbreakable alliance with Ecgberht's new dynasty. As is usual with pacts of this nature there was a *quid pro quo*. The additional military protection that was desperately needed inside Kent was provided by Ecgberht and his West Saxon forces. The association was sealed between the two parties with the formal elevation of Ecgberht's son Æthelwulf to the sub-kingship of Kent. Here Ecgberht set an essential precedent with his replication of Carolingian dynastic customs and the ceremony was probably sanctioned by the application of the inviolate holy ritual of unction.[154] It is likely that a royal *ordo* accompanied the ceremony to cement Æthelwulf's new position as *subregulus* and it may even have been the very one later adapted by Hincmar of Rheims for Judith's coronation at her marriage to Æthelwulf in 856.[155] This was Carolingian-style inauguration and Æthelwulf subsequently attempted to maintain the strategy when devising his Continental excursion in the mid 850s. In return for this display of political and spiritual unity, the two West Saxon kings formally

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[152] For the suggestion of how this document shows that the Church of Canterbury dealt with the West Saxon royal court on an equal footing see Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 234, n. 2.
[153] K. P. Witney, *The Kingdom of Kent: A History from AD 450-825* (London and Chichester, 1982), pp. 226-7.
[154] Wormald, 'The ninth century', p. 140
[155] Story, *Carolingian Connections*, p. 223.

agreed that: 'we ourselves and our heirs shall always hereafter have firm and unshakeable friendship from Archbishop Ceolnoth and his congregation.'[156] This sacred declaration was later reinforced during a meeting of the West Saxon *witan* at Wilton in 839, followed by a full episcopal synod attended by all the bishops south of the Humber at the unknown site of *æt Astran*. It was a dynamic exhibition of West Saxon-Kentish solidarity and it signalled the end of Mercian royal representation at synods on Kentish soil and further emphasised the politics of '*rapprochement*' between Wessex and Kent instigated by the contract of 838.[157] From this time on, the archbishop of Canterbury and other prominent ecclesiastics such as the bishops of Selsey, Winchester, Sherborne and even London would be found at the courts of the West Saxon kings rather than in attendance at Mercian royal meetings.[158] The contract firmly consolidated the primacy of Canterbury and emphasised an enduring commitment by the West Saxon kings towards the security and maintenance of the metropolitan see.

In essence, the Canterbury community and the great nobles of Kent swore loyalty only to Ecgberht and his direct descendants. In return for West Saxon protection against internal interference and further Danish forays, the Kentish nobility agreed to let

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[156] S 1438. *Hac vero condicione interposita hæc prænominata donatio firma permaneat quod nos ipsi nostrique heredes semper in posterum firmam inconcussamque amicitiam ab illo archiepiscopo Ceolnotho ejusdem congregatione ecclesie Christi habeamus et ab omnibus successoribus ejus hoc idem patrocinium ac protectionem illius sedis nos et hereditas nostra nostrique heredes quicumque De voluntatis fuerit quod illi sint in omnibus necessitatibus nostris absque omni dubitatione spontaneum paratumque amicali amore semper inveniant.*

[157] Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c.650 - c.850* (Leicester, 1995), p. 237.

[158] Brooks, *Early Canterbury*, pp. 147 and 323-5. For *æt Astran*, see Dorothy Whitelock, 'Some Anglo-Saxon bishops of London', *The Chambers Memorial Lecture, delivered 4th May 1974*, (London, 1975), reprinted in her *History, Law and Literature in 10th-11th Century England* (London, 1980), pp. 3-34, at p. 16, n. 1.

their territory become a sub-kingdom of Wessex.[159] The concord, moreover, made public an original method of dealing with the southern territories of Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Essex and it unified them into a 'single kingdom held as an appanage by the son of a king.'[160] The kings in question were only to be the sons and later descendants of the direct dynasty of King Ecgberht. As would be expected there was also a considerable spiritual element within the covenant; it provided a heavenly bastion that served to protect the continuation of the metropolitan see and this reciprocally ensured the survival of Ecgbehrt's dynasty. This contract should therefore be viewed as providential in the context of Christian fortitude and spiritual rejuvenation in the face of pagan aggression. It will be additionally suggested that this pact remained essentially inviolate throughout the ninth century and even King Alfred had to obey its inherited conventions.

Charters: Alfred and land

Only seventeen royal diplomas attributed to Alfred exist including those which are clearly spurious.[161] This modest collection therefore stands in disproportionate contrast to the wealth of contemporary literature produced by the king and his advisors, at least

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[159] S 1438; *Seu etiam familiæ liberorum monasteriorum qui antiquitus sub jure dominioque abbatum abbatissarumque constituti fuerint qui me meumque patrem Ecgberhtum regem pro suis propriis ac maximis necessitatibus sibi ad protectionem et ad dominium elegerunt spiritalesque dominos id est episcopos mecum constituti propria voluntate mecum habuerunt ut in omnibus libertas et regula monasterialis vitæ rite ac recte ab omnibus illis servetur.*

[160] Nicholas Brooks, 'Alfredian government: the West Saxon inheritance', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 153-173, at p. 156.

[161] The corpus of charters for Alfred is as follows: S 342a; S 343; S 343a; S 344; S 345; S 346; S 347; S 348; S 349; S 350; S 351; S 352; S 353; S 354; S 355; S 356 and S 357. The more blatant forgeries are: S 342a; S 343a; S 349; S 351; S 353 and S 357.

until the latter years of his reign.[162] The dearth of charter evidence for Alfred may not be entirely due to fate, however, and may be in part a consequence of his father's policies and his brother's subsequent revolt. Æthelwulf's decimation not only reduced the royal revenues, it attracted the aristocratic dissatisfaction which precipitated Æthelbald's ensuing rebellion inside Wessex. Alfred may consequently have been even more cautious in granting his limited stocks of land to laymen than his forebears had been. It also appears that there was a tradition of West Saxon land husbandry that Alfred both adhered to and possibly expanded. Wormald noted that this was a policy as much about dynastic stability as strategic necessity; 'as much against enemies within as Vikings without' he argued.[163]

In addition to any inherited disinclination, Alfred may have been unwilling to alienate land needed for his war effort and this may account for his apparent reluctance to over-endow the Church. Asser is a witness to the king's personally motivated religious foundations of Athelney and Shaftesbury and he also praises Alfred as a generous benefactor of previously established monastic communities.[164] But it does seem likely that Alfred adopted a more aggressive policy towards ecclesiastical lands, particularly outside Wessex and Kent, where the Danish invasions had overwhelmed more of the existing religious infrastructure. Alfred may have also appropriated - or at

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[162] Janet L. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a royal family: reflections on Alfred', in Ian Wood and Niels Lund (eds.), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 47-66, at p. 48, and n. 4, where she highlights the glaring gap in the evidence for the later years of Alfred's reign.

[163] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', at 9. See also, Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 196-197 and 279-280.

[164] Asser, ch. 92 for Athelney and ch. 98 for Shaftesbury. For the suggestion that Alfred may have given financial aid to all the religious communities that survived the Danish invasions see Asser, ch. 102. For comments see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, at pp. 36 and n. 51 and 217.

least made attempts to possess - church lands nearer to home in Kent and even in Winchester.[165] Using primarily later evidence, Robin Fleming has argued that Alfred substantially benefited from his wars against the Danes. The evidence for Alfred's putative policy is rather threadbare, but Fleming uses a passage from the thirteenth-century Abingdon Chronicle where Alfred is compared to Judas in conjunction with a spurious charter from the archive of Abingdon, to suggest that some of the lands of the abbey had been misappropriated by Alfred, noting further that the king may have made grants of land that had formerly belonged to other religious communities.[166] The Abingdon tradition is problematical and David Dumville has suggested that the community's later portrayal of Alfred as a 'Judas' may have been founded in the wake of anti-monastic sentiments current in the tenth century.[167] Smyth, on the other hand, has argued that this Abingdon tradition may have contemporary and 'deep-seated' historical roots and that Alfred was remembered there 'as a mean opportunist who had profited from the Danish onslaught.'[168] Kelly has, however, provided a more plausible explanation for the Abingdon chronicler's comparison of Alfred with Judas. She has suggested that Alfred may have gained an interest in a former Mercian royal minster which had originally been part of an aristocratic family's *hereditas*; the minster subsequently being sacked by the Danes. Alfred's later treatment of the land as a

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[165] Brooks, *Early Canterbury*, at pp. 149-150, has observed that Alfred may have become embroiled in a dispute over the lordship of 'monasteries' in Kent and elsewhere and Nelson, 'A king across the sea', at 61, has argued that the charter, S 354, contains veiled references to Alfred's appropriation of Winchester lands.

[166] Robin Fleming, 'Monastic lands and England's defence in the Viking Age', *EHR* 100 (1985), 247-265, at 250 and n. 5. The charter is S 93.

[167] David N. Dumville, 'Ecclesiastical lands and the defence of Wessex', in his *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 29-54, at p. 39, n. 50.

[168] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 43.

secular endowment would be on a different scale to one of outright confiscation, but seen through the tinted lens of reformed monasticism, still viewed as a misappropriation of land once owned by the Church, although in a distant past.[169] Despite this, the overall evidence for Alfred's alleged appropriation of ecclesiastical land remains troublesome and ill-defined. Those traces of animosity within some ecclesiastical sources towards him do suggest that he activated a sensible policy of accumulation and consolidation of landed resources for the continuance of West Saxon resistance to the Danes and the eventual spread of his own power-base.[170] Whether this can be legitimately described as 'a campaign of arm-twisting' is, however, debatable.[171] For at times, both spiritual and military objectives overlapped. Asser reported that Alfred's abbey of Athelney was sited so that it could not 'be reached in any way except by punts or by a causeway which has been built by protracted labour between two fortresses.'[172] Similarly, the nunnery at Shaftesbury was also constructed with defensive provisions in mind and was located in close proximity to an existing *burh*.[173] But, as Alfred's influence progressed into areas that had not previously concerned the West Saxons, he seemingly annexed ex-ecclesiastical lands out of strategic necessity, especially in areas where military tactics dictated their appropriation.[174]

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[169] S. E. Kelly, ed. *Charters of Abingdon*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2000), i. ccvii-ccvix.

[170] Dumville, 'Ecclesiastical lands', at p. 39 and 'King Alfred and the tenth-century reform of the English Church', in his *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 185-205, at pp. 187, n. 19 and 193 acknowledges that Alfred and his son Edward the Elder may have acquired church lands for reasons of military security.

[171] Fleming, 'Monastic lands', 253.

[172] Asser, ch. 92. See Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 271, n. 229. The first of these fortresses is the one built by Alfred at Athelney and described by Asser in his ch. 55. And the second 'of elegant workmanship' is the one at Lyng mentioned in the *Burghal Hidage*.

[173] James Campbell, 'Placing King Alfred', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 3-23, esp. pp. 18-23.

[174] Dawn M. Hadley, 'Conquest, colonization and the church: ecclesiastical organization in the Danelaw', *Historical Research* 69 (June, 1996), 109-128, esp. 109-113. Anglo-Saxon kings in general had been

Historiographical interpretations: a single Alfredian polity?

For the reasons argued above Alfred may not have issued charters in any quantity and those which have survived are of considerable value, but they are also problematical.[175] The evidence of those documents that are, or may be reliable, in particular the regnal styles used either by Alfred, or on his behalf, are seemingly indispensable to any interpretation of Alfred's royal aspirations. In 886, the *Chronicle* reported that King Alfred 'occupied London; and all the English people [*Angelcynn*] that were not under subjection to the Danes submitted to him.'[176] Hereafter King Alfred may at times have been accorded the following titles: *rex Anglorum et Saxonum*; *Anglorum Saxonum rex*; *Angol Saxonum rex*; *Angul Saxonum rex* and *Anglorum Saxonum.*[177] Alfred's perceptions of kingship and the limits of his authority had widened to such a degree that at his death he was described as 'king over the whole English people except that part which was under Danish rule.'[178]

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guilty of appropriating ecclesiastical land, and lay encroachment, while not endemic, was far from unknown.

[175] For King Alfred's charters the essential studies are: Dorothy Whitelock, 'Some charters in the name of King Alfred', in Margot H. King, and Wesley M. Stevens (eds.), *Saints Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, 2 vols. (Minnesota, 1979), i. 77-98 and Keynes, 'The West-Saxon charters of King Æthelwulf and his sons'.

[176] *ASC*, 886.

[177] The charters with their corresponding titles are as follows: S 346; *rex Anglorum et Saxonum*; S 347; *Anglorum Saxonum rex*; S 348 & S 356; *Angol Saxonum rex*; S 354 *Angul Saxonum rex*; S 355 *Anglorum Saxonum rex.*

[178] *ASC*, 899. For King Alfred's use of the title 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' or similar after his 'occupation' of London see Janet L. Nelson, 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Kings and Kingship* (London, 1993), pp. 125-157, at pp. 154-155; Simon Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in M. A. Blackburn and D. Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1-45, at 25-27 and for the wider context; Sarah Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series (1996), 25-49 and Nicholas Brooks, 'English identity from Bede to the millennium', *HSJ* 14 (2003), 33-51.

As long ago as 1904, Stevenson recognised the gravity of these ambitious royal styles and observed that they were remarkably similar to Asser's description of king Alfred in his *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*. It is likely that by 893, Asser was mirroring these new royal styles when he referred to King Alfred as *Anglorum Saxonum rex* in his dedication and *Angul Saxonum rex* throughout the body of his text. Asser reserved these titles for Alfred alone and Alfred's predecessors were described as either *Occidentalium Saxonum rex* or *Saxonum rex* making a clear demarcation between them and Alfred.[179] These new royal styles have formed the basis for several attempts at creating a framework for further political integration between the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. Unfortunately, there are still problems with this concept since three out of the six charters involved are undated. The Latinity and poor drafting of these documents strongly suggests that they were indeed produced during roughly the same time-span as the datable ones - between 889 and 892 - but ultimately this cannot be verified and their precise dates remain uncertain.[180] Stevenson, moreover, had serious anxieties concerning the authenticity of all of the six surviving documents, leaving him with doubts as to the contemporary nature of these loftier royal styles and he noted cautiously that:

> Whether this title [*rex Angul Saxonum* as used by Asser] was employed by Alfred at the date assigned for the compilation [893] we are unable to decide, as there is no contemporary charter of his in existence [and furthermore] the texts are derived from chartularies of such indifferent repute that little confidence can be reposed in them.[181]

Undeterred by Stevenson's concerns, the more recent translators of Asser's *Life* have demonstrated that each of these six charters was preserved in a different archive and it is

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[179] Asser used the title *Occidentalium Saxonum rex* in ch.1 for Ine; ch.14 for Beorhtric; chs. 7, 9, and 68 for Æthelwulf; ch. 30 for Æthelred and *Saxonum rex* in ch. 5 for Æthelwulf .
[180] S 354; S 355 and S 356 are all undated. The dateable charters of this group are; S 346 (dated 889); S 347 (dated 891) and S 348 (dated 892). See Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 227-228.
[181] Stevenson, *Asser's Life of Alfred*, p. 151.

unlikely for all of them to be later fabrications. They have suggested that this 'guarantees that the usage is genuine Alfredian, whatever the status of the texts in their received form.'[182] This argument reinforced a previous observation that these particular royal styles were very seldom used for later chancery charters, and, if they were products of later forgers, those concerned had attributed them correctly to Alfred and his son and not to any other West Saxon king.[183] It is likely that these six charters do represent titles appropriate to the period even if the authenticity of each individual document cannot be totally established.[184] These regnal styles imply that there was a collective intention by Alfred and his closest advisors to nurture existing West Saxon-Mercian harmony and perhaps to develop it even further. This should be viewed as a period of innovation in Alfred's kingship that was carefully orchestrated by his court officials to express a new kind of association between Wessex and Mercia. Historical opinion has tended to couple these novel royal charter-styles with the formal acceptance of Alfred as king by the Mercian *witan*, following his occupation of London in 886. Thus, these more overtly ambitious titles reflected a fresh conception of Alfred's kingship, broadened to encompass claims of sovereignty over all the inhabitants of 'English' Mercia. Something of consequence had happened in the period between 886 and 899, but recently these royal charter styles have been perceived to mirror the *Chronicle* rhetoric and have been interpreted as evidence for the creation of a new, unified, single kingdom by Alfred in the late 880s and 890s.

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[182] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 228.
[183] John, *Orbis Britanniae*, at 43-4.
[184] Cf. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, pp. 374-5.

Attempts have been made to demonstrate how Alfred governed a single polity that encompassed all of his territories based primarily around a new concept of his kingship derived from these apparently radical regnal styles. Three of the imaginative royal titles found in Alfred's charters formed the lynchpin of Nelson's argument that Alfred had used his restoration of London as a centrepiece for a 're-construction of the realm of the "English."' 'In all datable charters issued after 886, Alfred has the title that reflects rule over the Angles and the Saxons, or - to use the *ASC*'s terminology - "all Englishkind".'[185] Yet an original, or near-contemporary, royal diploma of 898 from the archive of Christ Church Canterbury, styles Alfred as *Saxonum rex* in the main body of the text and *rex Saxonum* in the witness list, where his son Edward also subscribes as *rex*.[186] Here Alfred has two dateable titles and neither reflects the existence of any new political amalgamation. Nelson had earlier discussed this particular charter of 898 and concluded that the document was correctly dated. She additionally argued that this charter contains a late discrepancy in Alfred's royal style that was 'perhaps explicable' by his losing a percentage of his control over his extended territories during the final years of his reign. This alleged loss of overall authority was based around Edward's subscription as *rex* in the same document which, for Nelson, implied that Alfred may

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[185] Nelson, 'The political ideas', at pp. 154-5. Nelson's statement that: 'Alfred has the title that reflects rule over the Angles and Saxons' also implies that there was a uniform regnal style to these diplomas. This is certainly not the case.

[186] S 350. There is a late transcript of a supposed charter of King Alfred's in favour of St. Saviour at Athelney. The charter reads: 'I, Alfred, by divine permission King of the West Saxons. See *Two Cartularies of the Benedictine Abbeys of Mulcheney and Athelney, in the County of Somerset*, ed. E. H. Bates, Somerset Record Society 14 (Somerset, 1899), 127-128. King Alfred's regnal style mirrors the one that appears in S 343 also from the archive of Athelney; that of *Occidentalium Saxonum rex*. For the Athelney cartulary see Simon Keynes,
'The cartulary of Athelney Abbey', at: http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/athelneycart.html, [accessed, 20th May 2007]. Furthermore, The Athelney cartulary also contains an English translation of a coronation oath attributed to King Alfred. It has been suggested that this text is very close to the twelfth-century version. P. L. Ward, 'The coronation ceremony in mediaeval England', *Speculum* 14.2 (April, 1939), 160-178, at 166, n. 4.

have been forced by factions at court into surrendering some of his former power within Mercia and Kent to his son Edward.[187] But Alfred's alleged loss of overall authority in Mercia towards the end of his reign is otherwise impossible to demonstrate. Moreover, the remainder of the evidence implies that the new innovations in stylings were only applicable to Wessex and 'English' Mercia and all six documents which bear these radical new stylings, whether dateable or otherwise, stem from archives in these regions, whereas the diploma of 898 was issued within Kent.[188]

Another argument suggesting political uniformity during King Alfred's reign has also been developed. Here it is claimed that the restoration of London in 886 signalled the commencement of a single polity which should be viewed 'unequivocally as the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons.'[189] Keynes has argued that here was the inauguration of a 'new political order [that] was far more than a catchy phrase: it was real, and substantial, and deserves to be taken seriously.'[190] But, this radical single kingdom was not just an amalgamation of Wessex and Mercia; it was one that encompassed all of Alfred's territories and:

> the birth in the 880s of the Alfredian "Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons", [was] conceived as a polity for all the English people who were not under subjection to the Danes (whether in Mercia, Wessex or the South-East), given more formal expression in 886 in connection with

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[187] Nelson, 'The political ideas', pp. 134-5, ns. 42 and 45. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a royal family', pp. 63-4 had previously argued that Alfred's title of *rex Saxonum*, found in S 350, implied that by the late 890s Alfred actually held 'a more limited authority than the "Anglo-Saxon" kingship he had asserted during the previous decade or more.' Edward's attestation in this diploma as *rex* further suggested to her that Alfred meant to recreate a separate kingdom in Kent for his son.

[188] S 346 Worcester; S 347 Glastonbury; S 348 Wilton; S 354 Winchester Old Minster; S 355 Abingdon; S 356 Malmesbury.

[189] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', at p. 36.

[190] Simon Keynes, 'Edward, king of the Anglo-Saxons', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder, 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 40-66, at p. 57.

> Alfred's restoration of the city of London and destined to be transformed in the 920s into King Æthelstan's "Kingdom of the English."[191]

This subtle shift in emphasis expands the historical role King Alfred occupies in the development of political amalgamation in Anglo-Saxon England. But, to strengthen his argument, Keynes has also had to address a number of inconsistencies that seem to exist within the Alfredian texts:

> It was Alfred who fastened on the importance of London, even if he was stuck for the time being in Winchester; it was Alfred who invented the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons' in the 880s, and who was known to his admirers as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons', even if in some contexts he persisted in calling himself 'king of the West Saxons'; and it was Alfred who paved the way for the extension and transformation of the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons' into the 'kingdom of the English', during the course of the tenth century. [192]

There are difficulties with this conception of Alfredian royal authority. Most pressing of these is how this supposed representation of Alfred's kingship clashes with the different ways in which he sought to portray his own royal image. Keynes has gone some way to acknowledging this with his comment that in some contexts Alfred persisted with the title King of the West Saxons. This is an important concession and these circumstances are significant. Alfred did not refer to himself as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' in the sizeable remainder of those texts associated with him, most notably in his law codes and his will.[193] Furthermore, Alfred himself never used the designation in any of the works ascribed to him personally.[194] Nor is Alfred ever represented as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' in the pages of his own *Chronicle*.[195] Some

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[191] Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 310-328 at p. 328. Contrast, Susan Reynolds, 'What do we mean by "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxons"?', *Journal of British Studies* 24 (Oct, 1985), 395-414, at 414 'when a single kingdom was formed in the tenth century within boundaries that more or less approximate those of what we think of as England, it was called the kingdom of the English - not the Anglo-Saxons, nor yet of the Anglo-Danes.'

[192] Keynes, 'The cult of King Alfred the Great', at 225 has also argued that it is as a 'British' hero, rather than a purely 'English' one that Alfred is most celebrated. For a more succinct critique of the cult which grew around Alfred the Great see Yorke, 'The most perfect character in history', 8-14.

[193] Alfred called himself either 'king of the West Saxons' or simply 'king' in his will and 'king of the West Saxons when promulgating his law codes.

[194] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', at 20.

[195] Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred the Great*, at pp. 193-4.

coin evidence also points towards Alfred retaining his more simple royal titles and the mints of both Exeter and Winchester were still striking coins bearing the legend *Ælfred rex Saxonum* very late into the king's reign.[196] In addition, with the notable exception of Asser, it is difficult to comprehend who actually might have known Alfred as 'King of the Anglo-Saxons', for without additional contemporary evidence, whether there was actually anyone at all who did in fact 'know' Alfred in this manner, may be questioned. Whilst Asser referred to his patron as *Angul Saxonum rex* throughout his biography and, as seen, similar titles were applied to Alfred in a number of the charters arguably produced at his royal court, these labels were manifestly linked to the disparate ways in which the king himself, or more probably those around him, wished to portray Alfred's royal image. To this effect, Eric Stanley has made the important suggestion that these loftier royal charter-styles may never have been actually used by Alfred himself, and that they were only ever used to portray his royal authority by his immediate entourage.[197]

The principal direct resistance to Keynes' interpretation of Alfredian hegemony, however, has come from Smyth, who has vigorously contested this version of the events of the late 880s. Smyth has argued that King Alfred's ascendancy over the Mercians at this critical juncture:

> was delicately covered by a new formula that of *Anglorum Saxonum rex*, [which] ought more properly to be translated as "king of the Angles and the Saxons" rather than "king of the Anglo-Saxons". For just as the annexation of Kent made the West Saxon ruler "king

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196 J. J. North, *English Hammered Coinage*, 2 vols. (London, 1980), i. 94.

197 E. G. Stanley, 'On the laws of King Alfred', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 211-221, at p. 213.

> not only of the West Saxons but also of the men of Kent", so now Alfred could claim to be king of the Saxons and of the [Mercian] Angles.'[198]

Smyth's interpretation of this evidence, has however, been neglected ever since certain reviewers condemned his more abrasive arguments.[199] For instance, David Pratt has not taken into account Smyth's observations, but has argued that the submission of the Mercians to Alfred in 886 'heralded the creation of a new polity, consisting of Wessex (with its south eastern regions) and western Mercia, and excluding the Welsh kingdoms.'[200] Whether these new royal styles suitably reflected Alfred's and later Edward's authority over a single kingdom of the '*Angli-Saxones*', incorporating just Wessex and Mercia at this juncture, remains one moot point, let alone the additional claim that Alfred's south-eastern lands also formed part of this overarching polity. Michael Davidson has recently made some welcome observations on the first of these two issues and has aired his reservations over the strength of West Saxon hegemony in Mercia in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. He has argued that 'although Simon Keynes has argued that the Mercian kingdom was subsumed under the rule of Alfred and Edward into a newly created "kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons"; I am not wholly convinced that they [Alfred and Edward] were successful in absorbing the Mercian polity.'[201] Despite the rhetoric which emanated from Alfred's royal court, the question

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[198] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 390, see also pp. 669-70, n. 91.
[199] For instance, Michael Lapidge, 'A king of monkish fable?', *Times Higher Education Supplement,* (8th March, 1996), 20; 'once the principal pillar [that Asser's *Life* was forged by Byrhtferth of Ramsey] is removed, the book collapses under the weight of its own pomposity.' Contrast with Barbara Yorke, 'Fake cakes', *History Today* 46 (Dec, 1996), 58; 'it would be a pity if debate stimulated by the book is restricted to cries of "Oh, yes it is" and "Oh, no it isn't", for it airs other important issues which, although not ignored before, still require more consideration.' I agree with Yorke's sentiments and do not believe that Smyth's entire book should be dismissed quite as glibly as some have tried to do.
[200] D. R. Pratt, 'The political thought of Alfred the Great' (University of Cambridge Ph.D. Thesis, 1999), at pp. 28 and 27, n. 88, acknowledges that this particular 'polity' 'was first recognised by Simon Keynes'.
[201] M. R. Davidson, 'The (non) submission of the northern kings', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward The Elder, 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 200-211, at p. 204.

of whether King Alfred managed to construct a single integrated kingdom in the 880s and 890s clearly requires further consideration.

In an earlier paper, Keynes had been more cautious in his approach to the extent of Alfredian hegemony in Mercia and further afield when he argued that 'we are under no obligation to imagine that anyone in Wales, or elsewhere, would have shared Asser's particular conception of the king, any more than we need suppose that Alfred's English subjects would have thought of him as king of the Anglo-Saxons.'[202] Since then, however, King Alfred has been transformed into the inspirational figure who 'paved the way' for 'English' unity and the creator of an interim, but ultimately ephemeral, version of a united kingdom. Whether this newly-constructed kingdom was ever 'real' or 'substantial' is at best debateable. Wormald's incisive observation that Alfred did not revise the laws of non-West Saxon peoples in an attempt to create legislation for all 'Englishmen' should stand as a reminder to this. Alfred legislated as *Westseaxna cyning* for he was reticent to seem too innovative, 'given the grounds for dating the code late in his reign, when he was otherwise called "king of the Anglo-Saxons."' [203] Wormald's earlier, and no less sceptical, observations on the origins of any unified kingdom appearing by the end of Alfred's reign are also worth repeating:

> There was no single kingdom of the English even at the end of the period [the year 899]. 'Of these, [the four independent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms at the onslaught of the viking raids] only one, Alfred's Wessex, survived the attentions of the Vikings. But this was a kingdom of the West Saxons, not of

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[202] Simon Keynes, 'On the authenticity of Asser's Life of King Alfred', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47. 3 (July, 1996), 529-551 at 540.

[203] Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1 Legislation and its Limits (Oxford, 1999, reprinted 2000), i. 281, n. 88, see also i. 277, for the translated passage in full. Contrast with Pratt, 'The political thought', pp. 148-9 who has argued that Alfred's regnal style of *Westseaxna cyning* in his *Domboc*, rather than *Angulseaxna cyning*, 'seems entirely appropriate' in the context of establishing 'the kingdom of the *Angli Saxones* as a single legal entity.'

> the English as a whole. There is evidence that Alfred came to see himself as a king of all Englishmen. There is almost no evidence that Englishmen beyond Wessex and perhaps the West Midlands would have agreed with him.[204]

There is a world of difference between what Alfred may have wished to have been appreciated as and what Alfred actually was. The rhetoric of the *Chronicle* may well, as Sarah Foot has suggested, be Alfred's attempt to 'promote a nascent conception of one people' but this does not justify an historiographical perception of a single Alfredian polity emerging in the 880s and 890s.[205] As Foot has also pointed out, 'the creation of one political unit at this period was hindered by the fissiparous nature of the Anglo-Saxon state, and the vigour of regional separatism.'[206] It is this spectre of regional independence that militates most strongly against Alfred imposing the concept of a single polity upon all of his subjects, especially those living within Kent and the south east.

Alfredian authority in Kent

Part of this particular debate concerns how Alfredian ascendancy over Kent should be interpreted and there is evidence to suggest Alfred's relationship with Kent was governed by inherited conventions. The charter of 898 and Alfred's simple regnal styles therein imply that if Alfred and his advisors created a new political federation, it did not extend to the management of Kent and the eastern-most parts of his dominions during the period of the late 880s and beyond. Alfred seemingly considered the realities of his own kingship to be variable according to circumstances, even during the

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[204] Patrick Wormald, 'The making of England', *History Today* 45 (Feb, 1995), 26-32, at 26.
[205] Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*', 30.
[206] *Ibid.*, 34.

latter parts of his reign. This particular grant was not drawn up by Alfred's court officials but is in Rochester diplomatic form and concerns land in western Kent.[207] But does this allow for the claim that this Rochester scribe was acting independently and ultimately beyond the control of the king? Alfred's titles in this document are thus viewed by Keynes as unrepresentative of royal policy and, he argues, they reflect how the 'draftsman saw the King from a perspective of his own, and not in terms of the aspirations current at Alfred's court; one should add that it is this charter that Alfred's son Edward is himself styled as "king", but in the absence of any West Saxon charters known to date from the late 890s, it is difficult to judge the significance of the matter.'[208] If true, this independence of scribal thought would be an interesting point in itself. The portrayal of the king's royal image was a central theme at Alfred's royal court which suggests that this particular explanation for these more conservative regnal styles is an uneasy one. Alfred's royal court provided cohesion for the maintenance of his existing power-base and for the further extension of his kingship. Like its Carolingian inspiration, the royal court was the centre of influence from which the king and his councillors broadcasted his royal authority and legitimacy.[209] If Alfred had constructed a single polity by the 880s, one which signalled such a momentous transformation in the direction of his royal ambitions, it seems strange that some twelve years later the relevant news, and how this should be articulated, had not even so much as filtered down to Kent.

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[207] Keynes, 'The West Saxon charters of King Æthelwulf and his sons', 1140-41.
[208] *Ibid.*, 1148 n. 1.
[209] For the Carolingian royal court see Stuart Airlie, 'The palace of memory: the Carolingian court as political centre', in Sarah Rees Jones, Richard Marks and A. J. Minnis (eds.), *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe* (York, 2000), pp. 1-19.

There is an added concern over the way this charter from Canterbury has been interpreted. If this individual scribe saw the king from his own perspective, because he was either unaware of, or unwilling to, mirror current court ideology, it follows that the subscription of Edward as *rex* in the same document is, by association, also unrepresentative. This would be unfortunate since it undermines the idea of Alfred's possible promotion of Edward to a subordinate kingship by 898. However, because this charter is not a court product and was produced at Rochester, this tends to suggest that the Kentish scribe who drafted the document was aware that Alfred (*rex Saxonum*) was his overall West Saxon king and that Edward (*rex*) had been elevated by his father to rule over the appanage created originally by King Ecgberht in 838. If Edward was by 898 a subordinate king with authority over Kent and the south east, as this charter suggests he might have been, his elevation to *subregulus* would also suggest that any composite realm of the 'Anglo-Saxons' could not have included Kent. A more likely explanation for both Alfred's and Edward's royal designations here is that Alfred had retained the successful West Saxon strategy of royal succession, which included the elevation of his eldest son Edward to the level of subordinate king over Kent and the south-east. Whilst it would be hazardous to place too much emphasis upon the evidence of one single charter, the alternative that this diploma be dismissed as either unrepresentative or inexplicable is far more unsatisfactory.[210] Æthelweard in his tenth-century Latin translation of the *Chronicle* also implies that Edward was representing Alfred as a *subregulus* even before this document was drafted. In 893, Æthelweard reported how Edward fought the Danish chieftain Hæsten at Farnham in Surrey and it

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[210] Barbara Yorke, 'Edward as *ætheling*', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder, 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 25-39, at p. 32.

seems likely that Edward was in overall control of the south-eastern defences for his father by this time.[211] Furthermore, in his will Alfred significantly bequeathed all of his *bocland* in Kent to his eldest son.[212]

The Kentish charter of 898 discussed above, is also important in other ways, for it appears to mirror the spirit of co-operation that had existed between the direct line of King Ecgberht and the Kentish subjects of the West Saxon king. Moreover, considering the general level of enmity that had existed between Kent and its Mercian overlords it could be construed as needless political insensitivity towards Canterbury had Alfred emphasised that following his occupation of London, he should be proclaimed throughout all his territories as the rightful trustee of the Mercian kingship as *rex Angul Saxonum*.[213] There is a precedent for Alfred's apparent reluctance to force this particular issue. His grandfather Ecgberht may have tried unsuccessfully to use the title of *rex Merciorum* himself. A small number of coins refer to Ecgberht as *rex M.* and he was allotted a one year reign for 829 in a Mercian regnal list, which suggested to Stenton, that at some stage Ecgberht may have used the title *rex Merciorum*.[214] Other evidence also points towards Ecgberht having influence over the vital Mercian emporium of London at least, as does a charter of 838 which was witnessed by the

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[211] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 893. This information about Edward is not found in the remaining *Chronicle* manuscripts.
[212] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p.175. See also Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England* (Basingstoke and London, 1999), p. 184, n. 64.
[213] For the relationship between Canterbury and the Mercian kings see Patrick Wormald, 'The age of Offa and Alcuin', in James Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 122-8 and D. J. V. Fisher, 'The church in England between the death of Bede and the Danish invasions', *TRHS* 5th series 2 (1952), 1-19, esp. 14-19. Asser in his ch. 14 wrote about Offa negatively; 'there was in Mercia in fairly recent times a certain vigorous king called Offa, who terrified all the neighbouring kings and provinces around him.'
[214] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 232, n. 4.

bishop of London.[215] Ecgberht's apparent abandonment of claims to Mercian sovereignty suggests that a West Saxon who proclaimed himself as king of the Mercians was resented by the Mercians themselves but it also possibly fuelled bitterness inside Kent.

The soul of the special covenant agreed in 838 was a personal association between the dynasty of Ecgberht and the archbishopric of Canterbury. Alfred had already had one disagreeable encounter with the metropolitan see of Canterbury and he could ill-afford another. For all Alfred's later reputation as a pious and truth-telling king, it seems that he had made an earlier unsuccessful attempt to usurp some of the rights and privileges of Canterbury. In 877 or 878, Pope John VIII replied to a letter sent by Æthelred the archbishop of Canterbury. The contents of this earlier communication are unknown but the pontiff's reply to his archbishop survives and alludes to Alfred's avariciousness against the metropolitan see. The papal response to the king's attempted violation of episcopal exemptions was typically forthright. The archbishop was told that he should not only defend all the Church's rights and immunities, but in addition he must 'resist strenuously not only the king, but all who wish to do any wrong against it, making your service honourable, as long as you are permitted by the divine will to discharge the supreme episcopate.'[216] This papal letter served to convince Alfred that he would sustain divine displeasure if he angered the see of Canterbury once again.[217] The pope condemned Alfred's actions and told his

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[215] Keynes 'The control of Kent', at 123, n. 61 and Campbell, *Charters of Rochester*, n. 19, the charter is S 280.
[216] *EHD*, 223.
[217] Pratt, 'The political thought', pp. 19-21.

archbishop that: 'we have admonished your king to show due honour to you for the love of Jesus Christ the Lord, and be anxious to preserve all the rights of your privilege in everlasting security and to keep them undiminished.'[218] The papal letter suggests that Alfred may have been accused of something more serious that a slight misdemeanour.[219] Alfred, as his own writings illustrate, was troubled by the stark repercussions of possible religious retribution. Once again, it is in an environment brimming with spiritual anxiety that Alfred's later dealings with Canterbury should be set. Further papal sanctions against Alfred could have destabilised the dynastic equilibrium sustained by the pact of 838 and may have compromised the traditional role of the West Saxon king as guardian over Kent and the south east. Alfred's evident reluctance to antagonise further the archbishopric of Canterbury highlights how papal favour was an indispensable factor that had to be taken into consideration by any West Saxon monarch when dealing with the metropolitan see. The archbishops of Canterbury were not only papal representatives but were also leading figures in the politics of the day, whether appointed by the West Saxon kings or not and 'to consider them simply as manifestations of a king's attitude to the Church is to simplify and to mislead.'[220] It is unlikely to be a coincidence that, with this one known exception, the amity between the line of Ecgberht and Canterbury stands in marked contrast to the animosity which

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[218] *EHD*, 223. See Brooks, *Early Canterbury*, pp. 149-50; Nelson, 'A king across the sea', 46. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture,* at p. 244 has observed that this episode shows that despite Alfred's piety forming a *leitmotif* of Asser's biography, the truth was not always so simple.

[219] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, at p. 271, n. 224 seem to have viewed the letter from John as being of secondary importance. It does not appear in their collection of Alfredian sources, and their remarks concerning its relevance are brief to say the least. 'In a letter written in 877 or 878, Pope John VIII gave encouragement to Æthelred, archbishop of Canterbury, apparently in connection with the archbishop's resistance to (unspecified) demands made by the king.' On this letter see also Nelson, 'A king across the sea', 58-9.

[220] Fisher, 'The church in England', at 16.

prevailed between Offa and his successors, inside their Kentish dominions. Archbishop Ceolnoth may, it has been suggested, have been 'gambling with the good faith of Æthelwulf's successors' when he instigated this contract in 838.[221] If this was a gamble, then it was one that later paid handsome dividends when Æthelwulf's youngest son proved himself in the end to be worthy of this trust.

[221] Brooks, *Early Canterbury*, p. 201.

Chapter Two

Alfredian Overkingship: Ninth-Century Legitimacy and the Development of Christian Hegemony

> And that year king Ecgberht conquered the kingdom of the Mercians, and everything south of the Humber; and he was the eighth king who was *Bretwalda*. [1]

At first glance, the *Chronicle's* statement that King Ecgberht was the 'eighth king who was *Bretwalda*' seems to be the most productive place to begin a search for the origins of West Saxon overkingship and the possible drive for broader hegemony. The entry in the 'A' manuscript (and, in its copy 'G') both refer to Ecgberht by means of this impressive epithet generally, but not universally, translated to mean that he was being portrayed by the annalist as the 'ruler of Britain'. *Bretwalda* will therefore be the term used throughout this discussion, rather than any of the *Brytenwealda* variants which can be found in other recensions of the *Chronicle* and perhaps, or perhaps not, signified wide/broad ruler.[2] The reasons for this are two-fold. First, Steven Fanning has argued that there is very little, if any, significance to be drawn from the possible mutations of the word. Any linguistic irregularities may merely derive from variations in spelling that can be habitually found in the different *Chronicle* manuscripts, rather than representing two entirely different words.[3]

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[1] *ASC*, manuscript 'A' for 827 (*recte* 829).

[2] *Bretwalda* is the version found only in 'A' and 'G' of the *Chronicle*. The alternative rendering *Brytenwealda* which possibly means 'mighty' or 'wide' ruler may therefore go back to the archetype of all other manuscripts and may have replaced *Bretwalda* early on; Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Revised Translation* (London, 1961), p. 40, n. 9.

[3] Steven Fanning, 'Bede, *imperium* and the *Bretwaldas*', *Speculum* 66 (1991), 1-26, at 22; for a comprehensive breakdown of the different usages and possible meanings in the *Chronicle* manuscripts, see Simon Keynes, 'Raedwald the *Bretwalda*', in Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (eds.), *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, Medieval Studies at Minnesota 5 (Minneapolis, 1992), 103-23, at 111.

Second, the term *Bretwalda* is the most commonly used variant in historical writing and in translation lends itself to a closer reflection of what the annalist was arguably trying to represent for Ecgberht, that he was indeed meant to be perceived as the 'ruler of Britain'.[4] However, before discussing further the legitimacy of Ecgberht's claims to this grandiose position, it is necessary to reflect on the origins of this evocative title and the manner in which it has been interpreted by generations of historians.

Anglo-Saxon overkings: interpreting the *Bretwalda*

In around 731, Bede completed his monumental *Ecclesiastical History*. In this work, Bede wrote about seven allegedly special kings in a passage that has since become synonymous with Anglo-Saxon overkingship:

> In the year of our Lord 616, the twenty-first year after Augustine and his companions had been sent to preach to the English nation, king Æthelberht of Kent, after ruling his temporal kingdom gloriously for fifty-six years, entered upon the eternal joys of the heavenly kingdom. He was the third English king to rule (*imperauit*) over all the southern kingdoms, which are divided in the north by the river Humber and the surrounding territory; but he was the first to enter the kingdom of Heaven. The first king to hold the like sovereignty (*imperium*) was Ælle, king of the South Saxons; the second was Cælin, king of the West Saxons, known in their own language as Ceawlin; the third, as we have said, was Æthelberht, king of the people of Kent; the fourth was Rædwald, king of the East Angles, who even during the lifetime of Æthelberht was gaining the leadership (*ducatus*) for his own race; the fifth was Edwin, king of the Northumbrians, the nation inhabiting the district north of the Humber. Edwin had still greater power and ruled over all the inhabitants of Britain, English and Britons alike, except for Kent only. He even brought under English rule (*anglorum subiecit imperio*) the Mevanian islands which lie between England and Ireland and belong to the Brittons. The sixth to rule (*regnum tenuit*) within the same bounds was Oswald, the most Christian king of the Northumbrians, while the seventh was his brother Oswiu who for a time held almost the same territory (*aequa libus pene terminis regnum nonnullo tempore cohercens*). The latter

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[4] Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the origins of the *Gens Anglorum*,' in Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 99-129, at p. 107, n. 11.

> overwhelmed and made tributary even the tribes of the Picts and the Irish who inhabit the northern parts of Britain…[5]

This famous (or infamous) passage was repeated by an unknown West Saxon chronicler over one hundred years later, but this annalist made one crucial addition when he informed his own audience of King Ecgberht's similar credentials and he gave him a ceremonial title, that of *Bretwalda*:

> And that year king Ecgberht conquered the kingdom of the Mercians, and everything south of the Humber; and he was the eighth king who was *Bretwalda*. The first who had so great authority was Ælle, king of the South Saxons, the second was Ceawlin, king of the West Saxons, the third was Æthelberht, king of the people of Kent, the fourth was Rædwald, king of the East Angles, the fifth was Edwin, king of the Northumbrians, the sixth was Oswald who reigned after him, the seventh was Oswiu, Oswald's brother, the eighth was Ecgberht, king of the West Saxons. [6]

The West Saxon annalist's addition of the vernacular title of *Bretwalda* for these alleged holders of *imperium* found within Bede's original text, has arguably been misappropriated by generations of historians in order to foster 'courageous attempts to conjure an Anglian Clovis out of the mists of the fifth and sixth centuries.'[7] Bede's claim that these particular kings held sway over the provinces south of the River Humber was often misread. Probably too much was inferred from Bede's list and it was optimistically interpreted to mean that a system of overkingship, however vague, operated within the independent kingdoms of the English and was periodically handed down from one special king to another through the generations:

> It is with Offa that the change in claim and title [rex Anglorum] is first translated into a measure of fact. The *Bretwaldaship* was being outgrown. In the past the component peoples of that vague supremacy had kept their native dynasties and broken away when it suited them to do so. Offa was clearly driving towards a lasting kingdom of the English.[8]

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[5] Bede, *HE*, II. 5.
[6] *ASC*, manuscript 'A' for 829 (*recte* 827).
[7] Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas*', p. 101.
[8] J. E. A. Jolliffe, *The Constitutional History of Medieval England From the English Settlement to 1485* (London, 1937), p. 48.

The ideal of the *Bretwalda* reached its twentieth-century apogee in 1966 when Eric John powerfully advocated that the existence of a 'ruler of Britain' perhaps stretched back even before the time of Bede.[9] As corroborative evidence for this claim, John cited Boniface's eighth-century correspondence with the see of Canterbury on the alleged conduct of Æthelbald of Mercia, in addition to passages from Adomnan's *Life of St. Columba*, referring to Oswald of Northumbria's victory over Cadwallon at Heavensfield in 634. John argued that here were 'two ecclesiastics of more than ordinary literary powers applying the term *imperator* to two different English rulers, both of whom probably claimed the title *Brytenwealda*.'[10] It was Boniface who addressed Æthelbald as *Anglorum imperii sceptra gubernanti Æthilbaldo regi* and probably referred to the same king in a letter to Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury, about the behaviour a certain *imperator vel rex* and Adomnan referred to Oswald as *totius Britanniae imperator*.[11] It is indeed tempting to see these titles as Latinised versions of the vernacular *Bretwalda* but is there any further evidence for such a position of an Anglo-Saxon overking?

Setting aside Bede's list of holders of *imperium*, there were various times when one king perhaps claimed an overall ascendancy over his contemporaries. The so-called Ismere

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[9] Eric John, 'Orbis *Britanniae* and the Anglo-Saxon kings', in his *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), pp.1-63.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

[11] Boniface, *Die Briefe des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus* ed. M. Tangl, *MGH, Epistolae Selectae* 1 (2nd edition, Berlin, 1955), letters nos. 73 and 78; *Domno carissimo et in Christi amore ceteris regibus preferendo inclita Anglorum imperii sceptra gubernanti Æthilbaldo regi. and imperator vel rex aut aliquis prefectorum vel comitum seculari potestate fultus* and Adomnan, *Adomnani Vita Columbae, Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. by the late Alan Orr Anderson and by Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, revised by Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Oxford, 1991), p. 17 and p. 16, n. 12, *totius Brittanniae imperator a deo ordinatus est*

Diploma of 736 refers to Æthelbald of Mercia as *rex Britanniae* in the witness-list and 'king not only of the Mercians but also of all the kingdoms that are known by the general name of *Sutangli*' in the *dispositio*.[12] A genuine charter of 789 from the archive of Christ Church Canterbury refers to King Coenwulf of Mercia as *rector et imperator Merciorum regni*.[13] The titles found within these documents support the possibility that the holders of this essentially Mercian hegemony were perhaps identified by some as rulers of Britain.[14] Somewhat hesitantly, Patrick Wormald suggested that overall 'the evidence just about suffices to establish that the early Anglo-Saxons had a notion, however vague or otherwise unwarranted, of hegemonial rule over Britain.'[15] Moreover, evidence from outside England seems to confirm some form of hegemonic power was exercised by certain Anglo-Saxon kings, in particular Edwin of Northumbria. David Kirby pointed out that the Welsh author of the poem *moliant Cadwallawn* represented Edwin in a similar fashion to his portrayal of his eponymous hero, whom he portrayed as *luydawc Prydain* (battle-hosted one of Britain), whereas Edwin was *(m)vneir Prydin* (Lord of Britain).[16] Looking further afield to Ireland, the *Annals of Tigernach* reported that at his death Edwin was 'the son Ælle, king of the Saxons, who ruled all of Britain.'[17] Clare Stancliffe has also cautiously suggested that the

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[12] S 89; *domino donante rex non solum Marcesium sed et omnium prouinciarum que generale nomine Sutangli dicantur.*

[13] S 153; *Ego Co[e]nuulfus [di] uina gratia largiente rector et imperator Merciorum regni.*

[14] Bede, *HE*, v. 23, seems to add Æthelbald to his own list at the very end of the *Ecclesiastical History*, for in the penultimate chapter he repeated his claim about Æthelbald of Mercia – this time concerning the ecclesiastical provinces south of the Humber. See Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas*', pp. 106-7.

[15] Patrick Wormald, 'The making of England', *History Today* 45 (Feb, 1995), 26-32, at 26.

[16] D. P. Kirby, 'Welsh bards and the border', in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 31-42, at p. 34.

[17] *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. W. Stokes, *Revue Celtique* 16 and 17 (Paris, 1895-6), 16, 181; '*regis Saxonum, qui totam Britan[n]niam regnauít, in quo uictus est a Chon rege Britonum et Panta Saxano*.' For these annals see A. P. Smyth, 'The earliest Irish annals: their first contemporary entries, and the earliest

contemporary Irish source in particular 'provides independent confirmation for Bede's attribution to Edwin of *imperium* over [both] Britons and English' alike.[18]

Despite this guarded historical confidence that there existed at various times an 'overking' of Britain, perhaps as part of a concept that pre-dated even the age of Bede, it appears strange that a title for this putative position cannot be established with any degree of certainty before its appearance in the ninth-century *Chronicle* entry. Even Bede seemingly shied away from giving his special holders of *imperium* a definitive label, which prompts the solution that there may not have been a recognisable word for this position, if it did indeed exist. It is not as if Bede was usually inclined towards vagueness and, as Donald Bullough argued, Bede 'generally uses *regnum* when the emphasis is territorial (the English "realm"), *imperium* when the emphasis is on "authority", but particularly "lawful Christian authority", in contrast with *tyrannis*, rather than a distinctive "superior authority", overlordship.'[19] This particular piece of the puzzle may not have been conjured up until the ninth century. As far as it can be ascertained, it was only in the ninth century that an anonymous annalist, whilst transplanting Bede's list of extraordinary rulers into his *Chronicle* to glorify King Ecgberht's military accomplishments, gave the position its name. Perhaps that same West Saxon annalist attached to Bede's list the pseudo-ceremonial title

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centres of recording', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 72 Section C – Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, and Literature (Dublin, 1972), 1-48.

[18] Clare Stancliffe, 'Oswald, "Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians"', in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stanford, 1995), pp. 33-83, pp. 49-51.

[19] Donald A. Bullough, 'Empire and emperordom from late antiquity to 799', *EME* 12.4 (2003), 377-387, at 382. See also James Campbell, *Bede's Reges and Principes* (Jarrow Lecture, 1979).

of *Bretwalda* to proclaim Ecgberht's exclusive status and *ergo* simultaneously designated the remaining seven seemingly special kings. If so, unwittingly, the annalist left in his wake an historical conundrum that has lasted for centuries. Moreover, the West Saxon annalist who reproduced Bede's inventory of overkings may have been merely the first of many to remove it from its appropriate context.[20] The lack of any historical framework that plausibly links Bede's exemplary kings with this later interpolation about Ecgberht has led to doubts concerning the dependability of the title and furthermore its position of overall importance. The *Bretwalda* has recently been toppled from his overarching position of grandeur in Anglo-Saxon studies, as argued so eloquently by John, and his very existence brought into question. On top of this, even the title of *Bretwalda* has been dragged through the proverbial mud by a number of historians.

The origins of English unity through overkingship

Doubts about the historical validity of a *Bretwalda* were first voiced way back in 1849 by John Mitchell Kemble who reasoned, 'that everything depends upon the way we construe a passage in Bede, together with one from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, borrowed from him.'[21] Barbara Yorke resurrected Kemble's arguments in the early 1980s, because, she suggested, it both exposes the fragility of the evidence for the *Bretwalda*, and demonstrates

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[20] Keynes, 'Raedwald the *Bretwalda*', 115.
[21] John Mitchell Kemble, *The Saxons in England: a History of the English Commonwealth till the Period of the Norman Conquest*, 2 vols. (London, 1849), ii, 10-11.

that there were earlier misgivings about the concept in general.[22] For other historians, the unification of England from the time of the Gregorian Mission to Kent was often entwined with the fortunes of the *Bretwalda*. Through Bede's holders of nominal political supremacy, the *Bretwalda* has almost single-handedly propped up a notion that a distinct identity of the English was somehow pre-ordained, 'the process of English unification has seemed almost organic, its yeast, once again, the southern *imperium* whose leader was the *Bretwalda* ... conceived in the very dawn of Anglo-Saxon historical studies as a "species of Agamemnon."' [23] Originally drawn by Sharon Turner at the start of the nineteenth century, the evocative comparison between the leader of an Anglo-Saxon hegemony and the Greek commander-in-chief from Homer's *Iliad* is particularly memorable. [24] Unfortunately, however, for all the literary fervour of Turner's ingenious association, any confirmation for the existence of a *Bretwalda* in early English history is as flimsy as the reality that lies behind the legendary Mycenaean warlord. Kemble's reservations have also been re-articulated by Fanning who followed up these suspicions with an additional observation that by omitting a number of the great Mercian kings, in particular Offa, from his resuscitation of Bede's list, the West Saxon chronicler left behind a rather lopsided assembly of overkings and 'to modern eyes the traditional list of *Bretwaldas* includes some who do not belong there and excludes others who do.' [25] Furthermore, there are

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[22] Barbara Yorke, 'The vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon overlordship', in David Brown, James Campbell and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 2 BAR, British Series, 92 (Oxford, 1981), 171-200, 171.

[23] Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas*', p. 104.

[24] Keynes, 'Raedwald the *Bretwalda*', 122, n. 68 for Sharon Turner's comparison of the *Bretwalda* with Agamemnon.

[25] Fanning, 'Bede, *imperium* and the *Bretwaldas*', 5.

inconsistencies between the *Chronicle* account and the Old English translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, which does not include any reference to the title of *Bretwalda* as a label for Bede's seven kings either.[26]

There appear to be no retrievable facts whatsoever behind the notion of a *Bretwalda* and the few historical foundations that may point towards it as a hegemonic concept are so wobbly that his continuing existence is difficult to sustain. It may well be, as Nick Higham has argued, that the *Bretwalda* has reached the end of his usefulness and that the entire concept 'as a title and institution must now be abandoned.'[27] From his seemingly assured position of magnitude within the making of England, the beleaguered *Bretwalda* has been made to suffer the ignominy of a tongue-in-cheek campaign launched in order to have him removed from Anglo-Saxon studies entirely. Simon Keynes mischievously encouraged his students to wear tee-shirts emblazoned with the legend: 'BAN THE *BRETWALDA*', although, as he later wryly admitted, there was as much chance of this happening as there was of successfully 'Banning the Bomb.'[28] There is a valid reason as to why the *Bretwalda* cannot be realistically banned, however. Despite the most ardent efforts of the revisionists, the primary problem with the *Bretwalda* entry in the *Chronicle* text still remains. An overriding concern about the *Bretwalda* issue here is not whether one should cast doubts

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[26] *Ibid.*, 23.
[27] N. J. Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the Early English Kings* (Manchester, 1995), p. 183.
[28] Patrick Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the Church of the English', in Geoffrey Rowell (ed.), *The English Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism* (Wantage, 1992), pp. 13-32, at p. 30, n, 34 for the legend concerning the BAN THE *BRETWALDA* tee-shirts worn by the students of Simon Keynes and for his bomb analogy see Keynes, 'Raedwald the *Bretwalda*', 115.

upon the validity of Bede's personal list of super-kings.[29] But it is whether his inventory has any relevance for the politics of the ninth century, where a particular emphasis should be placed on a West Saxon dynasty that was constructed textually at the court of King Alfred in the 890s. It was, after all, arguably within this milieu that the word was coined, and it is here that the search for its relevance, if any, should be continued.

Sir Frank Stenton refused to be taken in entirely by the notion of an 'imperial' office or office-holder in early English history, but he did agree in principle to the antiquity of the title. For Stenton, the *Bretwalda* belonged in the 'sphere of encomiastic poetry' and he argued that 'its origin should be sought in the hall of some early English king.'[30] For all Stenton's apparent scepticism, however, he also maintained that the chronicler's inaccuracy in elevating Ecgberht to this exalted position was somehow compensated by his 'preservation of the ancient title applied to these outstanding kings.'[31] Yet, whether the West Saxon annalist actually preserved the title of these particular seven, or for that matter any other, earlier Anglo-Saxon kings or overkings is at best questionable. Any pre-ninth-century origins for this title remain elusive and this generally unsuccessful quest has led to suspicions that the word *Bretwalda* may be merely a literary fabrication perpetrated by the

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[29] Keynes, 'Raedwald the *Bretwalda*', at 108 has argued that Bede's list of kings should not be taken at face-value for as a record of the succession of a 'grand Southumbrian overlordship [as such] the thing is a nonsense.'

[30] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1973), p. 35; see Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the Church of the English', pp. 20 and 30, n. 33.

[31] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 34.

anonymous chronicler and it is 'in effect a ghost word.'[32] This does appear to be the most logical conclusion, and therefore, whether the word has any continuing relevance might depend on how this form of linguistic chimera is interpreted. The word *Bretwalda* may be a mirage but it is one that appears to invoke the concept of 'Britain' and it may still have a tangible part to play in the search for any hegemonic claims made by King Alfred. Perhaps the ideological consciousness of a 'ruler of Britain' was re-invented at Alfred's royal court in the 890s to encourage the spread of the king's influence. For the word *Bretwalda* has arguably more in common with the territorial ambitions of Alfred and his advisors, than anything drawn from the mists of antiquity. The title *Bretwalda* was bestowed upon Ecgberht for it provided a bridge between past and present for Alfred's régime to work with. The title was invented as a tool to legitimise retrospectively Ecgberht's claim to the West Saxon kingship and consequently Alfred's own direct lineage, but it also invoked a sustainable image of Alfred as the heir to greatness. As Anton Scharer has argued:

> The compiler of the *Chronicle* missed no opportunity to tap all sources of legitimacy in favour of the dynasty of Cerdic and its most prominent ninth-century representatives: Ecgberht, Æthelwulf and Alfred. This is most apparent in the case of Ecgberht and Alfred. ... A case in point is the matter of overlordship. ... In the context of his [Ecgberht's] short-lived conquest of Mercia and "of all that was south of the Humber", he is referred to as the eighth *Bretwalda*, a notion gleaned from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. That was undoubtedly intended to confer legitimacy upon Ecgberht.[33]

If Alfred and his advisors were to reduce the likelihood of the kingship slipping away from him and his later direct heirs, then Alfred had to become what Richard Abels has described

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[32] David N. Dumville, 'The terminology of overkingship in early Anglo-Saxon England', in John Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective* (San Marino, 1997). pp. 345-65, p. 353.
[33] Anton Scharer, 'The writing of history at King Alfred's court', *EME* 5.2 (1996), 177-206, at 181.

as 'the 'font of all regality.'[34] But this was not just regality for all those who would succeed Alfred as king; it was also required by those who had already preceded him, especially his grandfather, Ecgberht. Alfred needed to involve his future direct lineage with an ancestor truly worthy of him and his subsequent heirs, but unfortunately, the conflict surrounding the latter years of his father's reign left Alfred with 'unwelcome family ghosts' from the 850s to contend with.[35] The reign of Alfred's father, Æthelwulf, invoked recent memories of discord, inter-family tensions and rivalry between Alfred and his brothers, and to a certain extent, had left a similar residual conflict between Alfred and his nephews. So a more appropriate father-figure was sought out and Ecgberht was the perfect candidate for Alfredian panegyric and eulogy. The '*Bretwalda*' annal reports that Ecgberht, conquered the kingdom of the Mercians and everything south of the Humber, replicating the Bedan claim of a southern *imperium*, but Ecgberht also 'led an army to Dore (in north Derbyshire on the Mercian-Northumbrian border) against the Northumbrians, and they offered him submission and peace there, and on that they separated.'[36] Evidently the annalist was drawing comparisons, but he did not restrict himself to the mere likening of Ecgberht with the previous seven 'rulers of Britain', he also offered his readers a favourable association between Alfred, Ecgberht and all of these seven previous remarkable leaders. Ecgberht was presented by Alfred's royal court as the great successful forefather

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[34] Richard Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability in ninth-century Wessex', *HSJ* 12 for 2001(2005), 83-97, 96.
[35] Pauline Stafford, 'Succession and inheritance: a gendered perspective on Alfred's family history', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 251-264, p. 258. It may have been Alfred himself who arranged for Æthelwulf's re-burial at Winchester. As Stafford suggests, this partially removed the stigma attached to Æthelwulf's original burial at Steyning.
[36] *ASC*, 829.

of Alfred, perhaps with conscious parallels. Alfred and his advisors tightened their grasp on the West Saxon kingship by the elevation of Ecgberht to the imaginary position of 'overking' of Britain. As Scharer has additionally argued, at the Alfredian court '*Vorherrschaft*' has been transformed into '*Oberherrschaft*': supremacy has become overlordship or overkingship.[37]

Legitimising West Saxon dynastic ambitions

The Alfredian court eulogised about Ecgberht and invoked his memory as an 'anticipated Alfred' to help project the latter's image as overking beyond West Saxon borders, but in order to do so the court also had to legitimise the sole inheritance of Alfred's line.[38] By the early 890s, Alfred and his advisors were already paving the way for the future exclusion from the throne of Wessex of the sons of his elder brother Æthelred. In the late ninth century the West Saxon genealogical regnal list and the *Chronicle* 'together portray the political fiction of a lineal succession to a unified West Saxon kingship from the earliest times.'[39] Both the *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life* placed Alfred at the forefront of the West Saxon success against the Danes and both texts constructed a past based around the perspective of the present. Asser, in particular, demonstrates his dynastic intentions right at

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[37] Anton Scharer, 'König Alfreds Hof und die Geschichtsschreibung', in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (Munich, 1994), pp. 443-458, at 450.
[38] Scharer, 'The writing of history', 181.
[39] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (revised edition, London, 2000), p. 39.

the very beginning of his *Life* of the king by situating the West Saxon genealogy found in the *Chronicle* annal for 855 in his opening chapter. As a strategy, this relocation of the genealogy not only strengthens Alfred's right to kingship at the expense of his father Æthelwulf, as suggested by David Howlett, it also by association, relegated the sons of his elder brother Æthelred behind Alfred's direct descendants.[40] The theme of a single legitimate lineage is pursued in both the *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life*, although they achieve their goals in differing ways. The *Chronicle* dwells upon the deeds of Alfred at the expense of his elder brothers Æthelbald (855-860) and Æthelberht (860-865) and ignores their contributions to West Saxon primacy.[41] But both the *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life* manipulated Alfred into the role of charismatic war-leader even whilst his remaining elder brother King Æthelred still lived. The *Chronicle* achieves this by consistently pairing the two brothers together, portraying them as conducting a harmonious if not always successful campaign against the Danes. By this expedient, the *Chronicle* emphasises Alfred's pre-ordained future role as king and saviour, but not to the detriment of current dynastic unity. Remembering the recent discord of the 850s, further friction within the ruling house is set aside and Æthelred is correctly portrayed as the legitimate king and Alfred invariably expressed as fighting loyally alongside him as the king's brother. There may well have been some brotherly disagreements, however, and these can be observed tentatively from Æthelred's charters where Alfred's name seldom appears in these witness-lists.[42]

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[40] D. R. Howlett, *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* (Dublin, 1995), p. 179.

[41] Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: questioning Old English History and historians', *The Historian* 49 (Spring, 1996), 2-7, at 4.

[42] There are ten charters of Æthelred's. They are as follows: S 334; S 335; S 336; S 337; S 338; S 339; S 340; S 341; S 342. Alfred witnesses two of these, S 335 of 862 and S 340 of 868.

Writing in 893, Asser elaborated upon the central outcome of one of these fraternal disputes, which, he alleged, occurred immediately before the major engagement with the Danes at Ashdown in 871. The *Chronicle* account states plainly that before battle was joined at Ashdown 'the Danes were in two divisions: in the one were the heathen kings Bagsecg and Healfdene, and in the other were the earls.' In response to the Danish tactics, Æthelred deployed his West Saxon forces in a similar fashion to confront the Danish host head-on 'and King Æthelred fought against the kings' troop ... and Æthelred's brother Alfred fought against the earls' troop.'[43] Asser's version is substantially different, however. Asser contends that it was Alfred and not his brother the king who provided the genuine fortitude behind West Saxon resistance to the Danish invaders at Ashdown and that:

> Alfred (then 'heir apparent') could not oppose the enemy battle-lines any longer without either retreating from the battlefield or attacking the enemy forces before his brother's arrival on the scene. He finally deployed the Christian forces against the hostile armies, as he had previously intended (even though the king had not yet come), and acting courageously, like a wild boar, supported by divine council and strengthened by divine help, when he had closed up the shield-wall in proper order, he moved his army without delay against the enemy.[44]

In what is in effect a prelude to Asser's battle scenes at Ashdown, the previous chapter situates King Æthered inside his tent deep in prayer, and, despite receiving warnings and exhortations from his brother, the king declared 'firmly that he would not leave that place alive before the priest had finished Mass, and he would not forsake divine service for that of men.'[45] Even confronting the heathens was ostensibly insufficient to prise Æthelred

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[43] *ASC*, 871.

[44] Asser, ch. 38. John of Worcester's *Chronicle* contains the information that once 'he had finished the prayers in which he had been engaged, Æthelred arrived and, once he had invoked the head of the universe, soon joined in the battle.' However, there is no way on knowing where this extract originally came from and it could just be an addition by John to explain what he believed Asser had implied. See JW, ii. 290-291.

[45] Asser, ch. 37.

away from his religious obligations. Asser's declaration that Alfred alone resisted the pagan enemy at Ashdown is worth further exploration.

Asser claims that Alfred brought forth both an immediate victory eventually leading to salvation by fighting 'like a wild boar' (*viriliter aprino more*) whilst his brother 'the king was lingering still longer in prayer.'[46] Although this extract appears contradictory, where Æthelred's deep religiosity is portrayed as inopportune and is tinged with negativity, the tale conveys moral messages that have significant dynastic implications. Here, Æthelred's actions are juxtaposed, where on the one hand his piety is viewed as commendable, his subsequent inertia is deemed to be reprehensible. Alfred's conduct is further contrasted with that of his elder brother and he is considered to be no less pious than Æthelred but Alfred's form of devotion is more hard-headed more pragmatic. Alfred's no-nonsense piety is distinguished from the more passive spirituality pursued by his brother and it is Alfred's ability to see beyond the merely devotional level of righteousness that sets him above even the king. Alfred's special form of godliness is also useful in other ways and it forms both a spiritual and temporal pathway for his people to follow.[47] Asser's wild boar metaphor is therefore instructive and its most likely origin is the *Proverbia Grecorum* possibly so-titled to mirror the *Proverbia* of King Solomon.[48] Alfred is once again portrayed as a latter-day

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[46] *Ibid.*, ch. 38.

[47] Karen DeMent Youmans, 'Asser's Life of Alfred and the rhetoric of hagiography', *Mediaevalia* 22.2 (1999), 291-305, 299-301.

[48] Scharer, 'The writing of history', 197-199, at 198, n. 131; the *Proverbium Grecorum* reads 'the armed warrior eager for battle; the lion from the cave, when he devours his prey; the wild boar from the wood when he rages against somebody.' A contrary view that Asser took his inspiration from Welsh heroic poetry can be found in Sir Ifor Williams, ed. *Armes Prydein, The Prophesy of Britain from the Book of Taliesin*, English version by Rachel Bromwich, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (Dublin, 1982), p. xxix-xxx, n. 2.

King Solomon and this ideology apparently provides an explanation for the contrasting portrayal of Alfred and Æthelred. In his role as Alfred's encomiast Asser relegated Æthelred's role at Ashdown and recast the events to fit the Solomonic model.[49] Asser's portrayal of Æthelred's religiously-inspired lassitude and its striking disparity with Alfred's blatant heroism is also based upon the rule of Solomon. This theme of indolent behaviour finds its voice once again in Asser's chapter 91 when Alfred urges his people against slothfulness while constructing his fortifications.[50] But Asser's exploitation of Solomonic parallels for this episode can be developed further, and this may cast additional light on some problematic issues of royal suitability.

Asser's *Life* was essentially composed in a two-part structure of 'annalistic' (chs. 1-72) sections and 'biographical' ones (chs. 72-106).[51] Marie Schütt's characterisation of the *Life* has been recently developed by Thomas Hill who has argued that the annalistic sections, which primarily detail Alfred's military encounters and lay an emphasise upon his personal martial qualities, comprise one half of the familiar heroic *topos* of *sapientia et fortitudo*, while the biographical sections, which concern his educational programme and his desire for wisdom and good governance, detail the remaining half.[52] Asser's chapters

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[49] Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1998), p. 131, n. 20.

[50] Asser, ch. 91. R. H. C. Davis, 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth', *History* 56 (1971), 169-82, reprinted in his *From Alfred The Great to Stephen* (London and Rio Grande, 1991), pp. 33-54, at p. 45 suggested linking Asser's account of Alfred getting his fortresses built on time with the *Chronicle* for 892, where there is a comment that at the Weald there was a fortress and 'inside the fortifications there were only a few peasants, and it was only half-made.'

[51] Marie Schütt, 'The literary form of Asser's *Vita Alfredi*', *EHR* 72 (1957), 209-20.

[52] Thomas D. Hill, 'The crowning of Alfred and the topos of *sapientia et fortitudo* in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Neophilologus* 86.3 (July, 2002), 471-6. See also Patrick Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred',

35 to 42 are all based on the single *Chronicle* entry for 871 and this particular *topos* pervades Asser's entire narrative of Ashdown and its aftermath. Alfred's heroism at Ashdown demonstrates his *fortitudo* and his reluctant acceptance of power, despite 'surpassing his brothers in both wisdom and good habits', reveals his *sapientia*.[53] But the battle scenes contained in Asser's version of Ashdown found in chapters 38 and 39 also accentuate Alfred's bravery at the direct expense of his brother, and Alfred's assumption of the kingship, following Æthelred's death in chapter 42, was one depicted as being divinely ordained long ago. The glue that cements Asser's portrait of his subject as both courageous and wise is his description of Alfred as *secundarius* in both chapters 38 and 42. *Secundarius* has been translated to mean 'heir apparent' but perhaps a closer reflection of Asser's sentiments, set within this context of *sapientia et fortitudo*, might be that Alfred is being portrayed as the rightful king in waiting.[54] Here Asser was arguably drawing from his own Welsh vocabulary and the word *secundarius* itself may derive from Celtic monastic terminology denoting a cleric elected during an incumbent abbot's lifetime to be his future successor.[55] It could, as, R. L. Thomson has suggested, have originally been derived from the Irish monastic *secundus abbas*.[56] We should not be surprised to find that

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Haskins Society Journal 15 for 2004 (2006), 1-39, at 13; 'Alfred's quest for a *sapientia* that was unambiguously the wisdom of Solomon.'

[53] *Ibid.*, 472. See Asser, ch. 41.

[54] W. H. Stevenson, ed. *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1904, new impression, Oxford, 1959), at p. 227, suggested that *secundarius*, which is otherwise unknown in English sources, might be translated as 'viceroy or almost joint-king.'

[55] Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great: Being the Ford Lectures For 1901* (Oxford, 1902), pp. 40 and 89-91. Cf. David N. Dumville, 'The *ætheling*: a study in Anglo-Saxon constitutional history', *ASE* 8 (1979), 1-33, at 1-2, who has noted, following Michael Binchy, that *secundarius* might be a Latinisation of the Welsh *eil* possibly meaning 'heir to the throne.'

[56] R. L. Thomson, 'British Latin and English history Nennius and Asser', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, Literary and History Section 18/19 (1982), 38-53, at 51. For the Irish origins of Welsh monasticism see Claude Evans, 'The Celtic Church in Anglo-Saxon times', in J. Douglas

Asser reverted to a familiar idiom when describing a concept of the Alfredian court's making. As Kirby has pointed out, it is 'not always appreciated that [Asser] saw the royal court with the eyes of a monk from St. David's as well as the eyes of a resident at the royal court.'[57] The word *secundarius* is a further reflection of the Solomonic ideology that inspired the overarching portrait of Alfred's kingship, but this model does not answer all the questions posed by Asser's extended narrative of Ashdown. Despite containing information about the West Saxon defeat at Basing and the death of the king respectively, Chapters 40 and 41 seem almost seem extraneous to Asser's essential story-line. The outstanding questions are therefore, why does Asser appear to stress Alfred's single-mindedness and bravery at the expense of any possible heroism demonstrated by his elder brother King Æthelred? And, furthermore, can this be linked to Alfred's eventual succession to kingship? Perhaps the answers lie in how Asser himself should be perceived. Was there, as James Campbell has suggested, something of a Hincmar about Asser? He was undoubtedly more than merely a scholar and biographer and was most probably a 'key figure in a powerful, but possibly insecure, régime' and his *Life* of Alfred was written as a calculated commitment to Alfred's quest for legitimacy and for extending his hegemony.[58] Alfred's régime and his own position as king were both under intense internal pressure in the 890s and Asser's contribution to dynastic welfare provides an explanation for his particular portrayal of Ashdown.

Woods and David A. E. Pelteret (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxons: Synthesis and Achievement* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 77-92.

[57] D. P. Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', *Studia Celtica* 6 (1971), 12-35, 17.

[58] James Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', in C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (eds.), *The Inheritance of Historiography* (Exeter, 1986), pp. 115-35, p. 123.

Two months after Ashdown, following battles at Basing and *Meretun*, King Æthelred was dead and his body interred at Wimborne. It is a matter of conjecture how Æthelred died, but it is possible that he succumbed to wounds sustained fighting the heathens at *Meretun*.[59] Later traditions suggest that Æthelred was venerated at Wimborne where a fourteenth-century commemoration plaque from the later minster bears the legend *St ÆTHELREDI REGIS WEST SAXONUM MARTYRIS VIA 873 23 DIE APRILIS PER MANVS CORVM PAGANORUM OCCVBVIT.* [60] Asser, despite having a copy of the *Chronicle* to hand, ignored the engagement at *Meretun* completely and he merely reported that Æthelred later died 'having vigorously and honourably ruled the kingdom in good repute, amid many difficulties.'[61] The dynastic predicament Alfred found himself in the 890s meant that Asser had good reasons for his omission of *Meretun*. Had Æthelred died from wounds received fighting the heathens, it would have strengthened further the claims of his children to the West Saxon throne, and, from the perspective of the Alfredian court would have been best hidden from view. Whilst inconclusive, the later traditions from Wimborne suggest that Æthelred's conduct was more estimable than either the *Chronicle* but especially Asser's version allow. Asser's explanation of Ashdown and its immediate aftermath suppresses any lingering knowledge that Æthelred died a hero's death and re-invents the method by which Alfred achieved his ascendancy. Alfred's superiority over his brother, both in terms of his bravery and his wisdom, now extends even beyond the grave

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[59] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War Kingship and Culture*, p. 134.
[60] John Peddie, *Alfred: Warrior King* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 102-103. There is an illustration of the memorial at p. 103.
[61] Asser, ch. 41.

and Asser's Alfred is portrayed as one divinely destined to succeed to the kingship long before this actually happened. 'Indeed' says Asser, 'he could easily have taken it over with the consent of all while his brother was alive, had he considered himself worthy to do so.'[62] Alfred, like his Carolingian contemporaries, fits the Solomonic model of a devout Christian warrior who triumphs through adversity but also like Solomon he is inspired by God.[63] In the *Chronicle* account of Ashdown, Æthelred was clearly in control of the West Saxon forces and he personally engaged the two heathen kings in battle while Alfred and his own retinue were ordered to 'submit to the fortunes of war against all the [heathen] earls.'[64] But in Asser's interpretation of the same battle, Alfred received divine approval to assume command of the West Saxon (and thereby Christian forces) even though his brother the king was there. Asser's version of these events negated any possible merit that King Æthelred may have been entitled to in death. The royal court's conception of Alfred's battle-hardened and pre-ordained kingship contrasts vividly with the devoutly passive role his brother was credited with at Ashdown. Asser portrayed Alfred as he wished himself to be revealed, as one capable of wielding divinely-inspired authority.[65] It might be that Alfred was, as Wormald argued, 'a holy man enthroned' and he was portrayed as such by Asser to provide the means to make his kingship successful and for the continuation of his direct lineage.[66]

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[62] *Ibid.*, ch. 42.
[63] Janet L. Nelson, 'Waiting for Alfred', *Early Medieval Europe* 7.1 (1998), 115-24, 123.
[64] *ASC*, 871.
[65] Janet L. Nelson, 'Power and authority at the court of Alfred', in Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, King's College London Medieval Studies, xvii (London, 2000), pp. 311-337, at pp. 335- 336.
[66] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', 18.

The legitimisation of Ecgberht as King of Wessex

Alfred's régime recruited Egberht as the archetypal West Saxon overking in order to model King Alfred's later claims to hegemony, but Ecgberht himself may have actually been an interloper into the lineage of the West Saxon kings. Although Ecgberht claimed his descent from Ine's brother Ingeld, he may have originated from Kentish royal stock and only later was he incorporated into the line of Cerdic. After Ecgberht, now king of Wessex, drove Bealdred north over the Thames in 825, he was acclaimed by the Kentishmen as their lord, and it has been claimed that 'in Ecgberht the Cantware were receiving their lawful king, the son of Ealhmund who had once ruled them and the head of the only surviving branch which had sprung from the stock of the Eskings.'[67] K. P. Witney's suggestion has been more recently re-articulated by Scharer whose additional observation is that if Ecgberht was descended from the Kentish kings, then the preoccupation of the *Chronicle* in certain Kentish affairs is more easily explained.[68] A Kentish descent for Ecgberht is implicit in the *Chronicle* entry for 825 where, following the West Saxon victory over Beornwulf of the Mercians at *Ellandun*, Ecgberht dispatched an army under 'his son Æthelwulf and Eahlstan, the bishop of Sherbourne, and Ealdorman Wulfheard, to Kent, with a large force' and:

> the inhabitants of Kent turned to him [Egberht] - and the Surrey men and South Saxons and East Saxons submitted to him because they had been wrongly forced away from his kinsmen. And the same year the king of the East Angles and the people appealed to King Ecgberht for peace

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[67] K. P. Witney, *The Kingdom of Kent: A History from AD 450-825* (London and Chichester, 1982), p. 227.
[68] Scharer, 'The writing of history', 184. However, Nicholas Brooks, 'The creation and early structure of the kingdom of Kent', in his *Anglo-Saxon Myths: State and Church 400-1066* (London and Rio Grande, 1995), pp. 33-60, at p. 41 has advised caution, and as he points out, the more we search the common stock of the *Chronicle* for 'authoritative information about the early kingdom of Kent, the more it vanishes from our eyes.'

> and protection, because of their fear of the Mercians. And that same year the East Angles killed Beornwulf king of the Mercians.[69]

Ecgberht's possible Kentish upbringing is additionally reinforced by the later bilingual version of the *Chronicle* known as 'F', produced at Christ Church Canterbury in the late eleventh, or possibly early twelfth century.[70] According to this version of the *Chronicle* *s.a.* 784, 'King Ealhmund reigned in Kent this King Ealhmund was Ecgberht's father.'[71] The alliteration of these names also indicates Ecgberht's possible Kentish origins and Ealhmund himself was possibly a son of an earlier King Ecgberht of Kent. Moreover, a charter from Christ Church Canterbury shows Ealhmund granting land to Reculver in 784 one year before Offa's occupation of the region.[72] It was Ealhmund's death in 784 that precipitated the invasion of that region by King Offa of Mercia whose sights had been set on the conquest of Kent even before the end of Ealhmund's reign.[73] If Ecgberht's family were the rulers in the south-east, who had been dispossessed by the Mercian kings, this could have led to Ecgberht seeking possible exile elsewhere. Evidence for Ecgberht's three-year exile in Francia is provided by the *Chronicle* entry for Ecgberht's obituary of 839 where Offa, aided by King Beorhtric of Wessex, expelled Ecgberht, and that 'Beorhtric helped Offa because he had married his daughter.'[74]

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[69] *ASC*, 825.
[70] Whitelock, *et al*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, p. xvii.
[71] *ASC*, 784.
[72] S 38. Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 597-1066* (Leicester, 1984), pp. 113 and 349, n. 15 has observed that the charter may not be entirely reliable and it may not bear the weight of too much historical interpretation.
[73] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, p. 136-8.
[74] *ASC*, 839.

Presumably, Ecgberht's Frankish exile was between 789 and 792 but, unfortunately, little is known about Ecgberht's early years from the contemporary sources which remain virtually silent about his progress. The twelfth-century *Historia Regum Anglorum* of William of Malmesbury contains an elaborate account of Ecgberht's life but how much can possibly be adduced from here is problematic. According to William, Ecgberht, before his eventual continental exile, spent a period of time at the court of Offa of Mercia. This Mercian sojourn allegedly came about because Ecgberht had discovered that Beorhtric of Wessex was plotting to assassinate him. Infuriated by Ecgberht gaining asylum at Offa's court, Beorhtric applied concerted diplomatic pressure upon Offa and these demands instigated Ecgberht's subsequent Frankish exile.[75] Perhaps with Offa's connivance, Ecgberht fled to Francia and into exile for three years probably at the court of Charlemagne.[76] Where William might have acquired such information remains uncertain but it is probably unwise to dismiss his account entirely. The recent editors of the *Historia Regum* have noted that although a late observer of these putative events, William may have had access to relevant information about Ecgberht's early life. Exactly what all of this material might have been remains unclear, but William probably had access to a genealogy for the West Saxon kings different from any now in existence.[77] William also had at his disposal an extensive collection of Alcuin's letters and, moreover, as a historian, William had a long-standing interest in cross-Channel affairs where he 'had the perspective of

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[75] *GR*, ii. 106, William's testimony that Ecgberht was given refuge at the court of King Offa is not found anywhere else in the records.
[76] *ASC*, 839. The annal states that Ecgberht's exile was for three years.
[77] *GR*, *Commentary*, 76.

England and the continent well in mind long before English scholars of this century.'[78] It may be more than coincidence that Alcuin was the primary mediator between Charlemagne and Offa at precisely the same time as Ecgberht most probably arrived on the continent. As Simon Keynes has cautiously argued, Alcuin may have been delegated the task of resolving this dispute and Charlemagne's support for Offa's enemies may have been on Alcuin's agenda.[79]

It may seem a strange move by Offa to have sheltered the young Ecgberht, who, if he were from Kentish royal stock, might have provided a direct threat to Offa's own authority within Kent. As Wormald argued Offa was the direct rival of the Kentish kings and not their overlord.[80] If Ecgberht were Kentish then it is more uncertain why Beorhtric would have had reasons to want Ecgberht dead. But it has also been claimed that Ecgberht's father, Ealhmund, was a West Saxon who had gained a foothold in Kentish affairs.[81] Dynastic considerations of both Wessex and Kent may have overlapped in the recent past and perhaps Kirby's reasoning that Ecgberht had a claim to both Wessex and to Kent is the right one. He suggested that if the Alfredian *Chronicle* can be believed, Ecgberht was laying claim to territory over which the West Saxons had a claim by kinship

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[78] *Ibid.*, 12. For William's views about Frankish society see John Gillingham, 'Conquering the barbarians: war and chivalry in twelfth-century Britain', *HSJ* 4 (1992), 67-84.
[79] Simon Keynes, 'The kingdom of the Mercians in the eighth century', in David Hill and Margaret Worthington (eds.), *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia, Papers from a Conference held in Manchester in 2000*, Manchester Centre for Medieval Studies, BAR British Series 383 (Oxford, 2005),1-26, at 16, n. 149.
[80] Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas*', p. 113.
[81] Keynes, 'The kingdom of the Mercians in the eighth century', 17.

through Ealhmund.[82] Ecgberht's ability to annex later all the region is possibly explained by these putative ties of kinship, especially if he were 'not only a royal heir to the kingdom of Kent but as the heir to local south-eastern hegemony which went back intermittently into the sixth century, but was recent enough to have retained political significance into the 780s.'[83] It becomes easier to see the dangers to Beorhtric's security if Offa was sheltering an opponent for the West Saxon realm as well as a claimant to the Kentish kingship, as William of Malmesbury claimed. It is less apparent why Offa, given his lack of scruples where political violence was concerned, should have allowed the young pretender to leave his own court for the continent and to join other prominent exiles at the court of Charlemagne.[84] However, William of Malmesbury's claim that Offa sheltered Ecgberht runs against the *Chronicle* statement that Offa was the driving-force behind Ecgberht's exile and has an uncertain historical basis.

If Ecgberht was descended from Kentish royal stock, but was also associated with the West Saxon line through ties of kinship, his appearance in Wessex by 802 is not surprising given that Kent's ruling family had been entirely dispersed by Mercian power by this time. How Ecgberht gained power in Wessex is unknown but one explanation might be that in the intervening years since his relocation in England from Francia, he perhaps led an

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[82] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, pp. 137-138 and appendix, 181.
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[84] For Offa and his relationship with Charlemagne see Simon Keynes, 'Changing faces: Offa King of Mercia', *History Today* 60 (Nov, 1990), 14-19. For Anglo-Saxons sheltering from Offa at the Frankish court see Janet L. Nelson, 'Carolingian contacts', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 126-143, at pp. 137-43 and Joanna Story, 'Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons', in Joanna Story (ed.), *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 195-210.

independent warband in a similar manner to an earlier West Saxon royal exile Cædwalla, or as the Mercian St. Guthlac did, before Ecgberht implemented a successful coup inside Wessex at the death of Beorhtric in 802.[85] A further distinct possibility, however, is that Ecgberht achieved the West Saxon kingship by means of Carolingian support.[86]

Ecgberht's relocation to Francia in 789 meant that he eventually found his way to Charlemagne's court. Although this cannot be verified it is difficult to envisage Ecgberht, as a displaced and possibly disgruntled young *ætheling*, just sitting biding his political time in Quentovic or wherever.[87] Rather, as William of Malmesbury has it, he is more like to have been using the Frankish court 'as a whetstone with which to sharpen the edge of his mind by clearing away the rust of indolence.'[88] At Charlemagne's court Ecgberht would have witnessed first-hand the way in which his Frankish hosts conducted their governmental affairs and prepared for military campaigns.[89] It is also possible that during his ostracism from England Ecgberht gained Frankish support for his claim over Wessex.[90] As Joanna Story has argued, Ecgberht's continental exile is situated prominently in the *Chronicle* under the year 839 for this revelation provides an important portion of a 'seminal

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[85] Heather Edwards, Ecgberht [Egbert] (*d.* 839), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press,
[http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8581?docPos=5 [accessed, 2nd July 07].

[86] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, p. 158.

[87] Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c 750-870* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 217.

[88] *GR*, ii. 106.

[89] On the importance of securing Anglo-Saxon favour in the pursuit of 'empire', see Janet L. Nelson, 'The Franks and the English reconsidered', in her *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 141-158, at p. 143 she suggested that Charles the Bald was trying to gain favour with King Æthelwulf where his grandfather Charlemagne had failed with King Offa.

[90] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, pp. 158-9. See also Story, 'Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons', pp. 206-207.

moment in the creation of a dynasty.'[91] The *Chronicle* retrospectively announces that Ecgberht spent several years in continental exile because it is evocative of past and present West Saxon-Carolingian associations. Carolingian connections with Ecgberht are further suggested by the way in which Frankish chronicles and correspondence follow the fortunes of the West Saxons throughout the first half of the ninth century.[92] This close Frankish involvement with West Saxon affairs continued after Ecgberht's death, but Ecgberht himself had arguably remained in personal communications with the Carolingian royal court right to the very end of his reign. The *Annals of St-Bertin* reveal that an unnamed king of the English [*rex Anglorum*] sent envoys to Louis the Pious 'to ask the emperor to grant him permission to travel through Francia on his way to Rome on pilgrimage.'[93] This entry in the Frankish annals has traditionally been associated with Ecgberht's son, King Æthelwulf, who is known to have made a later pilgrimage to Rome.[94] It seems more likely, however, that this particular request for safe passage through Francia was dispatched by Ecgberht who died before he was able to fulfil his spiritual obligations.[95] Ecgberht's identification with this would-be pilgrim is strengthened by a discrepancy in the regnal

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[91] Story, *Carolingian Connections*, p. 217.

[92] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, pp. 158-159. Whether this can be taken quite as far as Kirby suggests is problematic, however. His argument that Wiglaf's recovery of Mercia was due to a withdrawal of support by Louis the Pious when confronted with his own troubles in the 830s may stretch these Carolingian influences too far. It seems more likely that Wiglaf recovered Mercia because Ecgberht had overstretched his own resources.

[93] *AB*, 839.

[94] For the traditional view that this king was Æthelwulf, see for instance, Janet L. Nelson, *The Annals of St Bertin,* Manchester Medieval Sources: Ninth-Century Histories 1 (Manchester, 1991), 42, n. 4 and Paul Edward Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London, 1994), pp. 107-109.

[95] Simon Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon entries in the "Liber Vitae" of Brescia', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 99-119, at p. 113, n. 58.

dates set out in the *Chronicle* and this may have led to possible later confusion, for, it seems likely that Ecgberht actually lived until the end of July 839.[96] Had Ecgberht resigned the kingship and set out for Rome he would have been upholding a West Saxon royal tradition originally established by Cædwalla who abdicated the West Saxon throne in 688 and was subsequently baptised in Rome by Pope Sergius.[97] Thirty seven years later, Cædwalla's son Ine surrendered his own kingship and journeyed to the holy city in 726.[98] Ecgberht himself reigned for thirty seven years and seven months and it is likely that he intended to replicate these earlier abdications and retire to Rome as a pilgrim. Even if Ecgberht's premature death meant that he never made his spiritual journey, his proposed sacrificial abdication of power consolidated his family's grip on the now-extended West Saxon kingship and allowed his son Æthelwulf to succeed him without opposition. Ecgberht's spiritual surrender had minimised any opportunity that the kingship itself would become contested. Ecgberht's retirement to Rome signalled Æthelwulf's untroubled succession to the extended kingship of Wessex and of Kent; it was the conclusion to a dynastic strategy that had begun with the pact orchestrated at Kingston in 838.

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[96] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, p. 232, n. 37. See also David N. Dumville, 'The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List; manuscripts and texts', *Anglia Zeitschrift fur Englische Philologie* 103 (1985), 1-32, at 24 and Dumville, 'The West Saxon genealogical list and the chronology of early Wessex', 29-31.

[97] *ASC*, 688.

[98] *ASC*, 726, (728 Ms. A). Simon Keynes, 'Ine, King of Wessex', in Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes and Donald Scragg (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 251-2.

The concept of 'Britain-ruler'

The Alfredian court went about legitimising Ecgberht's position in the West Saxon dynasty in two ways. First, the West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List produced, or revised, at Alfred's royal court was refined in order to accommodate Ecgberht's direct descent from Cerdic. The regnal table was streamlined ultimately in Alfred's favour and in respect of this it is worth noting that Ecgberht does not have an entry in the *Chronicle* authenticating his own pedigree, but features only in the genealogy of his son Æthelwulf.[99] This manipulation is most likely to been inspired by ninth-century political concerns about the successful transmission of the kingship. Alfred and his advisors made further attempts to tighten their hold on the West Saxon kingship by the elevation of Ecgberht to the imaginary position of 'overking' of Britain. The original Bedan list was appropriated by the West Saxon annalist because it legitimised Ecgberht's position in West Saxon history. Additionally, by fastening Ecgberht to Bede's exemplary rulers, the annalist invoked the concept of Britain that arguably reflected Ecgberht's northern achievement when he entered into some form of peace agreement with the Northumbrians at Dore.[100] But the

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[99] Scharer, 'The writing of history', 183-4.

[100] The northern annals found in Roger of Wendover's thirteenth-century *Flowers of History, Formerly Attributed to Matthew Paris*, ed. and trans. J. A. Giles, 2 vols. (London, 1849), *s.a.* 829, report that Ecgberht's northern venture was much bloodier than the *Chronicle* account makes out and Ecgberht is said to to have laid waste Northumbria and made King Eanred pay him tribute. Patrick Wormald, 'The ninth century', in James Campbell, (ed.), *The Anglo Saxons* (Harmondsworth, first published, 1982, 1991 reprint), pp. 132-157, at p. 139, suggested that these northern annals are a good reflection on how the English kingdoms were preoccupied with their own internal conflicts on the eve of the main Danish assaults. John of Worcester also elaborated upon Ecgberht's campaigns in the north and narrated that the West Saxons advanced beyond the River Humber; see JW, *s.a.* 827 and the discussion by R. R. Darlington, and P. McGurk, 'The "Chronicon Ex Chronicis" of "Florence" of Worcester and its use of sources for English history before 1066', *ANS* 5 (1982), 185-196, at 189.

resuscitation of Bede's list in this particular setting also allowed Ecgberht, and by reflection Alfred, to sit alongside Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu of Northumbria as kings who had wielded 'still greater power and ruled over all the inhabitants of Britain, English and Britons alike.'[101] There seems little doubt that an ideological conception of hegemony over Britain found its tenth-century expression at the court of King Æthelstan and this notion is reflected in many of his charters and in other texts both associated with Æthelstan's court and from elsewhere.[102] But only in one charter which might be associated with Æthelstan does a variation of *Bretwalda* appear.[103] A somewhat dubious charter, supposedly of 934, was rendered into both Old English and Latin and both versions of the text apparently invoke the concept of Britain. In the vernacular portion of the document Æthelstan is accorded the title of *Brytenwalda* and in its Latin counterpart he is styled in an apparently corresponding manner as *Æðelstanus rex et rector totius huius Britannie*.'[104] What can possibly be claimed about this document is that it conforms to the general trend of many 'imperial' charters of the tenth century where a distinction is invariably drawn between the 'English' inhabitants of the West Saxon hegemony and the

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[101]Bede, *HE.* II. 5; see Simon Walker, 'A context for *Brunanburh*?', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages*: *Essays Presented to Karl Leyser* (London and Rio Grande, 1992), pp. 21-39, at p. 23.

[102] Sarah Foot, 'Where English becomes British: rethinking contexts for *Brunanburh*', in Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (eds.), *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks* (forthcoming, 2008).

[103] Yorke, 'The vocabulary of overlordship', 195, n. 18, has noted that it is impossible to know when the original vernacular version was made, or exactly what the scribe meant by *Brytenwalda*, for both versions are only preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript.

[104] The charter is S 427, supposedly of 934. The vernacular text reads: *Ongol Saxna cyning and bryten walda ealles þyses iglandæs* and the Latin reads: *Angul Saxonum necnon et totius Britanniæ*. The charter is printed in *Early Charters of Wessex*, ed. H. R. P. Finberg (Leicester, 1964), no. 51 and *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. A. J. Robertson (second edition, Cambridge, 1956), the charter is no. 25. Robertson, at pp. 304-307 suggested that neither seems to be a direct translation of the other.

rest of Britain or Albion.[105] This tenth-century perception of West Saxon hegemony over the whole of Britain also appealed to later writers as the Anglo-Norman historians looked backwards in time in search of a golden age.[106] Henry of Huntingdon was so impressed by this notion of 'rule over Britain' that he extended the *Chronicle* list to include both Alfred and Edgar. According to the text's editor, the addition of Alfred and Edgar was a merely a natural extension by Henry, although in respect of this comment, it is interesting to note that Henry's list omits the victor of *Brunanburh*, King Æthelstan, who would also have had excellent claims to this alleged ascendancy. Henry reported that:

> Eighth, [was] King Ecgberht of Wessex, who ruled imperially as far as the Humber. Ninth, his grandson Alfred, who brought all parts of the kingdom under his dominion. Tenth, Edgar, grandson of Alfred's grandson, a strong and peaceable king, who had both English and Scots either under his rule or completely at his will.[107]

William of Malmesbury also extolled Ecgberht's kingly virtues in a similar manner:

> Having thus become master of the whole of Britain, Ecgberht passed the last nine years of his life in tranquillity, except that near the end of his time a band of Danish pirates landed on his shores and disturbed the public peace. Such is the play of chance in human affairs; he who was the first to rule over the English as a whole, could derive little satisfaction from the obedience of his countrymen while a foreign foe was ceaselessly harassing him and his heirs.[108]

The *Chronicle* entry for 838 provided the inspiration behind both Henry's and William's later elevation of Ecgberht of Wessex to master of Britain and both apparently succumbed

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[105] James Campbell, 'The united kingdom of England: the Anglo-Saxon achievement', in Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London, 1992), pp. 31-47, at p. 38.

[106] H. R. Loyn, 'The imperial style of the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon kings', *History* 40 (1955), 111-115, 114-115. The perception of imperial authority in tenth-century England had enduring effects upon later medieval authors in England and their historical consciousness. On this see John Gillingham, 'Foundations of a disunited kingdom', in Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer, (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 48-64, at p. 51.

[107] Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford, 1996), ii. 23, 105-7, and lxi. Henry was the creator of the Anglo-Saxon historical construct which remains known to this day as the 'Heptarchy'. See James Campbell, 'Some twelfth-century views of the Anglo-Saxon past', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 131-150.

[108] *GR*, ii. 107.

to the nuances conveyed by the annal. If the origins of the notion of a *Bretwalda* can be found at the court of King Alfred did its related concept of Britain as a political entity also have discernible roots there?

Christian Overkingship in Wales

One Alfredian text in particular suggests that the concept of 'Britain-ruler' was on someone's agenda at the royal court, for Asser dedicated his *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* specifically:

> To my esteemed and most holy lord, Alfred, ruler of all the Christians of the island of Britain, king of all the Angles and Saxons, Asser, lowest of all the servants of God, wishes thousandfold prosperity in this life and in the next, according to the desires of his prayers.
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> *Domino meo venerabli piissimoque omnium Brittanniae insulae Christianorum rectori, Ælfred, Anglorum Saxonum regi. Asser, omnium servorum Dei ultimus, millemodam ad desideriorum ultriusque vitae properitatem.*[109]

Asser's dedication to King Alfred has been deemed incompatible with a true ninth-century date. This interpretation dismisses the dedication as a blatant imitation of the 'imperial' charter-styles of the tenth century and provides a tell-tale sign that the whole of Asser's *Life* is a later forgery. Smyth has claimed that the Latin word *rector* and 'its related phrase "ruler of all Britain" relates to the later tenth century, when Alfred's grandsons and great-grandsons were extending their overlordship over Danish and Celtic inhabitants of Britain.'[110] And, 'that the idea of a writer addressing Alfred as *rector*, in the context of "ruler of all the Christians of the island of Britain" is ... not compatible with a ninth-

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[109] Asser, dedication.
[110] Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), p. 391. See also the same author's 'Unmasking Alfred's false biographer', *British Archaeology* 7 (Sept. 1995), 8-9.

century Anglo-Latin historical text.'[111] This argument is, however, somewhat misleading and, as Keynes has pointed out, this description of Asser's *Life* as 'an Anglo-Latin historical text' is inaccurate, since it is 'ostensibly a Cambro-Latin work [set] in an Anglo-Saxon context.'[112] Moreover, far from being anachronistic, the title of *rector* was used in England in the eighth century to describe King Coenwulf of Mercia as *rector et imperator Merciorum regni*.[113] This charter was probably inspired by Alcuin's letter of 797 to the same Coenwulf and exhibits similar 'imperial' language, thereby suggesting that the regnal style in the Mercian charter was influenced by Carolingian models.[114] The royal style *rector et imperator Merciorum regni* provides an example of eighth-century hegemonic pretensions made on behalf of an Anglo-Saxon king as Coenwulf was now the ruler of a newly-extended Mercian kingship incorporating Kent.[115] But, by 893, when Asser wrote about the deeds of King Alfred, his use of the word *rector* was not in itself a claim of Alfredian *imperium*.

Asser's description of King Alfred as *rector* may seem unusual but it is entirely compatible with King Alfred's spiritual and political disposition. It clearly reflects the

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[111] Alfred P. Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), p. 195. Cf. Simon Keynes, 'On the authenticity of Asser's Life of King Alfred', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47.3 (July, 1996), 529-551 at 540 has somewhat overstated his case against Smyth. Keynes wrote that Smyth 'appears to believe that the word *rector* was not used before the tenth century which is certainly untrue.' However, Smyth never went this far, he just doubted that the word *rector* was valid for a ninth-century royal designation. See the response to this accusation by Keynes in Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred the Great*, at p. 268, n. 93.

[112] Keynes, 'On the authenticity of Asser's Life of King Alfred', 540.

[113] S 153. *Ego Co[e]nuulfus [di]uina gratia larigiente rector et imperator Merciorum regni.*

[114] Alcuin's letter reads: '*illium semper habeas in mente qui te regnum exaltavit super principes populi sui rectorem.*' For discussion see Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas*', at pp. 109-110 and n. 45.

[115] Yorke, 'The vocabulary of overlordship', 177.

writings of Gregory the Great, whose moralistic outpourings underpinned much of the ideology of the Alfredian court. In this environment, the word *rector* was synonymous with both ruler and bishop, and was chosen by Asser because it invoked directly Alfred's biblical and Gregorian sensibilities of good rulership.[116] The relationship between secular and religious authority was a favourite theme of both Gregory and Alfred and in much of his own writings Alfred echoed Gregory's earlier convictions about the common foundations shared by earthly and spiritual leadership.[117] The impact of Gregorian thought upon Alfredian royal ideology was extensive and the Gregorian conception of good governance saturates much of Alfredian kingship, both theoretically and practically, and finds its expression in many forms.[118] The *Moralia in Job* and its related images of *humiliatio-exaltatio* are reflected in Asser's description of Alfred's illnesses, where the king's pain and subsequent anguish contributed to the wider Gregorian world of the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition.[119] This includes the Alfredian translations of Gregory's *Dialogi* and *Cura Pastoralis*.[120] In his *Verse Preface* to Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, King Alfred placed himself directly into the chain of authority proceeding from God through the

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[116] R. A. Markus, 'Gregory the Great on kings and preachers in the commentary on I Kings', in Diana Wood (ed.), *The Church and Sovereignty, c.590-1918: Essays in Honour of Michael Wilks*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 9 (Oxford, 1991), 7-21, at 11, demonstrates that Gregory disapproved not of the institution of kingship, but the possibility that the office may be abused by the elevation of a 'reprobate' to this particular position of authority.

[117] Allen J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, 1986), p. 25. On Gregory's perception of the term *rector* see R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 26-31.

[118] Matthew Kempshall, 'No bishop, no king: the ministerial ideology of kingship and Asser's *Res Gestae Aelfredi*' in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 106-127, at p. 108.

[119] Scharer, 'König Alfreds Hof und die Geschichtsschreibung', 456.

[120] For the Alfredian translation of Gregory's *Diologi* see Kees Dekker, 'King Alfred's translation of Gregory's *Dialogi*: tales for the unlearned', in Rolf H. Bremmer Jr., Kees Dekker and David F. Johnson (eds.), *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, Mediaevalia Groningana, New series 4 (Paris, Leuven, Sterling, VA, 2001), pp. 27-50.

Gregorian Mission to the English. By this process, Alfred associated himself with all of his subjects. In order that Alfred can become an omnipresent ruler, Asser required a distinctive form of language and the Gregorian term *rector* was chosen rather than the more prosaic term ruler. By these means Asser could legitimately stake the king's claim to a universal authority over religious as well as lay people.[121]

Asser's Gregorian phraseology allowed Alfred, and those around him, to redefine their future territorial ambitions with a particular emphasis upon Alfred's ascendancy over the Welsh leaders. Asser recommended Alfred to a potential Welsh audience as rector of all the Christians of the Island of Britain (*omnium Brittanniae insulae Christianorum rectori*) and thereby defined Alfred's right to Welsh overkingship in religious terms, without resorting to ties of kinship, military power, or earthly fealty. Alfred's only apparent bond with his newly-acquired Celtic subjects was one of faith. Asser's distinctive word *rector* expresses the truly exceptional nature of Alfred's overkingship, a form of royal authority that crossed the awkward boundary of ethnicity by appealing directly to a joint spirituality. Now the obvious differences in ethnicity between Alfred's 'English' peoples and the Celts was no longer an insurmountable obstacle to cultural assimilation. Nor was it 'in itself the basis of political unity or opposition' rather 'political opposition was often expressed through the symbolic manipulation of these "pre-existing likenesses" in order to

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[121] Nicole Guenther Discenza, 'Alfred's verse preface to the *Pastoral Care* and the chain of authority', *Neophilologus* 85.4 (October, 2001), 625-633, at 626.

mould an identity and a community in opposition to one's enemies.'[122] In many ways Asser's *Life* is a treatise dedicated to the divinely-orchestrated rule of King Alfred who labours (at times through great adversity) day and night to serve God and to repulse the heathens. But Alfred needed allies for his cause.[123] Asser had constructed a method of projecting the king's political and religious ambitions beyond their customary limits, with particular emphasis across the territorial border with Wales, where traditionally Alfred as a 'Saxon' king, would have been perceived as hostile.[124] Central once more to Asser's theme is the dedication to King Alfred and its emphasis upon Christian rulership and solidarity.

Once more inspired by Gregory, Asser portrayed King Alfred as an unwilling recipient of authority.[125] Ultimately modelled on Christ himself, the *topos* of the reluctant ruler formed one of Alfred's own principles of wise and just government. Matthew Kempshall has argued that Asser's *Life* 'combined exemplary didacticism with precisely the safeguard against pride on which Gregory had insisted in his opening and closing

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[122] Patrick J. Geary, 'Ethnic identity as a situational construct in the early middle ages', *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 113 (1983), 15-26, at 25; Geary cites from Sidney M. Mintz and Eric R. Wolf, 'An analysis of ritual co-parenthood (Compadrazgo)', *South-Western Journal of Anthropology* 6.4 (1950), 341-368 and Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London, 1969).

[123] R. I. Page, 'The audience of Beowulf and the Vikings', in Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 113-122, at p. 119 pointed out that even Alfred's learning to read Latin is part of this overarching theme of divine rulership.

[124] For the historical relationship between England and Wales see Wendy Davies, 'The Welsh and the English', in her *Patterns of Power in Early Wales: O'Donnell Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford 1983* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 61-79. For the relationship between Wales and Mercia, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Wales and Mercia, 613-918', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 89-105.

[125] Paul Meyvaert, 'Gregory the Great and the theme of authority', in his *Benedict, Gregory and Others* (London, 1977), pp. 3-12, at p. 4. For Gregory's early career see Carole Straw, *Gregory The Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1988) and her 'Gregory the Great', in *Authors of the Middle Ages: Historical and Religious Writers of the Latin West*, general editor, Patrick J. Geary, vol. iv no.12 (Aldershot, 1996), 1-72.

chapters.'[126] For his part, Alfred eschewed arrogance and demonstrated that he possessed a humility that was reminiscent of Christ's when he promised his subjects that his own right to authority would follow this heavenly example:

> He did not wish to be king, and He came of His own will to the cross. He shunned the glory of royal authority and chose the punishment of that most abominable death, so that we who are His limbs would learn from Him to shun the allurements of this earth, and also would not fear its horrors and its dangers, and for the sake of truth would love work and fear prosperity and avoid it.[127]

Therefore it is humility that binds Alfred to all his people. Gregory, at the very outset of his *Regula Pastoralis*, had recommended humility as a virtue for all his *rectores* to follow:

> Let the ruler (*rector*), through humility, act as co-partner of those who lead good lives, but let him, through zeal for justice, take a firm stand against the vices of those who sin, so that where the good are concerned, he prefers himself to them in nothing, but where the faults of the sinful require it, he asserts at once the power of his authority. Thus, disregarding rank, he will see himself as the equal of his subjects who lead good lives, but will not fear to exercise the laws of justice against evil doers.[128]

Alfred's alleged inhibitions in taking up the kingship were subtly juxtaposed with his true role as the saviour of his people from the evils which accompanied the pagan invasions. According to Asser, Alfred obeyed domestic conventions and only received the kingship upon the death of his brother Æthelred. Yet, Asser makes it crystal clear that if Alfred had designs upon the kingship he could have taken it at any time. Echoing Gregory's fundamental text, Asser recounted Alfred's hesitant elevation to the kingship and 'when a month had passed after he had begun to reign almost unwillingly for indeed he did not think that he alone could ever withstand such great ferocity of the pagans, unless strengthened by divine help.'[129]

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[126] Kempshall, 'No bishop, no king', at p. 123;
[127] King Alfred, *Translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care*; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 127.
[128] Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, book ii. ch. 6, trans. Meyvaert, 'Gregory the Great and the theme of authority', p. 10.
[129] Asser, ch. 42.

Besides framing the West Saxon claims of Welsh overkingship in religious terms and adopting the Gregorian discourse found in the humility of the saviour, Asser reinforced Alfred's credibility by reminding his audience that 'at that time and for a considerable time before then, all the districts of right-hand (southern) Wales belonged to King Alfred and still do.'[130] Even before the southern Welsh princes turned to him for protection Alfred was portrayed as having substantial jurisdiction (however fictional) across the border. This hegemony over the Welsh was, however, not instigated by Alfred, but was brought about because of both internal friction and external aggression against the southern Welsh. Once again Alfred is the reluctant ruler, one who refrains from actively seeking further power and submission to his lordship. Those in need of Alfred's overkingship and protection, could, however, turn too him, and approach him at his royal court:

> That is to say, Hyfaidd, with all the inhabitants of the kingdom of Dyfed, driven by the might of the six son of Rhodri [Mawr], had submitted himself to King Alfred's royal overlordship. Likewise, Hywel ap Rhys (the king of Glywysing) and Brochfael and Ffynfael (sons of Meurig and kings of Gwent), driven by the might and tyrannical behaviour of Ealdorman Æthelred and the Mercians, petitioned Alfred of their own accord, in order to obtain lordship and protection from him in the face of their enemies. Similarly, Elise ap Tewdwr, king of Brycheniog, being driven by the might of the same sons of Rhodri [Mawr], sought of his own accord the lordship of King Alfred. and Anarawd ap Rhodri, together with his brothers, eventually abandoned his alliance with the Northumbrians (from which he got no benefit, only a good deal of misfortune) and, eagerly seeking alliance with King Alfred, came to him in person; when he had been received with honour by the King and accepted as a son in confirmation at the hand of a bishop, and showered with extravagant gifts, he subjected himself with all his people to King Alfred's lordship on the same condition as Æthelred and the Mercians, namely that in every respect he would be obedient to the royal will.[131]

For a number of reasons, this is one of the most important chapters in the whole of Asser's text; it is also one that has posed considerable interpretive difficulties over the years.[132]

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[130] *Ibid.*, ch. 80.
[131] *Ibid.*
[132] David N. Dumville, 'The "six" sons of Rhodri Mawr: a problem in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', in his *Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1993), pp. 5-18.

Asser's claim that the southern Welsh kings were driven to seek out King Alfred by the tyrannical behaviour of Ealdorman Æthelred will be further developed later in this thesis, but Asser's choice of language is, nevertheless, instructive. Taken literally, Asser's description of Æthelred is difficult to reconcile with the likelihood that the *Life* was intended to be used both as a *speculum principis* at the royal court and to play a didactic role in the King's overall strategy of education. Yet persuasive arguments that this was indeed the case have been put forward.[133] In contrast, David Pratt has argued that 'Asser's inclusion of part of the *Chronicle* translated into Latin and his reference to Ealdorman Æthelred's *tyrannis* rendered his *Life* inappropriate for court consumption.'[134] Pratt's suggestion is but one way of interpreting Asser's declaration about Æthelred's alleged behaviour. The distinctive contrast between the two powerful 'Saxons' Alfred and Æthelred, is however, convenient for Asser's purposes in other ways. The advantages of Alfred's benevolent royal overkingship are conspicuously compared with the oppressive demeanour displayed by Æthelred and the Mercians in general. Chapter 80 of Asser's text suggests that the Welsh were one intended audience for the *Life*, but there is no evidence to presuppose that the whole of this chapter – especially the negative representations of the Mercians - would have appeared in any other 'editions'.

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[133] Scharer, 'The writing of history', 185- 206, and Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', at p. 128 have both argued that the *Life* was written as a 'mirror for princes' and both have suggested that Asser's Latin translation of the *Chronicle* text would have been extremely beneficial for aiding new clerical recruits to Alfred's court, especially ones unfamiliar with the English vernacular. This seems particularly relevant for any would-be Welsh recruits to Alfred's entourage.

[134] D. R. Pratt, 'The political thought of Alfred the Great' (University of Cambridge Ph.D. Thesis, 1999), pp. 18-19.

The manuscript history of Asser's text is unfortunately clouded by uncertainty.[135] Only one medieval manuscript of the work is known to have survived into more recent times and this was destroyed in the Cottonian fire of the 23rd of October 1731. This particular manuscript (numbered in Cotton's collection as Otho A xii) may not have been the only version intended for 'publication'. Asser's claim that Anarawd's association with King Alfred was constructed on the exact level as Æthelred's relationship with the king is overstated and suggests that the entire wording of chapter eighty should be interpreted with extreme caution. Asser portrayed Anarawd as equal in status to Æthelred to protect Welsh pride and in order to facilitate Anarawd's assimilation into Alfred's Christian community, for Alfred also required Asser to draw together whatever military support he could muster against their common pagan antagonists.[136] As Wendy Davies has pointed out, one result of this arrangement was that Welsh troops fought with the West Saxons at Buttington in 893.[137] Asser's description of Æthelred also makes further reassurances to Anarawd and the other Welsh rulers since it confirmed Alfred's overall ability to restrain the Mercian leader. As Asser stated, 'in every respect' Æthelred too was also 'obedient to the royal will', essentially rendering any former tyrannical behaviour by Alfred's Mercian son-in law-obsolete.

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[135] For the manuscript transmission of Asser's text, see Andrew Prescott, 'The Ghost of Asser', in Philip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 255-291 and Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 56-58.

[136] N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth Making and History* (London, 2002), p. 186, has plausibly suggested that Anarawd's power was on a similar level as Alfred accorded Guthrum.

[137] Wendy Davies, 'Alfred's contemporaries: Irish, Welsh, Scots and Bretons', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 323-337, p. 332.

As a projection of the aspirations of Alfred's royal court, the dedication which opens Asser's *Life* illustrates the preoccupation of the Alfredian hierarchy for portraying Alfred as the most powerful Christian king within the British Isles. Asser's dedication to Alfred projected the virtues of Alfredian hegemony into the potentially conflicting environment of Wales while simultaneously ramming home the fact that Alfred was now in charge of Æthelred's Mercia.[138] In 893, Asser portrayed King Alfred in such grandiose fashion because it suitably reflected events that happened both some years earlier and more recently. In the early to mid 880s Alfred set his sights on forming a mutually beneficial alliance between his newly-extended Wessex, which now incorporated 'English' Mercia, and the remaining Christian peoples of southern Britain, whatever their ethnic background (British and Danish alike).[139] By promoting Alfred as a figurehead in a pan-Christian alliance the Alfredian royal court projected notions of overkingship into regions where it was clearly unrealistic for a West Saxon king to claim this kind of secular authority directly. Alfred's desire for a Christian coalition was primarily borne out of the military necessity to make secure his newly-extended boundaries, and even to possibly expand them further afield, but it also reflected his deep concern for the survival of the Christian religion.[140] In the Alfredian translation of Paulus Orosius' *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (probably composed between 889 and 899) Rome's Gothic wars are replaced

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[138] Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability in ninth-century Wessex', 94.
[139] Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, p. 187.
[140] Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 310-328, at p. 327 has observed that it was possibly the 'presence of the Vikings (perhaps more than a reading of Bede) made people all the more conscious of their common identity, both as English and as Christians.'

by the West Saxon struggle against the pagan Danes.[141] Here the unnecessary conflict between fellow Christians is viewed as a root cause of God's infliction of the heathens upon a Christian society:

> It is now rather ridiculous that we [should] complain and that we call it a war, when strangers and foreigners come upon us, and plunder us a little, and then again quickly leave us, we will not think of how it was then, when no man could buy his life from another.[142]

In response to the heathen invasions, a new and vibrant ethnogenesis was assembled at the Alfredian court within the context of Alfred's extended Christian-centric hegemony:

> How blindly many people speak about [Christianity], that it is worse now than it was formerly. They will not think nor know, that before [Christianity], no people, of its own will, asked peace of another, unless it were in need; nor where any [people] could obtain peace from another by gold, or by silver, or by any fee without being enslaved.'[143]

Alfred's benevolent overkingship emphasised Christian solidarity and, moreover, the arrangements constructed in respect of the Welsh kings were meant to be reciprocally beneficial.[144] The 880s was a period of great upheaval for the Welsh rulers as the Scandinavian newcomers proved to be not just an irritant exploiting traditional Welsh rivalries but a direct threat to overall Welsh stability. Alfred was the one remaining Christian leader able to confront the Danes openly and it was to Alfred that the Welsh

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[141] Janet Bately, ed. *The Old English Orosius*, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series (Oxford, 1980), p. xcii.

[142] *King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon Version of the History of Paulus Orosius*, in R. Pauli, ed. *The Life of Alfred the Great: to Which is Appended Alfred's Anglo-Saxon Version of Orosius*, trans. B. Thorpe (London, 1899), iii. 11, p.83; cited in P. J. E. Kershaw, 'Rex Pacificus. Studies in royal peacemaking and the image of the peacemaking king in the early medieval West' (University of London Ph.D. Thesis, 1998), p. 182.

[143] *O.E. Orosius*, 1.10, pp. 28-31. *Hu blindlice monege þeoda sprecað ymb þone cristendom þæt hit nu wyrse sie þonne hit wære, þæt hie nellað geðencean oþþe ne cunnon, hwær hit gewurde ær þæm cristendome, þæt ænegu þeod o; þerre mehete; frið begietan, oððe mid golde, oððe mid seolfre, oþþe mid ænige feo, buton he him underþiedd wære.* Cited in Stephen J. Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (New York and London, 2003), pp. 101-102.

[144] Wendy Davies,'The Welsh and the English', in her *Patterns of Power in Early Wales: O'Donnell Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford 1983* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 61-79, p. 75. Davies likened these agreements to those arranged between Charles the Bald and Salomon in the 860s.

princes turned.[145] As for the Alfredian court itself, they too made use of this political turmoil by appealing to a collective religious inheritance and Asser, who elaborated upon these meetings between Alfred and the Welsh leaders, may even have played a key diplomatic role in their apparent acquiescence to Alfred's authority, possibly in 885-6.

The epithet for King Alfred should not be viewed as an idle boast by Asser; nor should it be simply perceived as a form of high flattery perpetrated by a composer of panegyric for a powerful king. Alfred and his counsellors had exploited the disintegration of previously established boundaries of royal authority and in place of the more restrictive confines of kingship, or indeed the traditional methods of overkingship, they came up with a revolutionary conception of dominion based on commonality of faith. Central to the successful implementation of this radical concept was the dedication to King Alfred by Asser which opens his *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* and seemingly represents the most impressive statement of royal authority articulated for any Anglo-Saxon king before the tenth-century imperial claims of Alfred's descendants. But the wording of Alfred's title is deceptive. Alfred was not sufficiently powerful to achieve traditional tribute-taking hegemony and, what is more, it appears that both the king and his royal court were well aware of these practical limitations. A lack of military and political clout, however, would not prevent the Alfredian court from projecting the king's influence elsewhere and Alfred and his advisors also made their Christian presence felt in the north of England.

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[145] Henry Loyn, 'Wales and England in the tenth century: the context of the Athelstan charters', *Welsh Historical Review* 10 (1981), 283-301, at 285-286.

Further Christian Hegemony

Alfredian attempts to achieve nominal primacy inside Northumbria were made sometime around 893 and these too were bound up with the portrayal of Alfred as a spiritual overking. Asser's chapter 80 detailing the submission of the Welsh leaders to Alfred's Christian leadership is a conflation of past and present events. When the southern Welsh kings approached King Alfred somewhere in the mid-880s, Anarawd the king of Gwynedd and his brothers were busy forging an alliance with Guthfrith the Danish king in York.[146] From this association, Asser concluded, Anarawd received 'no benefit, only a good deal of misfortune' and afterwards he was compelled to seek out King Alfred's protection.[147] Anarawd's submission happened either in or shortly before 893 making Asser's *Life* a near-contemporary account of how Alfred achieved his overkingship of the northern Welsh.[148] In an extraordinary display of formalised religious overkingship, Alfred stood sponsor to Anarawd at confirmation despite the latter being already Christian.[149] Here Alfred was reaffirming his role as the sole protector of the faith but this was ritualised sponsorship with a political imperative. Besides standing sponsor to Anarawd at confirmation, Alfred forged deeper secular links with the Welsh king by entering into a relationship of *amicitia* further

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[146] D. P. Kirby, 'Northumbria in the reign of Alfred the Great', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumbria* 11 (1965), 335-346.
[147] Asser, ch. 80.
[148] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 263-264, n. 183.
[149] Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca and London, 1998), pp. 221-223.

cementing Anarawd's personal dependency upon Alfred.[150] Here Alfred was 'driving a wedge' between Gwynedd and York and crystallising his plan to promote himself in the north of England.[151] Guthfrith, without the backing of the northern Welsh king, was vulnerable to the threats posed by an emerging northern leader named Sigeferth. Guthfrith appears to have realised his predicament and treated with King Alfred shortly after the northern Welsh had aligned themselves with the West Saxons.

In 892 a formidable Danish army under their leader Hæsten arrived from Boulogne and proceeded to ravage throughout Alfred's kingdom and they constructed fortresses at Milton and Appledore on the Thames estuary. That same year, Alfred made a concerted effort to deny the invaders any additional military support from those Danes already settled in England and he treated with the native Scandinavians of both Northumbria and East Anglia. The *Chronicle* recounts Alfred's attempts to extract some measure of security from both groups of indigenous Danes and also reported that these arrangements made some twelve months earlier seem to have failed:

> In this year, that was twelve months after the Danes had built the fortress in the eastern kingdom, the Northumbrians and East Angles had given King Alfred oaths, and the East Angles had given six preliminary hostages; and yet, contrary to those pledges, as often as the other Danish armies went out in full force, they went either with them or on their behalf.[152]

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[150] Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Alliances, godfathers, treaties and boundaries', in M. A. Blackburn and D. Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 47-61, at p. 56.

[151] Kirby, 'Asser and his life of King Alfred', 16. Asser, ch. 102 relates that Alfred, 'depending on his resources', gave grants 'to churches and the servants of God dwelling within them in Wales and Cornwall, Gaul, Brittany, Northumbria, and sometimes even Ireland.'

[152] *ASC*, 893; see Whitelock, *et al The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 53, n. 5, for the differing dates of the various manuscripts. *On þysson geare, þæt wæs ymbe tweolf monað þæs ðe hi on þam eastrice geweorc hæfdon geweorht, hæfdon Norðanhymbre 7 Eastængle Ælfrede cyninge aþas geseald, 7 Eastængle foregisla .vi., 7 þeah ofer þa treowa, swa oft swa þa oðre hergas mid ealle herge ut foron, þonne foron hi, oþþe mid,*

Following the entry for 893, the *Chronicle* concentrates upon the conflict between the allied forces under Alfred's control and Hæsten's Danes.[153] These campaigns culminated in the great allied victory at Buttington, where Mercian, Kentish and Welsh levies supported the West Saxon forces, but, despite Æthelweard's statement that this battle was 'much vaunted by aged men' this was not the end of the war.[154] At this particular juncture there was a further struggle for power taking place away from the main arena where Alfred's coalition forces had battled with Hæsten's Danes. Mastery within Northumbria was being contested, possibly between King Guthfrith and his eventual successor at York, a 'pirate from the land of the Northumbrians' by the name of Sigeferth.[155] In response to this disruption to northern stability, it appears that King Alfred either initiated further contact with Northumbria, or alternatively, he proved responsive to requests for assistance from York. Æthelweard, who becomes an independent source for northern affairs from 893 on, provides the principal evidence for King Alfred's attempts to secure a lasting peace in the region and to promote his quest for further overlordship.[156]

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oðde on hyra healfa; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 6 MS. 'D', ed. G. P. Cubbins (Cambridge, 1996), *s.a.* 894. For this pact see Richard Abels, 'King Alfred's peace making strategies with the Vikings', *HSJ* 3 (1991), 23-34, at 34 and Ryan Lavelle, 'The use and abuse of hostages in later Anglo-Saxon England', *EME* 14.3 (2006), 269-296, at 288.

[153] For Hæsten see Ruth Waterhouse, 'The Hæsten episode in 894 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', *Studia Neophilogica* 46 (1974), 136-141 and Frederic Amory, 'The Viking Hasting in Franco-Scandinavian legend' in Margot H. King and Wesley M. Stevens (eds.), *Saints Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, 2 vols. (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1979), ii. 265-286.

[154] Æthelweard, *s. a.* 893. Hæsten and his arrangements with King Alfred are further discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis.

[155] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 893.

[156] For Æthelweard's Chronicle as an independent source for northern affairs see Kenneth Harrison, 'A note on the Battle of *Brunanburh*', *Durham Archaeological Journal* 1 (1984), 63-5, at 63.

Æthelweard reports on a West Saxon mission led by Æthelnoth, the ealdorman of Somerset, which ventured northwards and entered York in 894:

> Ealdorman Æthelnoth set out from Wessex. In the city of York he contacted the enemy, who possessed [are plundering] large territories in the kingdom of the Mercians, on the western side of the place called Stanford. This is to say between the streams of the river Welland and the thickets of the wood called Kesteven by the common people.[157]

Unfortunately, Æthelweard does not explain why Ealdorman Æthelnoth of Somerset was sent to York in 894. It may be that Alfred required retribution for Sigeferth's piratical attacks upon West Saxon territory and dispatched Æthelnoth to intercept the Danish forces.[158] Alternatively, Æthelnoth's mission could have been wholly unconnected with retribution and more to do with buttressing Alfred's boundaries in the north. Smyth has argued that Sigeferth should be identified with the similarly named Jarl Sichfrith who, *The Annals of Ulster* report, was attacking Dublin at the time of Æthelnoth's march on York.[159] Smyth's suggestion is attractive; it implies that the prime motive behind Æthelnoth's journey to York was to promote a peace agreement between Alfred and the York kingship.[160] Given both the geographical importance of York, and Æthelweard's uncharacteristic reluctance to relate the outcome of any military engagement, a diplomatic

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[157] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 894. The square brackets are the translation by Keynes and Lapidge who have suggested that Æthelweard's transmitted '*pandunt*' is nonsense and they have substituted '*praedantur*' (they plunder) as their alteration to Campbell's translation. See A. Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelweardi*: *The Chronicle of Æthelweard* (London, 1962), p. 51 and Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 190 and p. 337, n. 35.

[158] F. M. Stenton, 'Æthelweard's account of the last years of King Alfred's reign', in D. M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: Being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 8-13, pp. 10-11 and Whitelock, *et al The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 56, n. 6. More recently, D. P. Kirby, 'Northumbria in the ninth century', in D. M. Metcalf (ed.), *Coinage in Ninth-Century Northumbria*: *The Tenth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*, BAR British Series 180 (Oxford, 1987), 11-25, at 23, has also argued that Æthelnoth was sent by Alfred to campaign against Sigeferth.

[159] *The Annals of Ulster (to A. D. 1131)*, eds. Sean Mac Airt and Gearoid Mac Niocail, part one text and translation (Dublin, 1983), *s.a.* 893. See Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (I Dublin, 1975, II Dublin and New Jersey, 1979, reprinted in one volume, Dublin, 1987), i. 33-4.

[160] Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, i. 33-34.

initiative seems the most likely hypothesis.[161] If Æthelnoth was merely engaged in a punitive attack on Sigeferth's warbands it is indeed surprising that Æthelweard, who was generally well-informed about anything that concerned the deeds of Somerset ealdormen, failed to narrate the outcome of a military encounter. Perhaps this notion of a proposed peace agreement between the West Saxons and the York kingship can be developed a little further. The Christian King Guthfrith may have desired an alliance with the increasingly-powerful West Saxon monarchy if, as seems likely, he had become recently embroiled in a bitter dispute with Sigeferth over Rutland and perhaps held fears for his kingship more generally.[162]

The West Saxon advance into York has been viewed as either a military response to Sigeferth's raiding of West Saxon territory or as a diplomatic approach made by the West Saxons towards the kingdom of York. For example Keynes and Lapidge have suggested that 'it is uncertain whether he [Æthelnoth] was on military or diplomatic business.'[163] There is, however, no reason as to why these two objectives cannot be directly associated. Æthelnoth's mission could have been a diplomatic initiative combined with a potent illustration of West Saxon military capability. Æthelweard's uncharacteristic silence becomes more comprehensible if Æthelnoth's undertaking did not end with a set-piece battle. Moreover, any major West Saxon delegation making the dangerous journey to

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[161] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, p. 303, n. 32. Contrast with Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, i. 46-7 and his *King Alfred the Great*, p. 126.
[162] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, p. 303.
[163] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 337, n. 34.

York would surely have been prepared to defend itself against Sigeferth or any other roving Danish brigands. The region as a whole was inherently volatile during this period and here the leadership qualities of the West Saxon delegation should be noted.[164] Æthelnoth was not only one of Alfred's most loyal and valued retainers he was also a formidable soldier. A veteran of Alfred's flight into the Somerset marshes before Edington in 878, Æthelnoth was one of Alfred's most trusted generals and he was one of the victorious leaders at Buttington in 893.[165] Æthelnoth was an ideal candidate to lead a delegation allocated with the task of seeking some form of political and military accommodation with the Northumbrians. By entering into a political and military arrangement with the York kingship, Alfred established the more secure boundaries he needed. But it also furthered his political ambitions and the mission allowed Alfred the opportunity to acquire a nominal northern overkingship and superficial hegemony. Any cursory authority Alfred might have achieved proved short-lived, however, when Guthfrith died on the 24th of August 895. With his untimely death went the immediate prospect of a lasting Northumbrian alliance and, furthermore, with it went any chance of Alfred gaining a northern ascendancy. Guthfrith was succeeded by Sigefrith who, given his probable pagan-Norse background,

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[164] D. W. Rollason, *Northumbria, 500-1100* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 260.

[165] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 878 and *s.a.* 893 says of Æthelnoth's time at Athelney, that 'he lurked in a certain wood with a small force' and that he was at Buttington, where he was the general in charge of the West Saxon forces For discussion see also Whitelock, *et al The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 49, n. 3. For Æthelnoth's high status and importance to Alfred see Simon Keynes, ed. *An Atlas of Attestations in Anglo-Saxon Charters, c. 670-1066*, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge (Cambridge, 1998), table xxi (3 of 15), where the Somerset ealdorman witnesses three charters, S 352 as 1 *dux*; S 345 as 1 *dux* and S 356 as 2 *dux*.

was probably less inclined to show Alfred and the West Saxons a similar kind of deference as that shown by his predecessor.[166]

[166] Alfred P. Smyth, 'The chronology of Northumbrian history in the ninth and tenth centuries', in R. A. Hall (ed.), *Viking Age York and the North*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 27 (London, 1978), 8-10, at 9.

Chapter Three

Wessex at War: Securing Loyalty in the First Viking Age

Then in the harvest season the army went away into Mercia and shared out some of it, and gave some Ceolwulf.[1]

When King Alfred succeeded his brother Æthelred to the West Saxon throne in 871 Wessex was a kingdom besieged. Without time to reflect upon his accession, Alfred was immediately drawn into battle by the Danes; there was to be no respite from what was now in effect a war of attrition. The *Chronicle* reported that in that year 'nine general engagements were fought' and the same year 'King Alfred fought with a small force against the whole army at Wilton and put it to flight far on into the day; and the Danes had possession of the battlefield.'[2] Even the *Chronicle's* concise evaluation indicates that this was an inauspicious beginning to Alfred's reign. But Æthelweard's *Chronicon*, although later and somewhat garbled, possibly provides a more secure setting for Alfred's first taste of kingship. Æthelweard presented an account of an engagement, which was almost certainly Wilton, as a comprehensive defeat for the West Saxon forces; this following on almost immediately after King Æthelred's funeral at Wimborne minster:

> When all these things had happened, Ælfred got the kingdom after the death of his brothers. He was the last son of King Æthelwulf to rule over all the provinces of Britain. An innumerable summer army arrived at Reading, and opened hostilities vigorously against the army of the West Saxons. And the ones who had long been ravaging in that area were at hand to help them. The army of the English was then small, owing to the absence of the king, who was at that time attending the obsequies of his brother. Although the ranks were not at full strength, high courage was in their breasts. And rejoicing in battle they repel the enemy some distance. However, overcome with weariness, they desist from fighting, and the barbarians won a degree of victory which one might call fruitless.[3]

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[1] *ASC*, 877.
[2] *Ibid.*, 871.
[3] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 871.

The likeliest hypothesis for Alfred's inauguration as King of the West Saxons is that he was brought to battle by the Danish forces whilst overseeing his brother's funeral at Wimborne and he had to confront a vastly superior force at nearby Wilton with whatever forces could be mustered.[4] It was not just the engagement at Wilton that went badly, for now the Danes were bringing the war right into the heart of Wessex and Alfred was running out of the manpower necessary to continue fighting. As Asser put it 'nor should it seem extraordinary to anyone that the Christians had a small number of men in the battle [at Wilton]: for the Saxons were virtually annihilated to a man in this single year in eight battles against the pagans.'[5] Alfred's defeat at Wilton virtually ended any chance he had of expelling the Danes from his kingdom by force of arms and he finished 871 making peace with them.[6]

King Alfred also inherited at the start of his reign an alliance made by his father, King Æthelwulf, with the Mercian King Burgred, who was by this time, Alfred's brother-in-law, but this was a coalition already under severe pressure, and perhaps even before 871 it was being stretched to breaking point. At Nottingham in 868, Burgred requested assistance from King Æthelred and his brother Alfred, who together provided the Mercians with military aid, and both armies went 'into Mercia to Nottingham, and came upon the enemy in that fortress and besieged them there.'[7] If Æthelred and

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[4] Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), p. 37.

[5] Asser, ch. 42. Asser omits the Battle of *Meretun*; see chapter two of this thesis. I have used the religiously motivated word 'pagan' as implied by Asser rather than interpret it as 'Viking'. On this issue see Alfred P. Smyth, 'The emergence of English identity', in A. P. Smyth (ed.), *Medieval Europeans: Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe* (London, 1998), pp. 24-52 at p. 51, n. 59.

[6] Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 140-142.

[7] *ASC*, 868.

Alfred expected that the combined Mercian/West Saxon forces would oust the enemy from their stronghold and put them to flight then they were apparently mistaken. The *Chronicle* also reveals that 'there occurred no serious battle there, and the Mercians made peace with the enemy.'[8] Asser later dwelt upon this Mercian acceptance of peace and portrayed the West Saxons as returning home somewhat dejected after their fruitless exertions:

> Burgred, king of the Mercians, and all the leading men of that people sent messengers to Æthelred, king of the West Saxons, and to his brother Alfred, humbly requesting that they help them, so that they would be able to against the pagan army; they obtained this easily. For the brothers, promptly fulfilling their promise, gathered an immense army from every part of their kingdom, went to Mercia and arrived at Nottingham, single-mindedly seeking battle. But since the pagans, protected by the defences of the stronghold, refused to give battle, and since the Christians were unable to breech the wall, peace was established between the Mercians and the pagans, and the two brothers, Æthlered and Alfred, returned home with their forces. [9]

Alfred's respect for Burgred diminished from this point on, and the *Chronicle* account hinting at the Mercian's lack of resolve is accentuated by Asser's more intricate evaluation of the assault upon Nottingham. The juxtaposition of the West Saxons under Æthelred and his brother Alfred, who were 'single-mindedly seeking battle' with King Burgred's Mercians, who in contrast, were seemingly content to 'establish peace', is a theme pursued at length by the Alfredian sources. Moreover, the relationship between Alfred and Burgred may have become even more strained shortly after Alfred's accession and subsequent defeat by the Danes at Wilton. Roger of Wendover's *Flores Historiarum* preserves the tradition that in 872 Burgred gave safe refuge to the exiled Danish tributary king Ecgberht and Wulfhere his archbishop of York, who as a result of a rebellion against Ecgberht's authority, had both fled the north where the latter was

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Asser, ch. 30.

subsequently succeeded by a certain Ricsige as king.[10] Alfred may have perceived this as the first instance of Burgred openly complying with Danish demands for assistance.[11] Individually the West Saxons and the Mercians were now too wrapped up with thoughts for their own survival to lend further backing for one another's efforts against the invading Danes.[12] Mercian perception of what constituted survival differed substantially, however, from what King Alfred later believed to have been acceptable. The West Saxon royal court portrayed the end of Mercian autonomy as a direct result of disloyalty and betrayal. It is this theme of alleged Mercian complicity with the Danes, as viewed from the perspective of the Alfredian court in the 890s, which this chapter will expand upon.

The end of the Mercian kingship

The end of independent Mercian kingship was reported in considerable detail by the Alfredian *Chronicle* under the year 874:

> In this year the army went from Lindsey to Repton and took up winter quarters there, and drove King Burgred across the sea, after he had held the kingdom for 22 years. And they conquered all that land. And he went to Rome and settled there; and his body is buried in the church of St. Mary in the English quarter. And the same year they gave the kingdom of the Mercians to be held by Ceolwulf, a foolish [*unwis*] king's thegn; and he swore oaths to them and gave hostages, that it should be ready for them on whatever day they wished to have it, and he would be ready, himself and all who would follow him, at the enemy's service.[13]

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[10] Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History, Formerly Attributed to Matthew Paris*, ed. and trans. J. A. Giles, 2 vols. (London, 1849), i. 325.
[11] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 51.
[12] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, revised edition, 2000), p. 174.
[13] *ASC*, 874. Ceolwulf's name was omitted in the earliest *Chronicle* manuscript 'A' but all the other manuscripts have the name as does Asser and Æthelweard. See Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Revised Translation* (London, 1961), p. 48, n. 2.

This *Chronicle* entry is exceptional, concentrating solely as it does upon the termination of an autonomous Mercian kingdom for the benefit of an Alfredian audience in the 890s. The *Chronicle* narrative also has a more personal agenda, as it attempts to convince its readers that Ceolwulf II of Mercia was unlawfully enthroned by the Danes in 874 and held the Mercian kingdom in thraldom until his Danish masters required it be handed over to them. But other evidence suggests that this was an exaggeration and that Ceolwulf II was a lawfully elected Mercian king. Ceolwulf appears to have been accepted by the Mercians as their king and two of his charters from the year 875 survive and at least one more is known to have been issued.[14] Significantly, this now-lost charter of King Ceolwulf carries the implication that his authority to act as a legitimate king of the Mercians had been endorsed by a West Saxon monarch. A diploma of Edward the Elder for possibly 900 confirmed the sale of land at Water Eaton in Oxfordshire by a certain Hungyth to Wigferth and explained that the land had been 'previously purchased by Alhun, bishop of Worcester, from King Burgred and Queen Æthelswith, later sold by bishop Wærferth to King Ceolwulf, given by the king to Hungyth and then sold by Hungyth to Wigfrith.'[15] Ceolwulf was clearly exercising royal authority at least in the areas surrounding Worcester and Oxford. Furthermore, he was performing the role of king within these parts of Mercia with the support of many Mercian nobles and with the backing of the Mercian Church. Particularly noticeable is

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[14] There are two charters from the archive of Worcester that were issued in the name of Ceolwulf II. These are S 215 and S 216 both of 875. The former is much more reliable than the latter. See H. P. R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (2nd edition, Leicester, 1972), nos. 82 and 264. For Ceolwulf, see Ann Williams, Alfred P. Smyth and David Kirby, *A Biographical Dictionary of Dark Age Britain* (London, 1991), p. 78; Sean Miller, 'Ceolwulf II (*fl.* 874-879)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39145, [accessed 27th Sept 05]

[15] S 361. On this charter which was drawn up to replace an earlier lost document, see S 210 and Simon Keynes, 'A charter of King Edward the Elder for Islington', *Historical Research*, 66 (1993), 303-316, at 313.

the support Ceolwulf received from Wærferth the Bishop of Worcester who attested both surviving diplomas and is mentioned as selling land to the king in the lost one mentioned above. Later Mercian traditions do more to support Ceolwulf's royal credentials; he was allocated a reign of five years between 874 and 879 in a Mercian regnal list that dates possibly to the eleventh century.[16] Additionally, the *Annales Cambriae* for 877 suggest that Ceolwulf had sufficient royal influence to confront the Welsh and both 'Rhodri and his son Gwiriad [were] killed by the Saxons'; given Alfred's military commitments elsewhere, this can only have been the army of Ceolwulf II.[17] If this interpretation is correct, it might further support the view that not only was Ceolwulf a legal king of the Mercians but also that he was a formidable warrior and leader able to command the full support of an army in battle. Ceolwulf's ability to confront Mercia's traditional enemy the Welsh is also suggestive that he held sufficient autonomy from his putative Danish overlords to conduct typically aggressive border warfare along the western boundaries of Mercia. The available textual evidence therefore points towards Ceolwulf exercising royal authority within parts of Mercia from 875 and most probably from 874 as the *Chronicle* itself claims.

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[16] *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiæ Wigorniensis,* ed. Thomas Hearne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1723), i. 242. For Hemming, see N. R. Ker, 'Hemming's Cartulary: a description of the two Worcester cartularies in Cotton Tiberius A. xiii', in R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin and R. W. Southern (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 49-75 and Francesca Tinti, 'From episcopal conception to monastic compilation: Hemming's cartulary in context', *EME* 11.3 (Nov, 2002), 233-261.

[17] *Annales Cambriæ*, ed. John Williams ab Ithel, Rolls Series (London, 1860); trans. John Morris, *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London and Chichester, 1980), p. 48; Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Wales and Mercia, 613-918', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr, (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 89-105, at p. 101; for further historiographical opinion that this Mercian victory was achieved by Ceolwulf II see also N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (London, 2002), p. 172 and David N. Dumville, 'Brittany and the *Armes Prydein Vawr*', *Études celtiques* 20 (1983), 145-159, at 157.

Ceolwulf was additionally accused by the Alfredian chronicler of being a mere king's thegn, but if this description of his status is accurate, the identity of Ceolwulf's king remains obscure. Alfred P. Smyth has argued that the annal for 874 reflects Ceolwulf's treachery to King Burgred and the usurpation of his throne by one of his disloyal thegns.[18] While it is conceivable that the annalist was meant to imply that Ceolwulf had previously been King Burgred's thegn, this cannot be proved. Ceolwulf did not attest any of the surviving charters issued by Burgred or those that include references to him.[19] It could be that Ceolwulf was one of Burgred's thegns but of lowly status and was not required to be in attendance at the Mercian court, but once again this cannot be confirmed. Even Asser may have been unsure about Ceolwulf's exact identity, for when Asser translated his copy of the *Chronicle* into Latin he wrote '*quod tamen miserabili condicione cuidam insipienti ministro* [*regis*] *cuius nomen erat Ceolwulf.*' without a reference to any alleged obligation to a king.[20] The loaded word '*regis*' in the brackets was supplied by Stevenson and subsequently found its way into Keynes and Lapidge's translation as: 'however, by a wretched arrangement they entrusted it to a certain foolish king's thegn, who was called Ceolwulf'; thus, this particular translation mirrors the *Chronicle* testimony not Asser's exact interpretation.[21] By omitting Stevenson's addition of *regis*, a more accurate translation is that to Asser, at least, Ceolwulf was just a 'foolish minister.'[22]

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[18] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 51.

[19] The royal diplomas issued by Burgred are nine in number and are as follows: S 206; S 207; S 208; S 209; S 210; S 211; S 212; S 213 and S 214. Additionally, Burgred was represented in the following charters and they too contain witness lists contemporary with his reign: S 1201 issued by Queen Æthelswith; S 1440 issued by Abbot Ceored and S 222 issued by ealdorman Æthelred.

[20] Asser, ch. 46.

[21] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 82.

[22] Alfred P. Smyth, *The Medieval Life of Alfred The Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), p. 22.

There are grounds here for disbelieving the *Chronicle* allegations against Ceolwulf and for thinking that the annalist was following a set agenda to minimise any royal claims that Ceolwulf may have held personally and, more importantly in a context of political integration, with which other Mercians may have been familiar. One prime factor for doubting the annalist's description of Ceolwulf is that his name is not a common one, but is one that clearly conjures up associations of a possible Mercian royal pedigree and he may have been related to King Ceolwulf I.[23] This is not to say that Ceolwulf II's royal credentials are clear cut: far from it. The complexities of Mercian dynastic politics of the ninth century, at least from the 820s on, dictate that it would be foolhardy to attempt such a conclusion. As Keynes has suggested, caution should be the order of the day before the kin-group of King Ceolwulf I, who died in 823, is prolonged by another fifty years to include his latter-day namesake.[24] It is perhaps best to interpret the status of Ceolwulf II as that of a scion of Mercian royalty even if his exact rank cannot be proven, and he might even have been a claimant in exile. In which case, Ceolwulf II may have taken advantage of the turmoil of the 870s, and the pressure heaped upon Burgred by the Danes, to pursue a claim to kingship. Essentially, it is irrelevant whether Ceolwulf's claim to a direct royal ancestry was valid or spurious, since it was the assertion itself that counted overall not its legitimacy. If Ceolwulf II was entitled to claim his descent from Ceolwulf I, or perceived that he was, he may have also understood that his namesake was the last in a line of independent kings of

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[23] See Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990), p. 123. There are only twelve examples of the name Ceolwulf on the *PASE* website.
See http://eagle.cch.kcl.ac.uk:8080/pase/persons/index.html [accessed 20th January 2006]

[24] Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 310-328, at p. 316.

Mercia, before the intervention of the West Saxons under Ecgberht; he may have even viewed Burgred as an illegitimate interloper into the true family of Mercian kings. On this reading, Ceolwulf II was also staking the right to be directly descended from Pybba, the father of the mighty Penda himself.[25]

The Alfredian viewpoint: Ceolwulf II 'an unwise king's thegn'

In the securer environment of the 890s, the *Chronicle* looked back in time to a more dangerous period when the survival of Wessex itself was in the balance from the attentions of the Danish *micel hæðen here*. The annal for 874 is a conflation of past events structured to make several important points about how Mercian resistance to the Danes evaporated in the face of concerted pressure; 'the notice of the burial of King Burgred of Mercia in Rome under 874, looks ahead to some time in the future, and occurs as an integral part of the record of the Danish conquest of Mercia.'[26] The Alfredian *Chronicle* reported in considerable detail this past Mercian capitulation to the Danes and viewed King Burgred's pilgrimage to Rome as a Danish-inspired expulsion into ignominious continental exile.[27] If the West Saxon *Chronicle* can be relied upon,

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[25] Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, appendix, figure 8, p. 185 and Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 52. For the descent of Ceolwulf I from Pybba see the pedigree provided by Cyril Hart, 'The kingdom of Mercia', in Ann Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 44-60, at p. 55. Both Kirby and Hart's family trees are based on the genealogies found in Cotton Vespasian B. vi and show Ceolwulf and his brother Coenwulf as being descended from Pybba.

[26] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, pp. 99-100.

[27] A contemporary record of Burgred's exile, along with that of his queen Æthelswith, can be found in the *Liber Vitae* of Brescia. See Simon Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon entries in the "Liber Vitae" of Brescia', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 99-119, at pp. 109-111.

Burgred's ejection signalled the end of legitimate indigenous kingship within Mercia and his successor Ceolwulf II was a figure parodied by the compiler of the *Chronicle* as a Danish lackey. Burgred's replacement earned for himself the contempt of the annalist along with the withering sobriquet of 'unwise king's thegn' and this particular Mercian is best remembered today as a Danish collaborator.

The annalist's derision provided more that a stinging personal rebuke to Ceolwulf; it went much further and he was additionally portrayed as a perfidious usurper who would be 'ready and all who would follow him at the enemy's service.' The scorn heaped upon the Mercians makes this particular *Chronicle* entry exceptional. Not only does this annal focus solely on the end of Mercian independence with their surrender to the agenda of the Danes, its latter portions also condemn the morals of Ceolwulf, questioning both his legality and integrity. The chronicler, moreover, deplored that this unlawful king had likeminded supporters. Given the contemporary levels of West Saxon-Mercian political and dynastic solidarity, including their continuing military co-operation against the Danes, this antipathy seems both untimely and inappropriate. The continuation of Mercian resistance to the Danish threat was crucial to the West Saxon cause; further Mercian willingness to conform to the current Alfredian agenda seems to have been particularly necessary during this period when the various annals that constitute the *Chronicle* were conflated into their final form. Such an explicit reminder of past Mercian collaboration with the Danish enemy seems more likely to have driven a wedge between Wessex and Mercia than to cement them further together in mutual obligation at a time when the menace posed by the Danes was still in

evidence and, what is more, was high on the agenda of the annalist.[28] So why did the Alfredian chronicler make his impassioned revelations concerning Burgred and Ceolwulf II in 874?

Moralistic implications

The apparent incompatibility of Mercian compliance with the Danes in 874 and their highly valued status within the political climate current at the time of the compilation of the *Chronicle* has led Keynes to conclude that the derogatory comments about Ceolwulf 'need not be construed as anti-Mercian, and might rather be construed as [reflecting] pro-Alfredian interests in Mercia.'[29] A pro-Alfredian context for this literary attack upon Ceolwulf's credibility is plausible and it may be additionally explained as an impassioned appeal for political harmony by Alfred's courtly-circle. This annal pleads for unity amongst the Mercian Angles and the West Saxons, who together formed the constituent parts of Alfred's political order forged after 886 when Alfred symbolically restored London, and it exhibits warnings against future discord.[30] By fixing the root causes of past dissonance unambiguously at the door of political separatism, the process

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[28] During 880-891 the *Chronicle* closely follows the cross-Channel activities of the Danish armies to the exclusion of events nearer to home. Compiled in the aftermath of King Alfred's victory over Guthrum's Danes at Edington, the annal for 874 was probably written down in the 890s. See Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: questioning Old English History and historians', *The Historian* 49 (Spring, 1996), 2-7.

[29] Simon Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in M. A. Blackburn and D. Dumville (eds.), *Kings Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1-45, at p. 19.

[30] Sarah Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series (1996), 25-49.

justified the union of two distinct kingdoms under the single banner of the *Angli et Saxones*. As the *Chronicle* proclaimed, this was a fusion of two formerly separate peoples into one overarching *gens* where 'all the English people [*Angelcynn*] that were not under subjection to the Danes submitted' to King Alfred in anticipation of their continuing mutual political agreement.[31] The *Chronicle* was thus creating 'a single story that showed how former disunity was a necessary precursor to present unity.'[32] The literary treatment of Ceolwulf justified his disappearance from view and further served to enhance Alfred's statesmanship within Mercia, thereby helping to guarantee the security of his newly-orchestrated political federation, and to win over the loyalty of the Mercians in general. Alfred's 'restoration' of London in 886 was a turning point in his political career and there may have been a double celebration to underpin his occupation of this quintessentially Mercian city.[33] It conceivably provided Alfred with the ideal opportunity to further cement the union of Wessex and Mercia by providing an appropriate setting for the dynastic marriage of his daughter Æthelflæd to the new Mercian leader Æthelred. What is more certain is that, with his restoration of London, and by his entrusting it into the care of Ealdorman Æthelred, now Alfred had a Mercian leader who, unlike his predecessor Ceolwulf, 'moved in an Alfredian world.'[34] But in order to find an explanation of what these Alfredian interests were that made it necessary for the royal court to bring into the open the questionable morality of

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[31] *ASC*, 886.
[32] Sarah Foot, 'Remembering, forgetting and inventing: attitudes to the past in England at the end of the First Viking Age', *TRHS* 6th series 9 (1999), 185-200, at 195-196.
[33] Tony Dyson, 'King Alfred and the restoration of London', *London Journal*, 15 (2) (1990), 99-110 and Tony Dyson, 'Two Saxon land grants for Queenhithe', in Joanna Bird, Hugh Chapman and John Clark (eds.), *Collectanea Londoniensia, Studies in London Archaeology and History Presented to Ralph Merrifield*, Middlesex Archaeological Society Special Paper 2 (London, 1978), 200-215.
[34] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', p. 29.

Ceolwulf II, the early years of King Alfred's reign must be examined, in particular his personal relationship with this alleged unwise king's thegn.

Whilst accepting that the *Chronicle* appealed to a common cause with this version of events in 874, just why the annalist couched Ceolwulf's treachery so explicitly and in rhetorical terms is worthy of further consideration. This annal for 874 conveys a number of admonitory messages that are more normally associated with a 'mirror for princes' and are thus incongruous set deep in the midst of a text that is clearly not of that genre. Janet Nelson has demonstrated how the particular word chosen to represent Ceolwulf's immorality was central to the text's overall impact; Ceolwulf's description as being *unwis* formed a damning verdict by Alfred's régime, given their well-documented preoccupation with wisdom and the rule of Solomon.[35] For Alfred, in particular, wisdom was the architect of royal authority and as a virtue it was an essential requirement of those deserving of kingship. Alfred personally acknowledged that power was not something to be lusted after, rather wisdom searched out its own recipient for this special honour. In his vernacular translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Alfred amended the Latin original to declare that only the virtuous should inherit power. But, Alfred additionally counselled, that whosoever was eventually chosen for the honour of kingship should be sufficiently prudent not to abuse the authority that wisdom had offered:

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[35]Janet Nelson's comment can be found in Anton Scharer, 'The writing of history at King Alfred's court', *EME* 5.2 (1996), 177-206, at 179, n. 11. For Alfred and the rule of Solomon see Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, pp. 219-257; Patrick Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', *HSJ* 15 for 2004 (2006), 1-39, esp. 13-21; David Pratt, 'Persuasion and invention at the court of King Alfred the Great', in Catherine Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 189-221, esp. pp. 190-194 and D. R. Pratt, 'The political thought of Alfred the Great', (University of Cambridge Ph.D. Thesis, 1999), pp. 39-60.

If then it happens, as it seldom does, that power and honour fall to a good and wise man, what is there that deserves our liking but the virtues and honourable character of a good king himself, and not of his power? For power is never a good thing, save its possessor be good; for when power is beneficent this is due to the man who wields it. *Therefore it is that a man never by his authority attains to virtue and excellence, but by reason of his virtue and excellence he attains to authority and power. No man is better for his power, but for his skill he is good, and for his skill he is worthy of power, if he is worthy of it. Study wisdom, and when you have learned it, contemn it not* [*do not disregard it*]. *For I tell you, that by its means you may without fail attain to power, yea even though not desiring it. You need not take thought for power, nor endeavour after it, nor strive after power for if you are only wise and good, it will follow you, even though you seek it not.*[36]

Through the medium of the *Chronicle*, his royal court made use of Alfred's own model of a virtuous and wise ruler and conspicuously depicted Ceolwulf as its antithesis. Ceolwulf's lack of wisdom was instrumental in his unlawful quest for power and he achieved his royal ambitions only through his foolhardiness and his vanity.[37] The marginalisation of Ceowulf did not end with this assault upon his lack of wisdom, though. Not content with their personal character assassination, Alfred and his advisors stripped away any vestiges of a royal lineage from Ceolwulf that he may have personally claimed whilst he was alive. This strategy has proved to be particularly long-lasting and has been ruinous for Ceolwulf's later reputation. The *Chronicle* accusation that Ceolwulf was merely a king's thegn allowed for his defamation as a deceitful upstart who had simply bargained his way to the kingship by becoming a Danish vassal.[38] To the Alfredian hierarchy, Ceolwulf quite evidently had to be

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[36] *OEB*, pp. 35-36.

[37] For Alfred's views on un-virtuous kings in his translation of *Boethius*; Nicole Guenther Discenza, 'Power, skill and virtue in the Old English *Boethius*', *ASE* 26 (1997), 81-108, at 105-7.

[38] Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2004), at p. 43 and p. 175, n. 75, offers a rather different interpretation of this issue. She writes: 'although historians disagree about the amount of authority actually accorded Ceolwulf – a thane, not an *ætheling*, and thus not a likely candidate for the throne – binds himself to the Danes ... by invoking the same procedures that Alfred uses to establish peace.' However, in order to challenge Ceolwulf's alleged royal status, the annalist could not portray him as an *ætheling* without acknowledging that he had a royal pedigree. The portrayal of Ceolwulf as a thegn was the only way in which he could be charged with being an unlawful claimant for the vacant Mercian throne. On the issue of *æthelings* see David N. Dumville, 'The *ætheling*: a study in Anglo-Saxon constitutional history', *ASE* 8 (1979), 1-33.

portrayed as being of no account whatsoever.[39] The literary flourishes were written for their moral impact; the Alfredian rhetoric demonstrating that there cannot be true kingship without legitimacy. To secure the current loyalty of Alfred's Mercian followers the two rulers, Alfred and Ceolwulf, are juxtaposed. This is achieved implicitly for those readers unaware of the Solomonic model so admired by Alfred, yet explicitly as a direct reflection of this fundamental exemplar, for those who were.

But it is not just Ceolwulf whom the *Chronicle* implicates with Danish complicity, his predecessor king Burgred is also reprimanded. As Dorothy Whitelock argued, the *Chronicle* entry for 874 should be compared with the one for 878 and taken collectively the two entries emphasise one important factor above others; Alfred did not himself go to Rome: he stayed and he fought.[40] According to the *Chronicle*, Alfred found himself in a dreadful military predicament in 878 where the Danes had driven 'a great part of the people across the sea, and conquered most of the others; and the people [had] submitted to them, except King Alfred [who] journeyed in difficulties through the woods and fan-fastnesses with a small force.'[41] But through his continued defiance and heroic rearguard action, Alfred (and hence virtuous kingship) eventually won out, and at Edington he 'fought against the whole army and put it to flight.[42] Although exaggerated, and retrospectively reported as the ultimate decisive victory, Alfred's reputedly

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[39] H. R. Loyn, 'The term ealdorman in the translations prepared at the time of King Alfred', *EHR* 67 (October, 1953), 513-525. Loyn demonstrated that the stratification of the aristocracy during the reign of Alfred was to a surprisingly high level of consistency.
[40] Dorothy Whitelock, 'The importance of the battle of Edington' (Report for 1975, 1976 and 1977 of the friends of the priory church of Edington, Wiltshire) reprinted in her *From Bede to Alfred*, Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon History and Literature 13 (London, 1980), 6-15, at 11.
[41] *ASC*, 878.
[42] *Ibid.*

steadfast actions in 878 contrast vividly with the portrayal of Burgred's apparently shameful capitulation and eventual desertion against the same foe in 874 and with Ceolwulf's ready acceptance of Danish dominion. If, as R. H. C. Davis claimed, Alfred's victory at Edington had to 'be shouted from the 'roof-tops' to spur on the most 'faint-hearted' of Alfred's subjects, and to show that even in times of defeat, the royal line of Cerdic 'always emerged victorious', then Ceolwulf, and to a lesser extent, Burgred, are to be dismissed as unwise and irresolute respectively and both are unworthy of true memorialisation.[43]

The direct consequences of Burgred's surrender are incisively detailed by the chronicler in 874 once more using Solomonic ideology to drive home the primary point. Although this specific annal makes an obvious military comparison between the two kings, Alfred's later chastisement of the Mercian ruler, Burgred, also stemmed from the Gregorian-inspired convictions to which Alfred, as a committed Christian king, personally adhered. According to Gregorian philosophy, a true Christian king could not simply 'opt out'; he had to remain unfaltering and face up to his responsibilities; be an admirable and honourable ruler through all manner of adversities.[44] Not even after Edington in 878, where the *Chronicle* recounted at extraordinary length how Alfred rather improbably snatched a decisive victory from such an apparently hopeless military situation, did the West Saxon text resort to such edifying measures as it did for

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[43] R. H. C. Davis, 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth', *History* 56 (1971), 169-82, reprinted in his *From Alfred The Great to Stephen* (London and Rio Grande, 1991), pp. 33-54, at p. 45.
[44] Clare Stancliffe, 'Kings who opted out' in Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 154-76, at p. 175.

Burgred's desertion and Ceolwulf's subsequent enthronement. Both Burgred and Ceolwulf were subjected to rhetorical and moralistic retribution by the compiler of the early Alfredian *Chronicle* in didactic outpourings of a kind that are more normally found in the later post 891-2 entries. These messages were orchestrated in order to bolster the claims of Alfred and his West Saxon royal line within the regions formally ruled by the Mercian kings, but now left barren of such indigenous authority.[45]

Oaths

The Alfredian royal court enhanced King Alfred's royal credentials inside Mercia by bringing charges of political and spiritual treason against Ceolwulf. His illegality was accentuated by the accusation that here was a man of loose moral standards who, in order that he might achieve kingship, had perpetrated the heinous crime of swearing oaths to non-Christians.[46] It would be interesting to know just how Ceolwulf was supposed to have pledged himself to the Danes. Oath-taking was a crucial aspect of the Christian ruler-ethic and Ceolwulf's alleged debasement of these sacred rituals could be equated with both political and religious treachery. The Alfredian court's stinging

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[45] Cecily Clark, 'The narrative mode of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before the Conquest', in Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (eds.), *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 215-235, at 218 'the terse formulas of the early *Chronicle* are not simply *stilus humilis* in English, not "the humblest sort of everyday speech", but, as the contrast both with the charters and with the Old English Orosius shows, constitute in their own way a highly artificial manner, especially in their avoidance of descriptive elements of all kinds.' See also Janet Bately, 'The compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* once more', *Leeds Studies in English* new series 16 (1985), 7-19; Davis, 'Alfred the Great: propaganda and truth', at p. 45, highlighted some of the more cautionary tales contained in the later *Chronicle* entries.

[46] For oath-taking in general, see Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers*: *Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), esp. pp. 102-135. On Alfred and oaths see Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1. Legislation and its Limits (Oxford, 1999, reprinted 2000), esp. 277-285.

reprimand to Ceolwulf's memory brings to mind Archbishop Fulk of Rheims' letter from the late 890s to the young Charles the Straightforward and this particular piece of Alfredian rhetoric may have been inspired by the political ideology current at Rheims and accessed through Alfred's intellectual aide Grimbald.[47] Grimbald's arrival in Wessex provided an extra stimulus to the production of Alfred's *Chronicle* and he made significant contributions to its final creation. As Nelson has suggested, the *Chronicle's* annal for 887 with its noticeable interest in Carolingian affairs, reflects Fulk of Rheims' personal views on royal legitimacy; it has 'not so much a Frankish slant as a Fulkish one', she argues.[48] Fulk, Charles' chancellor from 898 until his assassination on 17 June 900, considered the pact the Carolingian prince made with the Seine vikings as an ungodly abomination and he scolded the prince for colluding with heathens:

> Who of those who should be faithful to you would not be terrified that you wish friendship with enemies of God and take up pagan arms in a detestable alliance to the destruction and ruin of the Christian name? ... Better you had not been born than to wish to rule a devil's patrimony, and aid those whom you ought to fight every inch of the way. Be clear about it, if you do this and accept such councils, you will never have me as your faithful man. And I shall recall from their fidelity to you as many as I am able.[49]

Fulk additionally supported his rhetorically-charged letter with undisguised threats of excommunication for this perceived act of treachery and this coercion was aimed at

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[47] There was regular contact between the Alfredian court and the see of Rheims and Fulk was responsible for sending Grimbald of St-Bertin to Alfred's court in around 886-7; see Philip Grierson, 'Grimbald of St Bertin's', *EHR* 55 (1940), 529-561 and Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 331-334. Fulk's letter confirming the Alfredian request for assistance is found in *EHD*, no. 223.

[48] Janet L. Nelson, 'The Franks and the English reconsidered' in her *Rulers and ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 141-158 at p. 148 and Janet l. Nelson, '"*...sicut olim gens Francorum ... nunc gens Anglorum*": Fulk's letter to Alfred revisited', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 135-144.

[49] Fulk of Rheims, letter to Charles the Straightforward in Flodoard, *Historia Ecclesiae Remensis Scriptores*, iv. 567; cited in Eleanor Searle, 'Frankish rivalries and Norse warriors', *ANS* 8 (1985), 198-213, at 203, and n. 20. Fulk's predecessor at Rheims, Hincmar drew up a document that dealt with a prince charged with amongst other crimes apostasy. See *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844-64), 125, col. 1121; see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Vikings in Francia*, in his *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 217-236, at p. 235, n. 58 and Hincmar of Rheims, *Epistolae* ed. E. Perels, *MGH Epistolae* viii. (Berlin, 1939), no. 170.

negotiations which he considered a premeditated attempt by Charles to have the majesty of his own realm at any price.[50] Fulk's responses therefore included a direct threat to the secular authority invested in Charles. Fulk threatened to 'recall from their fidelity' as many of the sworn followers of Charles as he was able to do so which, if carried out, would make the young pretender, like Ceolwulf in the Alfredian text, a political nonentity. Although Fulk was clearly expressing his own fears along with those of the Frankish Church, his threat to extract the secular magnates from their obligations to Charles has significant implications.

In Carolingian political thought the ruler was honour-bound to serve his people and was granted his power by God. To quote Walter Ullmann, 'kingship ceased to be a matter of blood and became a matter of divine intervention: the blood-charisma gave way to a charisma sustained by grace.'[51] Yet as God's representative on earth, the ruler was also obligated to provide just and righteous rulership else be branded as a tyrant and even suffer possible deposition. Certain oaths of allegiance were underpinned by a reciprocal accountability which is clearly demonstrated by the wording of the oaths exchanged between Charles the Bald and his *fideles* at Quierzy in 858.[52] Following the recognition shown by his supporters at Quierzy, Charles made his own solemn promises

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[50] Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840-1066* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1988), pp. 41-42. For the view that the later creation of Normandy by Charles the Straightforward came about because the region was already 'shredded by violence and in the midst of far-reaching social changes', see David Bates, *Normandy Before 1066* (New York, 1982), pp. 5-6.

[51] Walter Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship*, The Birkbeck Lectures, 1968-9 (London, 1969), p. 54.

[52] On Carolingian oaths of fidelity see Charles E, Odegaard, 'Carolingian oaths of fidelity', *Speculum* 16 (1941), 284-296; Charles E. Odegaard, 'The concept of royal power in the Carolingian oaths of fidelity', *Speculum* 20 (1945), 279-289 and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 249-251.

to care for them and to preserve law and justice as a rightful king ought.[53] Later at Gondreville in 872, Charles went as far as to acknowledge that he could be legally deposed by his bishops if he failed in his duties to his people.[54] Moreover, in July of 853, the *Annals of Fulda* describe how the threat posed by the Northmen to the durability of the Christian faith could be used to coerce the king into defending his Christian people and endorsing his religious responsibilities. The annal shows how the heathens were a viable, if perilous, alternative to Christian kingly protection when:

> suddenly the king was burdened with a great weight of troubles. For messengers came from the west, Abbot Adalhard and Count Odo, asking him to comfort with his presence a people sorely pressed and in peril. If he did not do this swiftly and they were denied hope of liberation at his hands, they would have to seek protection from the pagans with great danger to the Christian religion, since they could not get it from their lawful and orthodox lords. ... There was now no one left in the whole people who still believed his promises or oaths, and all despaired of his good faith. Hearing these things, the king was very disturbed, and found himself in a dilemma.[55]

The result of this embassy was that Charles 'yielded to the prayers of the legates and promised according to the people's wishes that with God's help he would come to those who longed for his presence.'[56] But it was not just the Carolingians who were concerned about the possibility that the heathens could become an alternative source of protection and lordship. The Alfredian court was also anxious about this issue and that their responses were similar to those policies pursued by the Franks should surprise no-

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[53] *Capitularia regum Francorum*, eds. A. Boretius and V. Krause, *MGH Capiitularia* II (Hanover, 1897), 296. Charles made similar promises at Pavia in 876 and Compiègne in 877 as did Carloman in 882, *ibid.* 100; 365 and 370. Janet L. Nelson, 'The intellectual in politics: content and authorship in the Capitulary of Coulaines, November, 843', in her *The Frankish World, 750-900* (London and Rio Grande, 1996), pp. 155-168, at p. 167 demonstrated that it was almost certainly Hincmar of Rheims who drafted the Quierzy oaths.

[54] Odegaard, 'The concept of royal power in the Carolingian oaths of fidelity', 282. The Robertian ruler, Odo, crowned at Rheims in November 888 by Hincmar, was later stripped of his authority in January 893 because Odo had abused the power invested in him. See Rosamond McKitterick, 'The Carolingian kings and the See of Rheims, 882-987', in her *The Frankish Kings and Culture in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 228-246, at pp. 231.

[55] *AF.* 853.

[56] *Ibid.*

one; for as Patrick Wormald suggested, 'Carolingian models loomed large in ninth-century English kingdoms and larger yet in Alfred's.'[57]

In a number of his less cautious moments, Asser reveals instances of possible political and religious adaptation inside Alfred's extended kingdom, brought about by the fluctuating military fortunes of the 870s. Asser's revelations imply that religious as well as political estrangement may have been two of the consequences of Alfred's campaigns and they could even have been more prevalent than the sources openly admit. In 886, when Alfred achieved his ascendancy over London, Asser described the willing submission to King Alfred of 'those [Angles and Saxons] who had formerly been scattered everywhere' [or] 'who had been with the pagans but not as captives.'[58] This is a crucial admission by Asser, who seems to be implying that many English inhabitants living in the regions under Danish control had been willing to comply with the customs of the newcomers. Nelson has suggested that those Angles and Saxons who submitted to Danish rule did so voluntarily, but how voluntary was their submission remains a moot point.[59] But it is also conceivable that here Asser is describing an amnesty offered to those Mercians who had succumbed to the jurisdiction of the Danes, and possibly

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[57] Wormald, 'Living with King Alfred', at 12.

[58] Asser, ch. 83. The first section of the quotation from Asser is that provided by Keynes and Lapidge and the second extract is from Janet Nelson. In my opinion Nelson's interpretation offers a more accurate description of this crucial part of Asser's text. Compare Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 98 and 266, n. 199 with Janet L. Nelson, 'A king across the sea: Alfred in continental perspective', *TRHS* 5th Series 36 (1986), 45-68, 53, and n. 42. Asser's text reads: '*Ad quem regem omnes Angli et Saxones, qui prius ubique dispersi fuerant aut cum paganis sub [sine] captivitate erant, voluntarie converterunt, et suo dominio se subdiderunt.*' See W. H. Stevenson Stevenson, ed. *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1904, new impression, Oxford, 1959), p. 69. I agree with Keynes and Lapidge that their translation of *sine* as opposed to Stevenson's *sub* is the right one. But their following translation of the conjunction '*aut*' as 'and' instead of 'or' seriously corrupts the meaning of this passage.

[59] Nelson, 'A king across the sea', 53.

those who had followed Ceolwulf II, if not those who had openly supported him. It is perhaps more surprising though to find examples of cultural defection deep inside Alfred's own kingdom; one of Asser's further indiscretions suggests that 878 was possibly a watershed year in more respects than one. When Alfred retreated into the Somerset marshes he had to 'forage ... either secretly or openly from [the pagans] as well as from the Christians who had submitted to the authority [of the pagans].'[60] Alfred's military indisposition in 878 meant that he had apparently lost control of Wiltshire to the heathen army and 'very near all the inhabitants of that *regio* submitted to the authority of the pagans.'[61] Asser is not the only witness to this incident and the eventual ramifications of this political and possibly religious realignment by a significant number of Alfred's West Saxon subjects during these tumultuous times would prove to be profound.

A charter of King Edward the Elder dated to 901 confirms Asser's testimony in recording Alfred's loss of Wiltshire when it details the duplicity of ealdorman Wulfhere, who broke faith with the king and 'deserted without permission both his lord King Alfred and his country [*patria*] in spite of the oath which he had sworn to the king and all his leading men. Then also by the judgement of all the councillors of the *Gewisse* [West Saxons] and of the Mercians he lost the control and inheritance of his lands.'[62] Whilst this particular text shied away from outright condemnation of the ealdorman, and that he may have in fact conspired with the *pagani*; both the *Chronicle* and Asser's *Life*

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[60] *Asser*, ch. 53.
[61] *Ibid.*, ch. 52.
[62] S 362. This is one of the more reliable of the charters of Edward the Elder. It is calendared in H. R. P. Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester, 1964), no. 221 and translated in *EHD* no. 100.

exhibit reasons why this kind of behaviour may have been concealed from view. Wulfhere was not just any defector; he was the ealdorman of Wiltshire, a central figure in Alfred's government and he was most probably responsible for the *regio* that Asser reported as succumbing to the authority of the Danish *here*. That 'even a single ealdorman's defection risked unravelling the fabric of the [entire] kingdom' demonstrates why the royal court would not want this duplicity advertised.[63] It is significant that Wulfhere's oath had not bound him to his lord as it should have done.

As for Wulfhere, he may have been the erstwhile brother-in-law of King Alfred's deceased elder brother, King Æthelred, and therefore a man with a grievance against Alfred's authority; a supporter of his nephew's Æthelhelm and Æthelwold's royal claims.[64] It seems likely that Wulfhere had dynastic motives for abandoning his oath to King Alfred. Wulfhere, like Ceolwulf, had much to gain by making an alliance with the Danes in direct opposition to King Alfred's authority and the Wiltshire ealdorman's putative sense of injustice would surface again with Æthelwold's rebellion against King Edward the Elder in 900-903. As his uncle may have done before him, Æthelwold too would align himself with both Christians and pagans alike when he claimed the vacant York kingship in 902.[65] This was an escalation of his uncle's initial disloyalty and Æthelwold's revolt eventually posed Edward a regional threat to his plans for further West Saxon dominion. Æthelwold, now a renegade *ætheling*, became

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[63] Janet L. Nelson, 'Power and authority at the court of Alfred', in Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy* (King's College London Medieval Studies xvii (London, 2000), 311-337, at 324-6 at 325.

[64] Nelson, 'A king across the sea', 53-59.

[65] *ASC*, mss. B, C and D. That Æthelwold was elected king at York is omitted from the Winchester text.

the focus for separatism both inside Wessex and further afield in Mercia and East Anglia. Æthelwold attempted to subvert his cousin's kingship by drawing other dissidents to his cause; where in effect he became 'a kind of king in disloyal opposition.'[66]

Wulfhere's earlier challenge to Alfred's royal authority within Wessex could have conceivably been partly responsible for the manner in which the king later amended the conditions of loyalty. Alfred was preoccupied by the prospect of treachery and his alteration of this fundamental law is indicative of these concerns. In what Allen Frantzen has termed 'a curious recasting of the "Great Commandment" from the *Gospel of Matthew*', Alfred distorted biblical precedents and transformed these sentiments into ones that allowed him full licence to act as the supreme mortal arbiter.[67] Alfred's amended law specifies that treachery against a secular lord was the solitary crime that could not be compensated and consequently the only penalty that could be correctly applied was death:

> If any one plot against the king's life, of himself, or by harbouring of exiles, or of his men; let him be liable in his life and in all that he has. If he desire to prove himself true, let him do so according to the king's 'wer-gild.' So also we ordain for all degrees, whether 'ceorl' or 'eorl.' He who plots against his lord's life, let him be liable in his life to him and in all that he has; or let him prove himself true according to his lord's 'wer.'[68]

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[66] John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Florida, 2000), p. 91.

[67] Allen J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, 1986), p. 20.

[68] Alfred, 4; *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England: Comprising Laws Enacted Under The Anglo-Saxon Kings From Æthelbirht to Cnut with an English Translation of the Saxon*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols. English Historical Society (London, 1848), i. 62-65; see Frantzen, *King Alfred*, p. 16 and Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 18, (Cambridge, 1995), 16. On the dating of Alfred's *Domboc*, see Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, i. 281 and 425-6. Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*', at 33, who has argued that Alfred's 'newly named people were subject to one lord, loyalty to whom was forcibly imposed by oath.'

King Alfred's critical modification to the oath of loyalty demonstrates the wider importance of oaths throughout Christian society.[69]

Accommodating the heathens into Christian society

Coming to negotiated terms with the Northmen became a way of life for the rulers of the Christian West and on many occasions the Franks entered into agreements with different Scandinavian chieftains in ways that were astute both politically and militarily.[70] Viking chieftains were often used by Christian rulers as a kind of '*condottieri*' taking service as mercenaries, but pacts were also made with the Northmen for other reasons; to pacify them, contain them or use them against other bands of Northmen. Accommodating the *pagani* into the fabric of Christian society became both a necessary evil and a time-honoured strategy and can be viewed as such predominantly on the Frankish side of the Channel.[71] The vast majority of these bargains were regulated by the commendation and baptism of the heathens involved, particularly their leadership, and this was a strategy that appeased, and in some instances, appealed to the Frankish Church.[72] But when these associations were arranged without the necessary spiritual assurances they caused consternation among clerical writers because they

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[69] On the Alfredian origins of the oath of allegiance see Patrick Wormald, '*Engla Lond*: the making of an allegiance', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7.1 (March, 1994), 1-24, at 6-7 and 20, n. 9.

[70] Lesley Abrams, 'The conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin', *ANS* 20 (1997), 1-29, at 14-15.

[71] For Anglo-Saxon examples and their similarity with Frankish pacts see Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca and London, 1998), pp. 212-228.

[72] For a comprehensive survey of the Frankish pacts see Simon Coupland, 'From poachers to gamekeepers: Scandinavian warlords and Carolingian kings', *EME* 7 (1998), 85-114.

clearly broke God's prohibitions. Flodoard of Rheims for instance made 'no distinction between someone making an alliance with pagans or denying God and worshipping idols.'[73] One arrangement that caused similar religiously-inspired anxiety was the Emperor Lothar's grant of the island of Walcheren and its neighbouring regions as a benefice to the Northman Harald Klak in 841.

Harald who had previously raided Frankish territory had also been accused of 'imposing many sufferings on Frisia and other coastal regions of the Christians' and in consequence the emperor was branded as being depraved for his actions in granting the Dane authority over Walcheren.[74] By securing his boundaries without inducing Harald into accepting Christianity, Lothar's arrangement with the Dane drew a stinging reprimand from the annalist Prudentius:

> This was surely an utterly detestable crime, that those who had brought evil on Christians should be given power over the lands and people of Christians, and over the very churches of Christ; that the persecutors of the Christian faith should be set up as lords over Christians, and Christian folk have to serve men who worship demons.[75]

It would be all too easy to dismiss Prudentius' account as an example of ecclesiastically-generated hyperbole. But the evidence provided by Charles the Bald's counsellor Nithard suggests that it was not just churchmen who were afraid of such unsecured agreements. Nithard was an aristocratic layman and a grandson of Charlemagne through his mother, Bertha. He was therefore an integral member of the Carolingian *stirps regia* and he viewed this particular pact in a similar manner to

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[73] Flodoard, *Historia Ecclesiae Remensis* ed. I. Heller and G. Waitz, *MGH: Scriptores* 36 (Hannover, 1881), 405-599, iv. 5, xiii. 565.
[74] *AB*, 842.
[75] *Ibid.* Coupland, 'From poachers to gamekeepers', at 92-93 has suggested that Harald may have been baptised at the same time as his uncle Roric in 826 but clearly Prudentius did not think that he had.

Prudentius. And there are good reasons as to why the secular Carolingian aristocracy viewed such arrangements with deep suspicion, for as far as the Frankish nobility were concerned, the spiritual and worldly realms were essentially intertwined.[76] Nithard and his contemporaries followed the lead of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the church provided the justification for the *gens Francorum*.[77] Even the Carolingian *renovatio* was based on the premise that societal order had to be maintained though religious conformity or correction in order to bring forth salvation.[78] Because of this interdependent ideological framework, Nithard and 'his fellow Franks needed to believe in the church's authority' for their political equilibrium as well as their spiritual fulfilment; 'Nithard was a Christian layman who believed in miracles and appreciated the ritual service of bishops. He held principles about political morality: it was wrong to put private before public interest.'[79] Thus, Nithard, like Prudentius, condemned the negotiated arrangement between Lothar and Harald as far more than an affront to the Christian faith. Nithard found it unacceptable that Lothar had 'put some Christians under their lordship, and permitted them to plunder others.'[80] Louis the German's opposition to his brother's policy was portrayed as a valiant attempt to shore up the Christian religion and ultimately save it from possible extinction in this sensitive region:

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[76] For the origins of this interactive relationship between the Carolingian Church and the secular aristocracy, see Mayke de Jong, 'Charlemagne's Church', in Joanna Story (ed.), *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 103-135, esp. pp. 103-112.

[77] On the origins of the *gens Francorum*; Mary Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel? Education for an identity from Pippin to Charlemagne', in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 114-161.

[78] Paul Fouracre, 'Space, culture and kingdoms in early medieval Europe', in Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 366-380, at pp. 376-378.

[79] Janet L. Nelson, 'Public histories and private history in the work of Nithard', in her *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London and Ronceverte, 1986), pp. 195-237, at pp. 217-219.

[80] Nithard, *Historia*, ed. G. H. Pertz, *MGH SRG* 44 (Hanover, 1870), 122; trans. B. W. Scholz with B. Rogers, in *Carolingian Chronicles : Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1970), cited in Paul Edward Dutton, ed. *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Ontario, 1993), p. 358.

> Louis thus feared that the Norsemen and Slavs might unite with the Saxons who called themselves *Stellinga*, because they are neighbours, and that they might invade the kingdom to revenge themselves and root out the Christian religion in the area. It was especially for this reason that he went to ... [there is a gap in the manuscript here] ... and at the same time did all that he could to avert other hazards to his kingdom lest this most horrible disaster befall the holy Church of God.[81]

Although less noticeable within the Anglo-Saxon sources, pacts made without spiritual assurances caused similar anxieties for some Christian commentators.

One agreement made between King Alfred and his Danish adversaries was bound without the requisite spiritual assurances of commendation or baptism, but it did involve an exchange of oaths. Swearing oaths fallaciously was severely punishable; 'whoever makes oath falsely in a church or on the Gospel or on relics of the saints, seven years [penance]; some judge ten years' was prescribed as suitable punishment in one book of penitentials.[82] But swearing oaths to, and fraternising with, the ungodly could be construed as being much worse. King Alfred's own law code, probably promulgated in the late 880s, expressly prohibited the swearing of oaths by invoking pagan deities; here Alfred decreed 'do not swear by heathen gods, nor cry unto them for any reason.'[83] It was one thing, however, for Alfred to be so outspoken here but quite another during the initial years of his reign when confronted with entire heathen armies.

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[81] *Ibid.* See Coupland, 'From poachers to gamekeepers', at 90-92 who has argued that both Prudentius and Nithard had political axes to grind about this arrangement; since both texts are written from a West-Frankish perspective this is an overly biased view. However, this does not really alter the perceptions of the pagans by either of these authors. Nithard's fourth book may comprise a 'private history' that deals with events from a perspective of his own rather than being written for political purposes designed to favour a particular patron (in this case Charles the Bald), Nelson, 'Public histories and private history', at pp. 226-233 and p. 229; see also Janet L. Nelson, 'History-writing at the courts of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald', in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (München, 1994), pp. 435-442, esp. pp. 437-438.

[82] *Medieval Hand-Books of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, eds. John T. McNeil and Helena M. Gamer (Columbia, 1990), p. 228.

[83] Laws of King Alfred, in Thorpe, ed. *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, vol. i, Laws of King Alfred, introduction, 48, 55. For the dating of Alfred's laws see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 304.

At Wareham in 876 Alfred personally bound an agreement with the *pagani* without extracting religious commendation from them:

> In this year the enemy army slipped past the army of the West Saxons into Wareham; and then the king made peace with the enemy and they gave him hostages, who were the most important men next to their king in the army', and they also 'swore oaths to him on the holy ring – a thing which they would not do before any nation – that they would speedily leave his kingdom. And then undercover of that, they – the mounted army – stole by night away from the English army to Exeter.[84]

This particular peace agreement has attracted much debate concerning both what type of ring the Danes may have sworn their oaths on and why Alfred allowed the heathens to swear on their own symbolic device, rather than enforcing their acceptance of Christian oaths. It has been interpreted as an example of King Alfred's 'essential pragmatism' and his attempt to find a common negotiating ground with the Danes.[85] But there is another way of interpreting Alfred's actions at Wareham. Æthelweard adds more information to the *Chronicle* account and he claimed that Alfred also 'gave them money at the same time and the Danes made an oath to him upon their sacred armlet (*armilla sacra*), a thing they never did elsewhere, to leave their [i.e. West Saxon] shores as soon as possible.'[86] Æthelweard's view that Alfred bought off the Danes at Wareham is reflected in the *Chronicle* explanation that the Danes used Alfred's negotiated peace as a ruse for an assault upon Exeter. The following year the Danes were back and made a similar agreement with Alfred, but Æthelweard explains that once more 'the barbarians made peace treacherously, being in the same frame of mind as before', despite offering

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[84] *ASC*, 876. For hostage-taking in Anglo-Saxon England, see Ryan Lavelle, 'The use and abuse of hostages in later Anglo-Saxon England', *EME* 14.3 (2006), 269-296 and for hostage-taking in a Carolingian context Adam J. Kosto, 'Hostages in the Carolingian world', *EME* 11.2 (2002), 123-147.
[85] Richard Abels, 'King Alfred's peace making strategies with the Vikings', *HSJ* 3 (1991), 23-34, at 27.
[86] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 876. However, Ryan Lavelle, 'Towards a political contextualization of peacemaking and peace agreements in Anglo-Saxon England', in Diane Wolfthal (ed.), *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 4 (Turnhout, 2000), 39-55, at 48 has suggested that Æthelweard's additions to the agreement at Wareham may incorporate tenth-century traditions of peace settlements.

Alfred hostages again, 'more than was asked' and promising to leave Alfred's kingdom, 'they ravaged the kingdom of the Mercians, drove away the natives everywhere, and with one involved movement encamped in the town called Gloucester.'[87] Although the negotiating methods pursued at Wareham may be viewed as an example of Alfred's essential pragmatism, it seems more likely that militarily Alfred was in no position to do anything else other than accept whatever terms were offered to him. The *Chronicle* claim about the holy ring being a triumph for Alfredian diplomacy sounds both hollow and contrived.[88] Wareham was a defeat for King Alfred and his chronicler was making the best out of a bad situation here; it is an attempt to twist the tale to suit the royal court's projection of Alfred as a wise and astute diplomat.

The mingling of Christian oaths with pagan devices is echoed elsewhere. In one instance it appears to have been inspired by the Northumbrian ecclesiastical hierarchy taking the initiative to safeguard its own interests.[89] The method by which King Guthfrith (*Guthredus, filius Hardacnut*) was elevated to the York kingship *c.* 883 is preserved in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. After being instructed by Saint Cuthbert to seek out a certain slave boy at the sixth hour the Cuthbertine community were told to:

> Lead him before the whole multitude, that they may elect him king. And at the ninth hour lead him with the whole army on to the hill which is called 'Oswiu's down', and there place on his right arm a golden armlet, and thus they may all appoint him as king (*posita in brachio eius dextro armilla in regnum constituatur*). ... and the whole army swore peace and fidelity, for as long as they lived; and they kept this oath well. [90]

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[87] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 877.

[88] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 70.

[89] Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (I Dublin, 1975, II Dublin and New Jersey, 1979, reprinted in one volume, Dublin, 1987), i. 43-44 and D. P. Kirby, 'Northumbria in the reign of Alfred the Great', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumbria* 11 (1965), 335-346, at 339.

[90] *Symeonis monachi Opera Omnia*, two vols. ed. Thomas Arnold, Rolls Series 75 (London, 1882-5), i. 68-69; trans. *EHD*, no. 6; see also Symeon of Durham, *Libellus De Exordio Atque Procursu Istivus, hoc*

This ceremony instigated by the community of Saint Cuthbert combined vows sworn on the holy relics of the saint - perhaps even the corporeal remains of Cuthbert's body - coupled with the conferral of the gold armlet, a clear symbol of pagan leadership.[91] Setting aside the miraculous elements of the tale, this appears to have been the northern Church coming to an accommodation with the Danes.[92] It might even be viewed as the Church producing its own candidate for the vacant York kingship.[93] In defence of the *Historia*'s account, Matthew Innes has noted that its re-use of Northumbrian regnal traditions and its invoking of Oswiu's name are both striking.[94] There are also examples of Scandinavians swearing oaths to Byzantine emperors which allow insights into the world of negotiated agreements between Christian and heathen in the ninth and early tenth centuries. In 907, after attacking Constantinople the northern Rus were bought off by the emperors Leo and Alexander and provided with accommodation, maintenance and other incentives for peace:

> Thus the Emperors Leo and Alexander made peace with Oleg, and after agreeing upon the tribute and mutually binding themselves by oath, they kissed the cross, and invited Oleg and his men to swear an oath like wise. According to the religion of the Russes, the latter swore by their weapons and by their god Perun, as well as by Volos, the god of cattle, and thus confirmed the treaty. [95]

Est Dunhelmensis Ecclesei, Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham, ed. and trans. David Rollason (Oxford, 2000), ii. 13.

[91] Francis P. Magoun, 'On the Old-Germanic altar – or oath-ring (*Stallahringr*)', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 20 (1949), 277-291, esp. 285 and Lesley Abrams, 'The conversion of the Danelaw', in James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch and David N. Parsons, (eds.), *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21-30 August 1997* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 31-44, at p. 37. For the comparative lack of contemporary evidence for pagan religious devices see P. J. E. Kershaw, 'Rex Pacificus. Studies in royal peacemaking and the image of the peacemaking king in the early medieval West' (University of London Ph.D. Thesis, 1998) pp. 191-2.

[92] David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500-1100* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 246.

[93] Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, i. 43-44.

[94] Matthew Innes, 'Danelaw identities', in Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (eds.), *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 65-88, at p. 79.

[95] Cited in Martina Stein-Wilkeshuis, 'Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: pagans and Christians', *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002), 155-168, at 159. For the provenance of these texts see R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths* (London, 1995), p. 98.

By insisting that at Wareham in 876 the Danes broke with their sacred customs when they swore oaths to Alfred on the holy ring, the Alfredian chronicler camouflaged the king's inherent weakness and presented this as a moral victory for Alfred the just and wise king. Æthelweard's evidence suggests otherwise, however, and this was not a precursor to Wedmore or Aller; for it appears that the Danes were calling the tune at Wareham not King Alfred. As Keynes has suggested, Alfred's peacemaking strategies in 871, 876 and 877 appear to have involved 'not only the payment of tribute but also the giving of hostages to the Vikings.'[96] Perhaps Alfred had also made pledges on pagan devices before 876 and the Alfredian chronicler's invention of diplomatic precedence at Wareham did not fool everyone, least of all the king's biographer Asser.

When translating his copy of the *Chronicle*, Asser appears to have been unimpressed with the methods Alfred used to bind the agreement at Wareham and he conceivably censored the non-Christian aspects of this concord when constructing his own version of events. Gone is the *Chronicle's* reference to the pagan ring and the oath taken on a heathen amulet is transformed into one sworn 'on all the [holy] relics in which the king placed the greatest trust after God Himself.'[97] Asser's omission of this

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[96] Simon Keynes, 'A tale of two kings: Alfred the Great and Aethelred the Unready', *TRHS*, 5th series 36 (1986), 195-217, at 199.

[97] Asser, ch. 49. *ASC*, for 876, except manuscript 'A'. For sacred amulets in more general terms; *The Penitential of Halitgar*, in Paul Edward Dutton, ed. *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, (Ontario, 1993), pp. 251-63. 'If anyone makes amulets, which is a detestable thing, he shall do penance for three years, one year on bread and water.' Penance on sacrilege, no. 40, p. 258. Asser may well have been aware of Halitgar's reformation of penance since Alfred's royal court had access to many things Frankish from the open conduit between Wessex and Rheims. Halitgar's handbook was written at the instigation of Archbishop Ebbo in around 830 and may be another instance of cross-Channel co-operation in spiritual matters by Alfred and Fulk of Rheims. On penance in general see Frantzen, *Literature of Penance*, pp. 103-4 and pp. 124-8. On the evolution of Frankish penitentials see Rosamond Pierce, 'The Frankish penitentials', in Derek Baker (ed.), *The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History: Papers Read at the Twelfth Summer meeting and the Thirteenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 31-39.

part of the *Chronicle* narrative has also been discussed, but his motives have not been conclusively explained. Two differing hypotheses as to why Asser remained silent on Alfred's acceptance of terms made on a pagan device have been advanced. Keynes and Lapidge suggested that 'either Asser mistook a pagan ring for Christian relics and then failed to appreciate the implications of what followed, or we have to suppose that he added the reference to the relics on his own initiative and that an intervening reference to the ring has somehow dropped out.'[98] Richard Abels, on the other hand, has suggested that Asser was 'embarrassed enough by it to change the holy ring into "relics in which the king placed the greatest trust after God" when he translated his copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* into Latin.'[99] Neither of these explanations is entirely satisfactory, however. King Alfred's actions at Wareham posed his biographer a delicate moral dilemma for this episode clearly compromised Asser's own Christian sensibilities. But it also provided Asser with a more overwhelming issue, one of articulating Alfred's Gregorian-inspired overkingship as 'rector of all the Christians of the Island of Britain.'[100] It was argued in the previous chapter that Asser's *Life* is a treatise dedicated to the divinely-orchestrated rule of King Alfred, who, above all else, was duty-bound by God to repulse the heathens. Revealing Alfred's acceptance of pagan terms at Wareham would have prejudiced the overtly Christian agenda of Asser's royal biography and its intended establishment of King Alfred as the foremost Christian king and most holy lord in the whole of the British Isles. Asser had to change the terms

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[98] Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 245-6, n. 90.
[99] Richard Abels, *King Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1998), p. 149 and 65. Kershaw, 'Rex Pacificus', at p. 191-192, has suggested that Keynes and Lapidge's theory and Abels' alternative hypothesis are both equally plausible.
[100] Asser, dedication and see chapter two of this thesis.

which bound this agreement because of the all-embracing Christian agenda of his *Life*. Advertising that King Alfred had consented to an agreement, even partially sealed by heathen rituals, would unceremoniously explode the central myth of Christian overkingship that Asser was manufacturing for his patron. As a Gregorian ruler, Alfred solely placed his trust in the power of God and His saints and never in the false hopes provided by idolatrous devices.[101] Asser's literary sleight of hand restored King Alfred's reputation as a paragon of Christian virtue and suitably appeased Asser's own Christian ethics.

Alfred, Ceolwulf II and the Danes

The numismatic evidence

The rhetorical flavour of the *Chronicle* for the years 874 to 878 makes it an untrustworthy witness to what happened in this crucial period. In order to gain further insights into these formative years of Alfred's kingship it is necessary to consider alternative sources of evidence that predate the inception of the Alfredian royal court - in its truest sense - which probably came into being after some time around 886. The coinages of the two rulers suggest some new interpretations of the relationship between Alfred and Ceolwulf may be made. On stylistic grounds it can be shown that the *Cross-and-Lozenge* type coins of Ceolwulf are later than those of Alfred's. Mark Blackburn

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[101] For Gregory's views about pagans (whoever they might have been) and how to convert then see R. A. Markus, 'Gregory the Great's pagans', in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 23-34, esp. pp. 30-34.

has argued that 'the stylistic progressions within each demonstrate that they must be successive, not concurrent coinages. Moreover, the degeneration in the obverse design away from the Roman prototype points surprisingly but firmly at Ceolwulf's coins coming *after* [author's own emphasis] those of Alfred.'[102] Blackburn's interpretation is that 'the people in London, and possibly elsewhere in southern Mercia, would seem to have turned initially to Alfred rather than the Viking or west Mercian nominee Ceolwulf.'[103] This view can, however, be questioned, and furthermore, so can the claim that the dating of the coins 'implies that after Burgred's expulsion in 874, mints in southern Mercia recognised Alfred as their king and only acknowledged Ceolwulf's authority towards the end of his reign.'[104] A different interpretation of this evidence is required because recently a further specimen has come to light. Once again Blackburn is the numismatic authority and he has dated this coin to around *c.* 875 arguing persuasively that it 'belongs at or near the beginning, alongside the first *Cross-and–Lozenge* coins of Alfred' and points towards Ceolwulf having participated in the monetary reforms of that year together with Alfred.[105] The new addition to the corpus 'enhances Ceolwulf's status and suggests that he can now be seen as 'a partner with Alfred in the initial re-coinage [of 875], continuing the monetary alliance that Burgred had formed with the West Saxons.'[106] Yet he has also suggested that this does not

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[102] M. A. S. Blackburn, 'The London mint in the reign of Alfred', in M. A. Blackburn and D. Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 105-123, at p. 118. On the *Cross-and-Lozenge* coins in general see Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage: With a Catalogue of the Coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*, vol. 1 The Early Middle Ages 5th–10th Centuries (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 312-3.

[103] Blackburn, 'The London mint', p. 119.

[104] Mark Blackburn, 'Alfred's coinage reforms in context', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 199-215, at p. 212.

[105] *Ibid.* pp. 212-3 and p. 216.

[106] *Ibid.* p. 213.

'lessen Alfred's role in affairs' meaning that Alfred was in control of the London mints by this date and that he was acknowledged as king within parts of Mercia by 875. 'Alfred may have seized the initiative, and in negotiating the terms of the recoinage with Ceolwulf insisted that he (Alfred) had a role in implementing the recoinage in London.' [107] This would essentially leave Ceolwulf in 875 as a king without a kingdom, which seems implausible.

Noting the difficulties of restructuring events through numismatic evidence alone, Nelson has cautioned against an overly positive approach; 'though it is understandable that talk of coinage should invoke "control" vocabulary' she has suggested 'a humbler posture is appropriate.'[108] Whilst it should also be borne in mind that the evidence exhibited by one single coin should be treated warily it does perhaps help to situate the corpus into a better chronological framework. The coin's probable early dating suggests that Alfred himself may have acknowledged Ceolwulf as king in Mercia in around 875. It further suggests that a significant number of Mercians may have recognised Ceolwulf's royal authority during this period. As Keynes has pointed out, 'Ceolwulf II issued charters and coins of a kind which is difficult to reconcile with the judgement of those who wrote him off in the early 890s as a 'foolish king's thegn.'[109] Although the minting of coins did not truly become the prerogative of kings

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[107] *Ibid.* pp. 213-4.

[108] Janet L. Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: II, the Vikings and others', *TRHS* 6th series 13 (2003), 1-28, at 23.

[109] Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century', at p. 320. That Alfred and Ceolwulf shared the same London moneyer in a certain Liafwald suggests that they were of equal standing. See Blackburn, 'Alfred's coinage reforms in context', p. 210, fig. 22, nos. 34 A and 59 A and Grierson and Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage*, vol. i, 312. For the names of the moneyers of Alfred and Ceolwulf see Mark Blackburn and Simon Keynes, 'A corpus of the *Cross-and-Lozenge* and related coinages of Alfred, Ceolwulf and Archbishop Æthelred', in M. A. Blackburn and D. Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and*

until Æthelstan at Grately between 926 and 930, in general, coinage was indicative of royal status, and both Alfred and Ceolwulf perhaps held a similar type of influence.[110] Besides the *Cross-and-Lozenge* issue of Alfred and Ceolwulf there is further evidence of their combined authority to mint coinage.

There are two examples of the so-called *Two Emperors* type in existence, one surviving coin in the name of each king. These coins are only known from 'a unique coin of Ceolwulf from the Cuerdale hoarde, and from one of Alfred, a single find from Croydon in Surrey.[111] On one of these coins Alfred is given the title of *rex Anglo* and on the other Ceolwulf is referred to as *rex*.[112] Blackburn suggested that Alfred's given title of '*rex Anglo* (*rum*) ("king of the English") may reflect the die-cutter's perception that Alfred was the superior king politically.'[113] However, many years ago, W. H. Stevenson advised caution: whether Alfred's title on this coin of '*rex Anglo* represented *rex Anglorum, Anglorum Saxonum* or *Anglo-Saxonum* it is impossible to decide.'[114] And even Blackburn himself had earlier advised prudence before too much is read into this title for Alfred. 'It is insufficiently appreciated by historians that the *Two Emperors* type is one of the most common designs on Roman *solidi* found in Britain, and that it had been copied previously on gold shillings of the mid-seventh century to which no

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Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 125-150, esp. pp. 130-149.

[110] For Grately *EHD*, 35; Mark Blackburn, 'Mints, burhs, and the Grately code, cap. 14.2', in David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble (eds.), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 160-175.

[111] Grierson and Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage*, i. 312.

[112] For the *Two Emperors* coins, where Alfred is titled as *rex Anglo*, see J. J. North, *English Hammered Coinage*, vol.1 (London, 1980), 92-95; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971), p. 250, n. 2, and p. 252, n. 1 and Grierson and Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage*, i. 311-312.

[113] Blackburn, 'The London mint', p. 113.

[114] Stevenson, *Asser*, pp. 151-2.

such sophisticated interpretations have been applied.' [115] Overestimating the importance of the titles exhibited by the *Two Emperors* type may invest them with more political significance than they deserve and imply that Alfred understood the propaganda value of coinage in an unprecedented and possibly anachronistic manner for this period. Still, notwithstanding these reservations, the single most important piece of information exhibited by these coins is that both Alfred and Ceolwulf are referred to as *reges* and the *Two Emperor* coins provide tentative evidence that Ceowulf was ruling alongside Alfred during the period from 874 to 878 throughout what remained of 'English' Mercia. Keynes has also argued that Alfred and Ceolwulf may have been 'unequal rulers' but he has also suggested that they may have 'shared mutual respect' and this is probably as far as can be legitimately argued for these coins.[116] There have been attempts to make more mileage out of these two coins and possibly the most radical has been Nelson's suggestion that they could have been issued jointly by Alfred and Ceolwulf in celebration of their combined victory over the Danes at Edington in 878.[117] As Nelson has freely admitted, however, the documentary corroboration points towards Edington being solely a West Saxon victory and her theory is not substantiated by any of the available textual evidence. Whilst there may have been a monetary alliance between Alfred and Ceolwulf in the 870s, these coins would be the only surviving legacy of Ceolwulf's involvement with Alfred at this decisive battlefield in 878. This is not a persuasive argument, but we will, however, return later to Nelson's idea that both Alfred and Ceolwulf were present at Edington.

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[115] Blackburn, 'The London mint', p. 113.
[116] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', p. 17
[117] Nelson, 'A king across the sea', p. 60.

(*a*)

PLATE 11. (*a*) Coin of King Ceolwulf II of Mercia (873–9). Ceolwulf came to power in Mercia as a Danish tributary king after Burgred's expulsion. His Two-Emperor type coinage establishes an obvious link with the same issue of King Alfred who may also have been regarded by the Danes as their tributary king in the period 871–8. This coinage and Alfred's Two-Emperor type were most likely issued under Danish control.

(*b*)

(*c*)

PLATE 11. (*cont.*) Two coins of King Alfred. The example of the Two-Emperor type (*b*) carries the title *REX ANGLO* which does not necessarily mean that Alfred was claiming to be king of more than the people of Wessex. The London Monogram issue (*c*) may or may not date to after Alfred's reported occupation of London in 886. Such a coin could refer to Alfred's new arrangement with the victorious Danish Army which controlled London from 871 onwards. These coins cannot be taken to present realistic portraits of Alfred. The Two-Emperor specimen shows a strong chin and long head, while the London Monogram issue displays an entirely different portrait.

After Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995).

Silver pennies issued in the name of King Alfred the Great (871–99), illustrating the complexity of relations between Wessex and Mercia. (i) 'Two Emperors' type, probably minted *c.*875. Alfred is here styled *rex Anglo[rum]*, or 'king of the English'. Coins of a similar type were also minted in the name of Ceolwulf, king of the Mercians (874–9), styled simply *rex*. (ii) 'Cross and Lozenge' type. This specimen was minted by the London moneyer Liafwald, probably *c.*875; Alfred is styled *rex S*, apparently signifying 'king of the Saxons'. Coins of a similar type were minted in the name of King Ceolwulf, styled *rex* or *rex M*. (iii) 'London Monogram' type, reflecting the more formal establishment of King Alfred's authority in London, probably *c.*880.

Images and text after Simon Keynes, 'The Vikings in England, *c.* 790-1016', in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford and New York, 1997), pp. 48-82, at p. 57.

(The above illustrations of Alfred's and Ceolwulf's coins, and the respective discussions by Smyth and by Keynes, have been reproduced to give both a visual appreciation of the coinage itself and to highlight their differing interpretations of these coins.)

Despite arguments to the contrary, it remains doubtful that Alfred was recognised as king anywhere within Mercia between 874 and 878. Had Alfred been accepted by the Mercians as their king by this early date it would have surely been announced in the *Chronicle*, or perhaps in Asser's *Life*, in a similar way that Asser claimed for his patron a fictional jurisdiction over parts of Wales.[118] Furthermore, the historical evidence points towards a Danish occupation of London following Alfred's defeat at Wilton. The *Chronicle* itself states dryly that in 872 'the army went from Reading to London, and took up winter quarters there, and then the Mercians made peace with the army.'[119] Whilst any Danish presence in London the following year went unrecorded, similar demands for peace were made upon the Mercians and probably on their coffers as well. Simon Coupland has demonstrated that the Northmen in Francia demanded tribute on either a one-off basis or as an annual payment and what the Scandinavians did on one side of the Channel they tended to do on the other; there was a well established pattern of extortion.[120] Whilst this is not evidence that the Danes remained in occupation of London throughout the period, it does suggest that they may have at least left representatives in situ to oversee an annual levy of tribute from the Mercians. Alternately, it has been argued that following Burgred's expulsion in 874:

> Alfred succeeded him in control of London and reformed the coinage. One of Alfred's issues early in this phase represents him as "king of the English" and another as "King of the Saxons and Mercians". This may be an early articulation of ideas concerning English unity against the enemy, but it may be no more than an acknowledgement by Mercians in London and its

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[118] Asser, ch. 80.
[119] *ASC*, 872.
[120] Simon Coupland, 'The Frankish tribute payments to the Vikings and their consequences', *Francia* 26.1 (1999), 57-75, at 58-9. See also the classic study by Timothy Reuter, 'Plunder and tribute in the Carolingian Empire', *TRHS* 5th series 35 (1985), 75-94 and Neils Lund, 'Allies of God or man? The Viking expansion in a European perspective', *Viator* 20 (1989), 45-59.

> regions that Alfred was the *de facto* ruler, at least until the outcome of the Danes' appointment of Ceolwulf as king of Mercia became clear.[121]

This argument is almost solely based upon the numismatic findings of Blackburn and it too over-emphasises the significance of these royal titles found on the coinage of Alfred. It is unwise to assume that the Danes had not retained a presence in London based upon coin evidence alone. What is revealing is that neither the West Saxon chronicler nor Asser had much to say about the activities of King Alfred or the West Saxon forces during this period from 871 to 874. Both sources, following Alfred's defeat at Wilton, remain focussed on either the movements of the Danish army or the Mercian acceptance of Danish terms. The next time the West Saxons are mentioned in either of their own historical compositions is not until 875 when Alfred was reported fighting the Danes in a minor skirmish at sea against seven Danish vessels and putting them to flight.[122] It is not unreasonable to suggest that London in the early and mid 870s may have been beyond the direct control of any single authority. Therefore to assume that there was no Danish presence in London after they had over-wintered in 872, based entirely on the dating of numismatic material is possibly also unwise.[123] There are other explanations to the questions posed by the coin evidence.

Using Quentovic as her example of an 'economy in which markets could be accommodated' Nelson has suggested that this 'should provoke reflection' on the way in which London functioned at this time; 'on the edge but also as a hub, [where] there is

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[121] Derek Keene, 'Alfred and London', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 235-249, at p. 240.
[122] *ASC.* 875.
[123] Robert Cowie, 'Mercian London', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 194-209, at p. 208 has noted that there are two sites at Maiden Lane and the Royal Opera House which could conceivably have been Danish defensive structures constructed in the 870s.

more transacting than othering.'[124] One numismatic parallel to London may be drawn for the example of the Frisian port of Dorestad in 850. The Annals of *Xanten* reported that in 850 'Rorik the Northman ... again attacked Dorestad and deceitfully inflicted many woes upon the Christian populace.'[125] According to both the *Annals of St-Bertin* and the *Annals of Fulda*, Dorestad was later granted to Rorik as a benefice by the emperor Lothar because he was unable to expel the Northman by force of arms.[126] Although Lothar still maintained his overall authority over Dorestad, the localised jurisdiction for the Frisian port was Danish and Rorik was now the *de facto* ruler of the region, for all his supposed submission to Lothar. Yet coins bearing the emperor's name continued to be minted at Dorestad albeit declining in overall quality. Coupland has suggested that the emperor allowed the situation with Rorik to develop because the Rhine estuary was gradually silting-up and that Lothar had already recognised that Dorestad was becoming less commercially viable.[127] But Dorestad retained its overall military and strategic significance even if its economic future was uncertain.[128] The example of Dorestad illustrates that coins bearing a certain ruler's name do not necessarily signify who actually 'controlled' the region where the coins were being minted. Similarly, just because Alfred's name appears on many coins from the London mint this does not automatically signify that he was in 'control' of its mints or the city. It could be, as recently argued by Jeremy Haslam, that the Danes had

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[124] Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: II, the Vikings and others', 22-24.
[125] *Annals of Xanten*, *s.a.* 850, trans. Simon Coupland (Unpublished).
[126] *AB* 850; *AF* 850. For Rorik's career see K. L. Maund, 'A turmoil of warring princes; political leadership in ninth-century Denmark', *HSJ* 6 (1994), 29-47.
[127] Simon Coupland, 'From poachers to gamekeepers', 96, and for the numismatic evidence in general Simon Coupland, 'Dorestad in the ninth century: the numismatic evidence', *Jaarboek voor Munt – en Penningkunde* 75 (1988), 5-26.
[128] Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: II, the Vikings and others', 15.

succeeded in restricting Alfred's influence over London and acted as a 'ninth-century mafia, creaming off the profits for their own use.'[129]

Alfred and Ceolwulf as tributary kings of the Danes

It was not only the Mercians who had been forced to come to financial terms with the Danish host but Alfred's Wessex as well. 'It was not because they [the Danes] were beaten in battle or outmanoeuvred that they left Wessex alone for the next five years. They were simply sufficiently discouraged by months of fighting to come to terms – not improbably in return for what other ages would call Danegeld.'[130] If the Danes were the victors at Wilton in 871 it is conceivable that they were kept at bay during this five-year period by the payment of tribute raised by both Alfred and Ceolwulf. The silence of the *Chronicle* during these critical years may be a sign that the West Saxons under Alfred were also being subjected, alongside Ceolwulf's Mercians, to an annual levy of cash by their Danish conquerors. The re-coinage that both Alfred and Ceolwulf participated in was possibly instigated because of Danish demands for cash. Smyth has argued that the coins struck by Alfred, following his setback at Wilton in 871, 'were of precisely the same status' as those issued by his Mercian counterpart, Ceolwulf II.[131] It is Blackburn's numismatic discoveries that allow for Smyth's bold conclusion that

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[129] Jeremy Haslam, 'King Alfred and the Vikings: strategies and tactics, 876-886 AD', in Sarah Semple, (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 13 (Oxford, 2006), 122-154, at 128.
[130] Patrick Wormald,
'Alfred (848/9-899)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/183 [accessed 15th Sept 05]
[131] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, pp. 48-50, at p. 49.

Alfred may have spent a period of time as a tributary king of the Danes. Here Smyth thinks 'the unthinkable: that is, contemplating an Alfred who, early in his royal career, was, like Ceolwulf a Danish sub-king.'[132] If the Danes were the dominant force in and around London when both Ceolwulf's and Alfred's coins were minted, then perhaps both Anglo-Saxon kings were subject to their demands, and as Smyth articulated it:

> for Alfred such an arrangement may not have been as humiliating or as economically disadvantageous as modern political commentators might imagine. ... As for the Danes, by ruling through tributary kings they stood to gain tribute and taxation with minimum cost in lives and labour to their own men.[133]

Alfred as a Danish tributary king may seem unthinkable. But given that he was defeated at Wilton, this may have been Alfred's sole method of maintaining any kind of grip on his kingdom and ensuring his own continued existence. It may be purely Alfred's later reputation that makes this idea seems absurd, or it may be that the modern-day lexicon of complicity, with its inherent implications of treachery, can still have a detrimental effect on the study of early-medieval political pacts. When the seemingly junior partner in any such arrangement is habitually described as being a 'puppet ruler ', or similar, it makes it difficult to unravel the complexities of these sensitive and highly motivated relationships.[134] Smyth's suggestion that Alfred spent

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[132] Nelson, 'England and the continent in the ninth century: II, the Vikings and others', at 24.

[133] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 49.

[134] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, at p. 146 'The *Chronicle*, thus implicitly contrasted Ceolwulf, the lap-dog of the Danes, with Alfred, their conqueror. This judgement, as biased as it is, is not without merit. Ceolwulf II was not his own man. He ruled Mercia on the sufferance of his Danish masters.' Whilst agreeing with Abels that the *Chronicle's* literary portrayal of Ceolwulf was precisely that of a Danish lap-dog, it was written from the perspective of the West Saxon court in the 890s. I cannot agree with him when he writes that 'Ceolwulf was not his own man' or that he 'ruled Mercia on the sufferance of his Danish masters.' The only evidence for either of these damning allegations against Ceolwulf comes from the *Chronicle*. It seems to be the case that Abels has clearly noted the bias within the *Chronicle* text and then paradoxically perpetuated its validity. On the over-reliance on the term 'puppet king' see for instance, Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (London, 1992), p. 237, where she cites the *Chronicle* text and that 'the army went away into Mercia and they shared out some of it and gave some to Ceolwulf (the Vikings' puppet king).' Justin Pollard, *Alfred the Great: The Man Who Made England* (London, 2005), at p. 340 has also used this loaded term and Ceolwulf appears in his index as: 'Ceolwulf II (puppet king of Mercia).'

some of his formative years as ruler of the West Saxons as a tributary king of the Danes and merely the equal in political significance to Ceolwulf is worth following up. The *Chronicle* entry for 871 unintentionally lends support to the notion that Alfred's predicament was sufficiently grave to compel him to seek an accommodation with his Danish conquerors after Wilton. When the *Chronicle* hints at almost complete West Saxon surrender to the Danish host it raises the possibility that Alfred may have had no choice but to act in accordance with the enemy's demands. The *Chronicle* may have portrayed Alfred's retreat into the Somerset marshes in 878 as the nadir in his fortunes, but his defeat at Wilton in 871 was also severe and was possibly obscured from close scrutiny in the 890s for the promotion of his current and future ambitions. Shorn of its Alfredian disingenuousness, the *Chronicle* account of the peace agreement at Wareham in 876 also sounds suspiciously similar to that same text's account of Ceolwulf II's acceptance of Danish demands in 874.

Arguing that Ceowulf II may have been more than merely a Danish appointee, David Pratt has also suggested that Ceolwulf may have been forced to accept 'crippling terms' from the Danes in return for his sudden elevation to the kingship.[135] Ceolwulf's elevation as more than just a Danish-inspired sub-king is credible but the secondary proposal that the terms of his kingship may have left him 'crippled' is too strongly argued. It would seem illogical that the Danes would have made the terms of Ceolwulf's kingship unacceptable to the Mercians and there is no reason to suppose that the Danes were irrational in such matters. Essentially, Ceolwulf does not appear to

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[135] D. R. Pratt, 'The political thought of Alfred the Great' (University of Cambridge Ph.D. Thesis, 1999), p. 16, n. 22.

have been overly inconvenienced by his pact with the Danes and he seems to have exercised appropriate royal authority at times without recourse to his Danish overlords, for example when campaigning against the Welsh. This is not to underplay the financial burdens the Danes imposed upon their tributary kings. The Mercians had evidently been feeling the pressure of Danish demands for tribute even before Ceolwulf came to the throne. In 872, during the reign of King Burgred, Wærferth, the bishop of Worcester, issued a charter that highlights that there was a substantial price to be paid for the peace Burgred negotiated with the Danes.[136] The charter reveals how the Worcester *familia* 'with the unanimous permission of the community' agreed to lease an estate in Warwickshire to raise twenty mancuses of gold: 'chiefly because of the very pressing affliction and immense tribute of the barbarians, in that same year when the pagans stayed in London.'[137] Sir Frank Stenton suggested that this charter emphasised the level of Danish extortion when they occupied London. But, he cautiously added, that the charter does not necessarily signify that the Danes had reached any part of the bishop's diocese which was still clearly functioning. Rather, it reveals how a general levy of cash by the king in order to buy off the invaders could affect 'the life of districts some eighty miles away.'[138]

The *Chronicle* was disapproving of Ceolwulf in 874 and once again in 877 when the Danes shared out the land of the Mercians 'and gave some to Ceolwulf' but these

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[136] *ASC*, 872.
[137] The charter in question is S 1278. The Latin reads: *Hoc est autem supra nominatus episcopus potissimun consentiebat proxima afflictione et inmenso tributo barbarorum. Eodem anno quo pagani sederunt in Lundonia*; trans. *EHD* I, no. 94.
[138] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 251.

remarks should no longer be treated literally.[139] The *Chronicle* was quite simply orchestrating history and indulging in 'creative forgetting.'[140] Ceolwulf was a legitimate king of the Mercians and he was probably so recognised by many Mercians and West Saxons alike in the period between 874 and 878, although he paid tribute to the Danes for his continuing kingship. With two essential functions in mind, the Alfredian court attempted to downplay Ceolwulf's credibility. The rhetorical messages reaffirmed Alfred's role as the leader of a united Christian people, including his own kingdom of Wessex now extended to incorporate the formerly independent kingdom of the Mercians, while they simultaneously counselled against disloyalty and future separatist intrigue with the Danes. David Dumville has observed that '[a] politically motivated chronicle – perhaps one favouring a particular dynasty – might be revised in different political circumstances, whether of time or place.'[141] This type of annalistic revision evidently occurred in the *Annales regni Francorum*, which were subjected to a certain amount of editorial falsification, and, as a result, much of the information concerning Charlemagne and Duke Tassilo of Bavaria is at the very least highly suspicious and some may even be fictitious.[142] Unlike the Frankish annals, the

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[139] *ASC*, 877.

[140] Patrick J. Geary, 'Oblivion between orality and textuality in the tenth century', in Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried and Patrick J. Geary (eds.), *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory and Historiography* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 11-122 at p. 111. Geary used this memorable phrase in relation to a later period in medieval Europe starting around *c*. 950. However, it seems to fit ideally with what was going on post-871 in the West Saxon-inspired *Chronicle*; 'as individuals and communities, both lay and secular, readjusted their sense of a relationship to the past, creating a new and more useful memory through a process of transmission, adaption, and suppression.' See also his extended discussions about social memory in Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).

[141] David N. Dumville, 'What is a Chronicle?', in Erik Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicle II* (Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Medieval Chronicle, Driebergen/Utrecht, 16-21 July 1999, Amsterdam-New York, 2002) pp. 1-27, at p. 19.

[142] M. Becher, *Eid und Herrschaft: Untersuchungen zum Herrscherethos Karls des Grossen,* Vorträge und Forschungen Sonderband 39 (Sigmaringen, 1993), esp. pp. 74-77; cited by Anton Scharer, 'The writing of history at King Alfred's court', *Early Medieval Europe* 5.2 (1996), 177-206., 182-183. See also Rosamund McKitterick's series of essays on the Royal Frankish Annals: 'Constructing the past in the

Chronicle may not have been a product that projected the accomplishments of Alfred's particular dynasty above all else; it was more subtle in its approach where Alfredian unity was portrayed as being paramount. 'Here the West Saxon victory is celebrated, in stark contrast to the failures of the other native English royal lines, but is explained as a victory for a whole people (and for a continuance of a shared faith), not just for one dynasty.' [143] It was, therefore, a politically-motivated creation that solidified the ideological and dynastic foundations assembled at the court of King Alfred.[144] If, as Sarah Foot has additionally suggested, 'Alfred was thus manipulating the history of the Anglo-Saxon peoples to create among his own subjects a sense of cultural and spiritual identity, by invoking a concept of Englishness particularly dependent on the Christian faith', then clearly something had to be done to repair the damage caused by the collapse of the Mercian polity in the 870s and the failure of the West Saxons themselves to halt Danish expansion during these formative years of Alfred's unlikely kingship.[145] Consequently, there were ideological reasons why Ceolwulf's reputation was sullied by the Alfredian court. Someone had to be held culpable for the failure of the forces of Christianity to deal with the heathen menace of the 870s and Ceolwulf's image fitted this particular role for the Alfredian court. He was a most convenient scapegoat for the failings of all the 'English' forces following Wilton in 871.

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early middle ages: the case of the Royal Frankish Annals', *TRHS* 6.7 (1997), 101-129; 'The illusion of royal power in the Carolingian annals', *EHR* 115 (2000), 1-20; 'Political ideology in Carolingian historiography', in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 162-174.

[143] Sarah Foot, 'Finding the meaning of form: narrative in annals and chronicles', in Nancy Partner (ed.), *Writing Medieval History* (London, 2005), pp. 88-108, at p. 100.

[144] On the *Chronicle* and the influences of contemporary politics see Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories: Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2001), esp. pp. 14-60.

[145] Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*', at 37.

Based on the numismatic evidence it is difficult not to argue that Alfred's attitude towards Ceolwulf changed between 874 and 878.[146] One prime motive behind the royal court's new aggressive demeanour towards the Mercian king may be that Alfred had, alongside Ceolwulf, spent a number of years as a tributary king of the Danish forces. This would have been a part of Alfred's kingship that would have been advantageously overlooked, but was probably better still entirely forgotten. Another reason may be discerned from the *Chronicle*. Nelson may have been right when she suggested that Ceolwulf had participated at Edington, but her idea that Ceolwulf participated in conjunction with Alfred and the West Saxons is not persuasive. The problems arising from Ceolwulf's disappearance from all the known sources after 878 are acute and the evidence of the eleventh-century regnal list suggesting that his reign ended following Edington cannot be reasonably ignored.[147] Yet the *Chronicle* appears to hint that the Mercian king possibly participated in the crucial encounter at Edington, and it may well be that Ceolwulf's involvement in this decisive engagement was partly responsible for his later degradation at the hands of the annalist. It seems possible that Ceolwulf could have participated in the decisive battle, but on the side of Guthrum's Danes. 'And he would be ready, himself' moralised the chronicler 'and all who would follow him, at the enemy's service.'[148] Military obligation to the Danish host is implied by the aggressive tone of the *Chronicle* narrative. Furthermore, it has recently been

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[146] Scharer, 'The writing of history', at 179.

[147] Nelson, 'A king across the sea', at 60; Janet L. Nelson, 'Wealth and wisdom: the politics of Alfred the Great', in her *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 31-52, at pp. 42-44 and p. 50, n. 49; Janet L. Nelson, 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Kings and Kingship* (London, 1993), pp. 125-157, p. 148. Nelson does indeed ignore the evidence of this admittedly later regnal list and gives Ceolwulf an extended reign through to 883. Contrast Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', at p. 14, n. 54 'it is better practice to take the regnal list at face value, as evidence that Ceolwulf's activities did not extend beyond *ca* 879.'

[148] *ASC*, 874.

suggested that the composition of the Danish *micel hæðen here* remained in a constant state of flux and that the forces arranged against Alfred only occasionally coalesced into a composite warband when circumstances dictated the necessity for such action.[149] Although Ceolwulf is not explicitly condemned by the chronicler for fighting alongside the Danes at Edington, we should not completely rule out the possibility, for he may have been expected to honour this part of his pledge to them. If Abels' insightful observation about what made up the *micel hæðen here* is taken one stage further, it might be suggested that part of this composite force could have been recruited from the native Anglo-Saxon warrior élite.

Ceolwulf's participation at the Battle of Edington, fighting alongside Guthrum's Danes, makes both political and military sense. If, as seems likely, Ceolwulf claimed to be descended from a branch of the Mercian royal line historically opposed to the exiled King Burgred, who he had recently supplanted on the Mercian throne, Ceolwulf would have had his own political agenda to follow. This schedule was not necessarily synonymous with the one pursued by the West Saxons, particularly since King Alfred had been previously allied with Burgred. Alfred was, furthermore, related into this particular branch of the Mercian royal house through the earlier marriage of his sister,

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[149] Richard Abels, 'Alfred the Great, the *micel hæðen here* and the Viking threat', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great*, pp. 265-279, at p. 265. See also Ryan Lavelle, 'Towards a political contextualization of peacemaking and peace agreements in Anglo-Saxon England', in Diane Wolfthal (ed.), *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 4 (Turnhout, 2000), 39-55, at 41-42. Lavelle notes Peter Sawyer's ground-breaking observations about the possible complexities of the allegiances making up a viking host army. Today Sawyer's work is mainly perceived as a debate about numbers of ships and combatants. However, he made some fundamental observations that can still be taken further. See P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962), esp. pp. 117-142 and for a critique of Sawyer's thesis see Patrick Wormald, 'Viking studies: whence and whither?', in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings* (London, 1988), pp. 128-153.

Æthelswith, to King Burgred. These factors suggest that Ceolwulf was not a natural ally of the West Saxons. But more compelling still would be Ceolwulf's possible resentment against Burgred's former alliance with the West Saxons, perhaps perceiving this as an alien encroachment into Mercian affairs. Ceolwulf's possible alignment with Guthrum was a course of action that could, in this context, be construed as one pursued to 'liberate' Mercian kingship from any possible subservience to Wessex. The Danish newcomers should not be viewed purely from the perspective of them being an invading force but also as a potential source of military assistance. If Ceolwulf was a scion of Mercian royalty, possibly a claimant in exile, he could have appealed to the Danes for support against undesirable West Saxon influences within Mercia. Even members of royal families and close kin-groups could align with outsiders, including pagans, if the prize was worth the risks. The examples of Charles the Straightforward and the Seine vikings, Wulfhere's renunciation of his oath to King Alfred and Æthelwold's confrontation with his cousin Edward over the West Saxon throne clearly demonstrate this. Paganism in itself was not a barrier to interaction and ultimately the advantages gained in the midst of a power struggle could outweigh any moral considerations.[150] The West Saxon texts openly accuse Ceolwulf of Danish collaboration but it could be more worthwhile to view this as a reciprocal arrangement that was in the interests of both the Danes and Ceolwulf. This may explain the *Chronicle's* accusation that Ceolwulf had pledged himself and his retinue to the service of the Danish host and that he had done this under oath.

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[150] D. M. Hadley, '"And they proceeded to plough and support themselves": the Scandinavian settlement of England', *ANS* 19 (1997), 69-96, at 89.

In the end, following the West Saxon victory at Edington, Ceolwulf may have paid the ultimate price for his kingship. It has been suggested that Ceolwulf's disappearance from the political scene from 879 on may be attributed to the post-battle arrangements between Alfred and Guthrum.[151] Ceolwulf's departure from the political arena was crucial for Alfred's own security and the extension of his kingship, since it opened up the new political horizons that now beckoned for him, following his arrangements with Guthrum. Part of the treaty between Alfred and Guthrum stressed a reciprocal concern to prevent defection from one side to the other, once more laying an emphasis upon loyalty.[152] As will become apparent in the next chapter, by 886 there was no longer any room for more than one 'English' king. On a similar note, there were also personal loyalties involved and reputations that had to be protected. It was not just King Alfred who benefited from the royal court's criticism of Ceolwulf. Many of those present at Wedmore knew what had happened in the intervening years between 871 and 878. These individuals included Bishop Wærferth who later became one of Alfred's foremost advisors, and yet, as the sources suggest, had previously stood at King Ceolwulf II's right hand.[153] New personal bonds were created in the aftermath of

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[151] John Peddie, *Alfred: Warrior King* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 150-3. A further possibility for the post-battle agreements between Alfred and Guthrum would most likely have been financial; Alfred demanding the tribute that would signify Guthrum's submission. See J. R. Maddicott, 'Trade, industry and the wealth of King Alfred', *Past & Present* 123 (1989), 3-51, at 14-15.

[152] Paul Kershaw, 'The Alfred-Guthrum Treaty: scripting accommodation and interaction in Viking Age England', in Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (eds.), *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 43-64, at p. 59.

[153] On Alfred and Wærferth see Malcolm Godden, 'Wærferth and King Alfred: the fate of the Old English *Dialogues*', in Jane Roberts, Janet L. Nelson and Malcolm Godden (eds.), *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 35-51. On Ceolwulf and Wærferth F. M. Stenton, 'The Anglo-Saxon coinage and the historian', in D. M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 370-382 at p. 372 argued that Ceolwulf and Wærferth held at least an alliance.

Edington and in order to achieve these, some of the old ones had to be creatively forgotten.

Chapter Four:

'The Lord and Lady of the Mercians': Kingship or Lordship?

And King Alfred entrusted the borough of London to the control of Ealdorman Æthelred.[1]

Chapter three argued that King Alfred, aided by certain influential members of his royal court, creatively overlooked past alliances, and perhaps past indiscretions, to promote a closer alliance between West Saxons and Mercians in the new circumstances occasioned by Scandinavian warfare. Where these former associations had previously existed, new political affiliations had become necessary. One of the new personal bonds of loyalty created by King Alfred was with a Mercian nobleman named Æthelred. This association was arguably Alfred's most important, yet the date when the alliance came into being, or the exact conditions that bound the relationship, have never been satisfactorily explained. Although the alliance between the two has been much debated, little has altered since Sir Frank Stenton noted that Æthelred's origins are as obscure as is his sudden appearance as the 'ruler' of Mercia.[2] It would be foolhardy to underestimate Æthelred and to assume that he was merely appointed by Alfred to facilitate the acceptance of West Saxon hegemony throughout English Mercia. The Mercian alliance with the West Saxons was an intensely delicate relationship, crucial for the furtherance of West Saxon royal ambitions, and critical for the survival of Mercian identity. The first part of this chapter will examine the career of Æthelred and

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[1] *ASC*, 866.

[2] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edition, Oxford, 1971), at p. 259; a point reiterated by Simon Keynes; 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in M. A. S. Blackburn and David Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1-45 at p. 19.

attempt a re-definition of his responsibilities. This will provide the platform for an assessment of the inter-connected problem of how comprehensive Mercian subordination to the West Saxon king was between 878/9 and the first quarter of the tenth century. For, if the status of Æthelred remains an enigma, so too does the fate of the kingdom of the Mercians, from the period when Alfred defeated Guthrum's Danes in 878, to the death of his daughter Æthelflæd in 918. The formative years of Alfred's innovative federation remain particularly hazy because of the seeming lack of available source material for this period. As Janet Nelson has expressed it:

> Mercian history is a blank between 878 and 883 when we find Æthelred the ealdorman, "enriched with part of the Mercian realm" granting lands "with the leave of Alfred the king". According to Asser, Alfred the truth-teller had an explanation for why the West Saxons no longer had queens. But the truth-teller's *Chronicle* preferred silence when it came to explaining why the Mercians no longer had kings.[3]

The silence of the *Chronicle* narrative on this matter is itself highly suggestive, which may indicate that there existed a policy of literary restraint that served a vital political function. The Alfredian hierarchy hid certain conditions that bound the West Saxon king to the Mercian leadership away from too much scrutiny and thereby suppressed any lingering tendencies towards Mercian separatism. This formed part of an overall strategy implemented to ease the transition from the old order to the fledgling new one being orchestrated by Alfred's régime in the 880s and 890s. By this date, not all interested parties would necessarily have subscribed to the view that Alfred was anything other than a West Saxon king, despite the best efforts of his policy-makers.[4]

Even the seemingly innocuous fact that Æthelred was King Alfred's son-in-law went

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[3] Janet L. Nelson, 'A king across the sea: Alfred in continental perspective', *TRHS* 5th Series 36 (1986), 45-68 at 60.

[4] Simon Keynes, 'England, c.900-1016', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History, III c. 900-1024 (*Cambridge, 1999), 456-484, at 459.

unannounced in the *Chronicle*.[5] In the context of this apparent political expediency, one of the most important factors that may have required handling with the utmost prudence was the reputation and status of the Mercian leader Æthelred. Æthelred, who may have been entitled to royal status, was only ever referred to in the *Chronicle* as the Ealdorman of the Mercians, or in Asser's *Life*, as the Latin equivalent as *comes Merciorum*.[6] These are important considerations and the following discussion will follow Nelson's lead and offer some suggestions as to why it seems to have been that by 883 the Mercians no longer had kings.

Æthelred in the sources

Æthelred: the charter evidence

Æthelred remains a shadowy political figure as may be judged from this recent account of both his origins and the limits of his 'leadership' of the Mercians:

> Æthelred (d. 911), ruler of the Mercians, took over the government of that portion of Mercia left to the English after the vikings had dismembered the kingdom in 877 and King Ceolwulf II had disappeared from the scene two years later. Nothing certain is known of how Æthelred attained leadership of the Mercians, nor his family background. He first appears in 883, by which time he had recognized the overlordship of the West Saxon king, Alfred: he made a grant to Berkeley Abbey in that year with Alfred's assent.[7]

We should avoid conjecturing that Æthelred became the leader of the Mercians in 877, following the reported partition of the Mercian kingdom between the Danes and

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[5] Anton Scharer, 'König Alfreds Hof und die Geschichtsschreibung', in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (München, 1994), pp. 443-458, at p. 450. Asser was less reticent, however; see Asser, ch. 75.

[6] Asser, chs. 75, 80 and 83.

[7] Marios Costambeys, '*Æthelred (d. 911)*', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/52311[accessed 4th Oct 2005]

Ceolwulf II. As argued in the previous chapter, the available evidence suggests that Ceolwulf II ruled parts of 'English' Mercia until his disappearance from the sources *c.* 878-9. Whilst one might speculate that Æthelred could have assumed the mantle of Mercian leader in direct opposition to King Ceolwulf and his alliance with the Danes, the first reliable indication that Æthelred had become Ceolwulf II's actual successor comes much later in 883. This is the year that Æthelred can be seen presiding over events inside Mercia when he granted privileges to Berkeley Abbey with the 'leave and witness of King Alfred and all the *witan* of the Mercians, of divine and secular conditions.'[8] Later, Æthelred would have sufficient authority to establish the borough of Worcester with a division of market and judicial profits between the king and his bishop and Æthelred also presided over the settlement of major land-disputes.[9] But even by 883, Æthelred's authority seems plain enough. He was the Mercian leader with the consent of the West Saxon king and with the blessing of the ecclesiastical and lay aristocracy of Mercia. It leaves, however, the four years between 878/9 and 883 unaccounted for and this significant gap in Mercian chronology raises a number of fundamental questions. During this period who ruled inside Mercia and with what type of authority? Whose approval of Æthelred's right to endorse this particular grant came first: Alfred's or the Mercian aristocracy's? These questions, and others, might best be approached by wrestling with the problems associated with the outer and inner limits of

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[8] The charter is S 218; *Æthelræd ealdorman, inbryrden'd're Godes gefe gewellegod 7 gewlenced mid sume dæle Mercna rices ... 7 þæt ic do mid Ælfredes cyninges leafe 7 gewitnesse 7 mid ealra Myrcna witena, godcundra hada 7 woroldcundra. Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. and trans. F. E. Harmer (Cambridge, 1914), no. 12, pp. 20-2 and pp. 53-4.

[9] S 223, of 901 and S 1441 of 896; see Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents*, nos. 12 and 14.

Æthelred's political jurisdiction during these formative years. At its simplest, did Æthelred ever rule as a king of the Mercians?

Traditionally, Æthelred has been situated within the Alfredian polity as second only to King Alfred and historians have generally envisioned him as being a kind of Mercian viceroy, perhaps in receipt of quasi-royal rank.[10] More recently, however, there has been a reassessment of both Æthelred and his role in the Alfredian polity and a drive towards a more constructive appraisal of his rank and status. A number of historians now argue that Æthelred was more than merely the subordinate of the West Saxons and that he should be acknowledged as a true king of the Mercians.[11] Despite this new historiographical confidence in Æthelred and his right to be viewed as a Mercian king, the questions of when and how he may have ruled need more clarification, even if the requisite evidence seems both problematic and ambiguous.

Because of the difficulties in assessing this seemingly ambiguous evidence, the sources for Æthelred's authority might best be approached from a working hypothesis that when first drawn up they were intended to be diplomatically nebulous.[12] Even a

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[10] Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great: Being the Ford Lectures For 1901* (Oxford, 1902), p. 42, used the expression 'semi-royal' for the Mercian leader, while R. Pauli, ed. *The Life of Alfred the Great: to Which is Appended Alfred's Anglo-Saxon Version of Orosius*, trans. B. Thorpe (London, 1899), p. 115, on the other hand, referred to Æthelred as being 'entrusted with the viceroyship of the whole of Christian Mercia.'

[11] Scholars who have recently argued for fully-royal status for Æthelred include: David Dumville, 'The terminology of overlordship in early Anglo-Saxon England', in John Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective* (San Marino, 1997), pp. 345-365, at p. 360; A. P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 387-389 and Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 19-34. Cf. Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1998), at pp. 180-184 who has opted for the view that the Mercians, and Alfred of Wessex, arranged for an interregnum inside Mercia.

[12] Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, at p. 389 has suggested that the charter formulae for Æthelred and Æthelflæd were drafted in a manner of being 'deliberately ambiguous.' However, Smyth's opinion is that

cursory glance at the charter evidence for Æthelred reveals a bewildering array of titles for the Mercian leader and the fact that the range of his authority was described by such roundabout means suggests that this was a deliberate ploy used to cultivate diplomatic imprecision.[13] It is not only the titles denoting Æthelred's authority that exhibit a serious capacity for circumlocution, however. The limits of his jurisdiction were similarly dealt with and were articulated in ways that allegedly verge on royalty, or that they even symbolise 'regality', where the only piece of the puzzle missing is that of the Mercian royal title itself.[14] But the conspicuous absence of the title of *rex Merciorum* from any of Æthelred's contemporary documentation is a fundamental omission that cannot be brushed aside and this remains the major obstacle in the way of proclaiming outright Æthelred's right to kingship during these years. Another complication is the complete lack of coins for Æthelred. While nothing can be done to alter the lack of numismatic evidence, the literary sources involving the Mercian leader can, however, be re-appraised.

One charter issued for King Alfred is symptomatic of the uncertainty that surrounds the limits of Æthelred's authority. The document, dated to 889, and preserved in the Worcester archive, contains ambitious royal formulae for both King

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Æthelred was 'acknowledged as a king' in Mercian circles, presumably throughout the period when the diplomas were issued. I disagree with Smyth's ultimate conclusion, but agree about the calculated ambiguities of the charter styles.

[13] In Æthelred's charters he is referred to as: *dux et patricius* of Mercia in S 217; ealdorman in S 218; 223 and S 1441; lord of the Mercians in S 219; *procurator* of Mercia in S 220; ruler of Mercia (along with his wife Æthelflæd) in S 221; *dux Merciorum* in S 222; Lords of Mercia (along with Æthelflæd) in S 1280 a charter of Bishop Wærferth of Worcester and most intriguingly *subregulus et patricius Merciorum* in S 346 a charter of King Alfred's from Worcester and dated to 889. For an extended discussion on these charters see Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 20-29.

[14] Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture*, p. 181.

Alfred (*rex Anglorum et Saxonum*) and for Æthelred (*subregulus et patricius Merciorum*) and is as near to an outright declaration of Æthelred as *rex Merciorum* as is available in the contemporary sources.[15] It has been suggested that this charter exhibits an ambitious Latin style, in particular the use of grecisms, which anticipates the flamboyant literary approach favoured within many of the diplomas produced during the reign of King Æthelstan.[16] However, the titles used for Æthelred in this document are more realistically a manifestation of the Alfredian court's fixation with euphemisms. The extraordinary diplomatic language used by the draftsman here articulates in a recondite manner the conceptual fluidity of West Saxon and Mercian status. It could be argued that the elusive nature of Æthelred's authority is encapsulated within this particular title of *subregulus et patricius Merciorum*. The *subregulus* segment of the title implies Æthelred's royalty as king of the Mercians but also his overall subordination to Alfred. Whereas, the additional title of *patricius Merciorum* qualifies the negative implication of subservience and evokes a close affinity with an independent Mercian past that lay at the heart of this image of authority. This particular circumlocution allowed the Mercians to retain their credibility as an autonomous people while participating in the overall grand design under Alfred's leadership. Charters – such as this one – can in certain instances provide windows into even the most sensitive political processes.[17] Overall this particular charter style conveyed the image of West Saxon/Mercian unity forged through consent rather than confrontation.

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[15] S 346; see *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley*, ed. M. Gelling (Leicester, 1979), no. 212, pp. 106 and pp. 188-189.

[16] Michael Lapidge, 'Schools, learning and literature in tenth-century England', in Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 900-1066* (London, 1993), pp. 1-48 at p. 10, n. 25.

[17] Herwig Wolfram, 'Political theory and narrative in charters', *Viator* 26 (1985), 39-51.

The concept of political consensus developed in the latter part of the ninth century and became increasingly important to both the West Saxon and Mercian leadership as they attempted to restructure the political landscape following the cultural accommodation with Guthrum and his followers in 878. Yet consensus was a difficult concept to portray successfully without upsetting certain sensibilities. The evasive characteristics of Æthelred's charter styles negated much of this problem and they may be viewed as examples of a literary paradigm which anthropologists and linguists refer to as 'anti-language'. The primary process of an anti-language 'is one not of construction but of reconstruction ... [and consequently] the cornerstone of the new reality is a new social structure.'[18] An anti-language also exists, according to Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge:

> to transform what is troublesome and problematic in reality into something less disturbing ... an anti language is a device for managing reality, creating the necessary counter reality. ... [It] is defensive, protecting its community from direct grasp of problematic reality. ... So it reveals, through its evasions, what parts of reality are problematic for that community.[19]

If these illusions of diplomatic unanimity - where actuality lies just beyond reach - are scrutinised in conjunction with the contemporary narrative sources, it can be demonstrated that they too contain similar linguistic ambiguities and evasions.[20] These literary circumventions were executed during this crucial phase of reformation and realignment because of the delicate, but essentially unequal, nature of the West Saxon/Mercian partnership.

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[18] M. A. K. Halliday, 'Anti-languages', *American Anthropologist*, new series 78.3 (Sept, 1976), 570-584, at 575.

[19] Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge, *Language as Ideology* (London, Boston and Henley, 1979), pp. 71 and 76.

[20] For the concept that an anti-language lies 'always just beyond the reach of secure reading' see John Henderson, 'Tacitus: the world in pieces', in his *Fighting For Rome: Poets and Caesars, History and Civil War* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 257-300, at pp. 258-9.

During the formative period of the West Saxon and Mercian alliance one event arguably stands above all others in importance. In 886, most probably as part of an elaborately stage-managed ceremony to mark Alfred's restoration of London, the king entrusted the borough of the former Mercian emporium to Æthelred.[21] The wording of the *Chronicle* extract detailing the restoration of London is instructive. The language reveals much about the relationship between the two men and the two kingdoms and the suggestion that this event signalled the 'climactic moment' in both the compilation of the *Chronicle* and in King Alfred's pursuit of political and religious togetherness is a persuasive one.[22] Yet, notwithstanding the magnitude of Alfred's re-establishment of London, the event itself was subtly articulated by the chronicler using language that exhibits similar signs of hesitancy in keeping with the evasiveness of other sources which refer to Æthelred. 'That same year King Alfred occupied London and all the English people that were not subject to the Danes submitted to him. And he then entrusted the borough to the control of Ealdorman Æthelred.'[23] The use of the verb *befæstan* (to entrust) demonstrates that Æthelred's authority over the borough may have been transitory. A charter issued three years later mirrors this intangibility and Alfred and Æthelred are both to have jurisdiction over London: 'always, for as long as the

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[21]On the restoration of London see Tony Dyson, 'King Alfred and the restoration of London', *London Journal* 15.2 (1990), 99-110; Tony Dyson, 'Two Saxon land grants for Queenhithe', in Joanna Bird, Hugh Chapman and John Clark (eds.), *Collectanea Londoniensia: Studies in London: Archaeology and History Presented to Ralph Merrifield*, Middlesex Archaeological Society Special Paper, 2 (London, 1978), 200-215; Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 19-33; Derek Keene, 'Alfred and London', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 235-249 and Richard Abels, 'Royal succession and the growth of political stability in ninth-century Wessex', *HSJ* 12 for 2005 (2001), 83-97, at 92.

[22]Sarah Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series (1996), 25-49 at 36. See also Foot's more recent treatment of the *Chronicle* in her 'Finding the meaning of form: narrative in annals and chronicles', in Nancy Partner (ed.), *Writing Medieval History* (London, 2005), pp. 88-108, esp. pp. 99-102.

[23] *ASC*, 886; *7 hie Þa befæste Þa burg EÞerede aldormen to haldonne.* See *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 3 MS. 'A', ed. Janet Bately (Cambridge, 1986), 53.

peoples of the Angles and the Saxons are sprinkled with the water of holy baptism through the faith of the Christian religion, or as long as the city of London lies suitably under the rule of their authority.'[24] This particular charter formula replicates the *Chronicle* account by once more intimating that jurisdiction over London was at present bi-partite, whilst further emphasising that this particular kind of authority may well be temporary. Inbuilt ambiguities are once more in evidence and the charter accentuates, as does the *Chronicle* text, that there could come a time when the rule of both Angles and Saxons (Mercians and West-Saxons) over London would not be wholly appropriate. The following discussion will offer a number of explanations as to why these deliberate ambiguities were perpetrated.

Æthelred: the narrative sources

Æthelred, who as we have seen, granted land with the permission of King Alfred and all the Mercian *witan* in 883, may have made his first dateable appearance as the Mercian leader in 881. It may even be suggested that his authority to act in this capacity came earlier. Æthelred's emergence as the Mercian ruler before 883 can possibly be adduced from three disparate sources, which, if pieced together, may shape a coherent narrative of events that would situate the Mercian ealdorman into a more secure narrative framework. Using these three texts in conjunction with one another it seems likely that

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[24] S. 346; *semper quamdiu unde sacri baptismatis populi Anglorum sive Saxonum per fidem Christianæ religionis asspargentur seu ipsorum auctoritatis dominio urbs Lundonia habilis subjaceat ad Ueogernensem civitatem subdita persistat.*

it was Æthelred's aggression that instigated the Battle of Conway, fought in 881, between the Mercians and the Welsh. This battle was apparently the Welsh response to a punitive Mercian raid deep into north Wales and it resulted in a resounding victory for the Welsh king, Anarawd ap Rhodri, over the Mercian forces arranged against him.[25] The *Annales Cambriae* confirm that this was not only a highly significant but also an outwardly emotional victory. Conway provided Anarawd with personal retribution for the death of his father Rhodri Mawr (the Great) who had previously fallen in battle in 878 fighting against King Ceolwulf II's Mercians.[26] For this very reason, the *Annales Cambriae* portrayed the victory at Conway as 'vengeance for Rhodri at God's hand' and the battle was thus presented as the settling of personal scores as well as a stirring Welsh victory.[27] Unfortunately, despite revealing the central theme behind the Battle of Conway, the Welsh annals do not identify the leader of the Mercian forces.

A highly detailed account of this battle at Conway does survive, but only in a seventeenth-century printed edition. Despite its very late provenance, the narrative may be worthwhile since its origins may date from the twelfth century or possibly earlier. The original text may have been copied in its present form by Caradoc of Llancarvan (died 1147?) who could have been drawing on much older ninth-century material from the see of Bangor.[28] This account seems to name Æthelred as the leader of the Mercian

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[25] Arthur Miller and David E. Thornton, 'Anarawd ap Rhodri (*d.* 916)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/458 [accessed 18th April 2006]

[26] David E. Thornton, 'Rhodri Mawr (*b.* before 844, *d.* 878)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23456 [accessed 18th April 2006]

[27] *Annales Cambriæ*, *s.a.* 880, ed. John Williams ab Ithel, Rolls Series (London, 1860); trans. John Morris, *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London and Chichester, 1980).

[28] John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales: From the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2 vols. (London, 1911), i. 328 and n. 30. For Caradoc's career see Christopher Brooke, 'The Archbishops of

forces at Conway and it additionally implies that he was the *de facto* ruler of Mercia even before this battle took place. Important information about Conway, its aftermath and about the Mercian leadership involved in the battle may therefore be available from this source. The narrative relates that, before the encounter at Conway, the Mercians had imposed some form of hegemony upon the North Britons of Strathclyde and Cumberland who had already settled in the territory surrounding Conway and Chester. If this text can be believed, it was hostile Mercian intervention in the region that precipitated the resulting battle. Because of Mercian interference, the beleaguered Britons approached Anarawd for assistance and were granted an audience by the Welsh king:

> Therefore towards the beginning of Anarawd's Reign, several of them came to Gwyneth under the conduct of one Hobert, whose distressed Condition the Prince Commiserating, granted them all the Countrey betwixt Chester and Conwey to seat themselves in, in case they could drive out the Saxons who had lately possessed themselves of it. Necessity, giving edge to their valour, they easily dispossessed the Saxons who were not yet warm in their seats.[29]

This alliance between Anarawd and the North Britons apparently provoked Æthelred into making preparations to eject the North Britons. Using this alliance as a pretext for imposing his own authority over the Welsh, 'Eadred Duke of Mercia (Æthelred), called by the Welsh *Edryd Wallthir* (Æthlered long-hair), not being able any longer to bear such an ignominious ejection, made great Preparations for the re-gaining of the said Countrey.'[30] Anarawd, however, proved victorious and won a famous victory in a

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Saint David's, Llandaff and Caerleon-on-Usk' in Nora K. Chadwick, Kathleen Hughes, Christopher Brooke and Kenneth Jackson (eds.), *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 201-242.

[29] Dr. Powel, *The History of Wales Comprehending the Lives and Succession of the Princes of Wales, from Cadwalader the Last King, to Lhewelyn the Last Prince of British Blood : With a Short Account of the Affairs of Wales Under the Kings of England: Written Originally in British, by Caradoc of Lhancarvan ; and Formerly Published in English by Dr. Powel: now newly augmented and improved by W. Wynne* (London, 1697), p. 38.

[30] Powel, *History of Wales* pp. 37-9. It is interesting to note that both the text under review and the transcript of Asser's *Life* have the same misspelling of Eadred for Æthelred. Plummer noted that this was not an uncommon mistake in late records. See C. Plummer and J. Earle, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892 and 1899), ii. 318. Whoever originally wrote Powel's history may have

battle that 'was by some called *Gwaeth Cymryt Conwey*, by reason that it was fought in the township *Cymryt* near *Conwey*' and thereafter 'called *Dial Rodri*, because he had there revenged the Death of his father *Rodri*.'[31] Accordingly, it was portrayed as 'a very compleat Victory ... [and the Welsh] ... chased the Saxons quite out of Wales into Mercia, where having burnt and destroyed the Borders they returned home laden with rich spoils.'[32] Simon Keynes has noted this much later account of Conway and has agreed that it points towards an identification of Æthelred as the Mercian leader at this battle, but he also warns that this late source is the only plausible recognition of Æthelred in this capacity that exists.[33] There is, however, a tenth-century source that might conceivably boost the credibility of this later account and could help to define the status of the Mercian leader at Conway, as recounted by Powel in his narrative.

The Celtic Latin colloquy known as *De raris fabulis* contained in Oxford, Bodleian, MS. Bodley 572 (a manuscript known as the *Codex Oxoniensis Posterior*) is an educational tract, most probably written in Wales, but perhaps in Cornwall, during roughly the second quarter of the tenth century.[34] *De raris fabulis* contains an

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shied away from calling Æthelred (Eadred) king of the Mercians outright and chose to describe him as the Duke of Mercia. This may reflect the common usage of the period and that the writer was correctly restricting Æthelred to his more universally recognised levels of status as advertised by the Alfredian and Edwardian sources.

[31] Powel, *History of Wales*, p. 38. The range of historical traditions embedded inside this text is impressive. Accordingly, Rhodri's son, (Idwal Foel), named here as *Tudwal*, was allegedly wounded in the knee during this encounter.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 19-20, n. 77 tentatively accepts the veracity of these traditions and accepts that Æthelred was personally involved in the battle. If the Mercian leader at Conway was not Æthelred, then we are at a complete loss as to who it might have been. Æthelred remains the only serious candidate for the Mercian military leader against the Welsh in 881.

[34] On colloquies in general see Scott Gwara, *Latin Colloquies from Pre-Conquest Britain* (Toronto, 1996) and G. N. Garmonsway, 'The development of the colloquy', in Peter Clemoes (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in some Aspects of their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickens* (London, 1959), pp. 248-261.

extraordinary account of 'a great combat' between an anonymous *rex Britonum* and a similarly unidentified *rex Saxonum*.[35] The putative military encounter between Britons and Saxons described in *De raris fabulis* has been commented upon for its rarity value, in this most incongruous colloquy setting, but there has been no attempt made to place the descriptive account into a wider historical context.[36] It may be possible, however, to suggest that there are links between this account and Conway which would help remove the tale from its religious textual setting and fix it into a clearer political environment.

Whilst the battle scenes found within the colloquy may represent customary Celtic anti-Saxon *topoi*, a number of generic similarities exist between the scenes outlined in *De raris fabulis* and the seventeenth-century account of the Battle of Conway, and these, although broad in outline, may suggest otherwise. Amongst these are: that the battle itself was fought because of 'Saxon' pride – for which the 'Saxons' were severely punished; the resulting capitulation of the 'Saxon' forces; the extraction of tribute in the form of hostages by the 'Britons' and that the 'Saxon' leader escaped the battlefield and evaded capture. The battle extract still exhibits elements of its primary didactic application – where substitute words are supplied for the benefit of those under instruction – yet it is possibly a tenth-century Celtic account chronicling a considerable, and memorable, victory by a *rex Britonum* over a *rex Saxonum*. The

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[35] The battle described in *De raris fabulis* is glossed in the Celtic vernacular as '*hair*'.

[36] See for instance Garmonsway, 'The development', 258, and Scott Gwara, 'Education in Wales and Cornwall in the ninth and tenth centuries: understanding *De raris fabulis*', Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures on Mediaeval Welsh History, 4 Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge (Cambridge, 2004), at 4.

educational format of *De raris fabulis* does not have to mean that this portrayal of armed conflict is purely fictitious. Whatever the textual history of this work, and the rationale of colloquy writing as a genre, the entrenched tale of warfare between Britons and Saxons may represent oral tradition:

> Nevertheless, so that you will not have said that we are ignorant clerics, we did hear some men telling us truthfully that there had been a great battle between the king of the Britons [*regem Britonum*] and the king of the English [*regem Saxonum*], and God gave the victory to the Britons because they are humble as well as poor, and they trusted in God and confessed and received the body of Christ before they entered the skirmish or conflict. The English, however, are proud, and because of their pride God humbled them, for God did as it was said, "God opposes the proud but he gives mercy or victory to the humble". A great combat (that is *hair*) was ventured, and many of the English [*Saxonibus*] were struck down, but few of the Brittons [*Britonibus*]; nevertheless, [their] king escaped ... since they fell on account of pride ... And the Britons escaped in peace and took a captive, hostage, pledge, or prisoner with them.[37]

If this were a codified version of a major engagement, then it becomes difficult to find evidence suggesting a suitable alternative location with which to link it with other than Conway. The bloody encounter between the Welsh and the Mercians at Conway could have provided an appropriate memorial focal point for Celtic commemoration and have presented the author of *De raris fabulis* with a motivation for his eulogy. Michael Lapidge has convincingly dated *De raris fabulis* to the second quarter of the tenth century and this dating coincides with the further assimilation of Mercia into the increasingly West Saxon-dominated polity of Æthelstan and Edmund.[38] By the second quarter of the tenth century the ascendancy of the House of Wessex was becoming progressively perceived by the Welsh as hostile and even repressive. As Alfred P. Smyth has shown, the increasing unification of Wessex and Mercia 'could only spell

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[37] *De raris fabulis, 'On Uncommon Tales': a Glossed Latin Colloquy-Text from a Tenth-Century Cornish Manuscript*, ed. and trans. Scott Gwara, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, University of Cambridge (Cambridge, 2002), ch. 22, pp. 28-29.

[38] Michael Lapidge, 'Latin learning in Dark Age Wales: some prolegomena', in D. Ellis-Evans, John G. Griffith, and E. M. Jope (eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford, 1983* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 91-107, at p. 94. Lapidge's palaeographical dating of *De raris fabulis* supersedes that of Garmonsway, 'The development of the colloquy', p. 255, who suggested a date of around 1000.

disaster for the Welsh.'[39] Conway was thus a suitable battle for Celtic commemoration; for this was the last time that the Welsh had held the upper-hand in combat against their traditional enemy.

The Battle of Conway and its aftermath

From these three texts a somewhat tentative interpretation may be proposed. A significant battle was fought at a place near to Conway between a king of the Welsh (Anarawd) and a king of the Saxons (Æthelred). The outcome of this encounter was a providential Welsh victory that gave Anarawd vengeance for the slaughter of his father King Rhodri in 877 at the hands of King Ceolwulf II of Mercia. The battle itself was provoked by Æthelred, following the ignominious ejection of Mercian settlers in Wales by the North Britons of Strathclyde. These same North Britons were subsequently granted the regions around Conway and Chester as benefices by Anarawd. Following their defeat at Conway, Æthelred and his Mercian forces were chased right out of Wales by Anarawd who later returned to Wales with rich spoils and numerous prisoners. The battle itself was reported in the *Annales Cambriae* as a great victory for the Welsh but in a laconic tone in keeping with its other entries. The victory at Conway was, however, extremely significant and the memorial traditions from the battlefield could have remained essentially intact. Some years later these inherited remembrances may have

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[39] Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (vol. 1 Dublin, 1975, vol. 2 Dublin and New Jersey, 1979, reprinted in one volume, Dublin, 1987), ii. 65.

found their way into the colloquy know today by the title *De raris fabulis* as examples of the anonymous cleric's knowledge of worldly affairs and his personal Celtic patriotism.

Whether the strange battle extract contained in *De raris fabulis* is a eulogy for Conway, cannot be proved, but the scenes of warfare between Celt and Saxon may have stemmed from a similar stimulus of ethnic jingoism to the one that produced the most celebrated clarion-call to Celtic togetherness, the tenth-century poem, *Armes Prydein Vawr*. The intensely partisan fervour embedded in *Armes Prydein* 'The Prophecy of Britain' was most likely a product of the tempestuous political climate that endured throughout the reign of King Æthelstan and the poem itself was most probably composed some time between 927 and 942, either during or immediately following Æthelstan's kingship.[40] Here was a period when the restrained diplomatic approach towards the Welsh kings favoured by King Alfred, and to a lesser extent his son Edward, had been supplanted by a more overtly martial drive for West Saxon superiority, vigorously pursued by his grandsons Æthelstan and Edmund.[41] *Armes Prydein* portrays West Saxon and Mercians as uniting under a single banner to the detriment of all the Celtic peoples.[42] The poet lamented that: 'the day will come when the men of Wessex

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[40] On the date of composition and the reasons behind the production of the poem see Sir Ifor Williams, *Armes Prydein, The Prophesy of Britain from the Book of Taliesin*, ed. Sir Ifor Williams, English version by Rachel Bromwich, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (Dublin, 1982), introduction, pp. xi-lii. Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, ii. 65-72 has suggested the later date of 939-42 in light of the contemporary politics following Æthelstan's death in 939. That Welsh (British) patriotic fervour was a recurring theme in contemporary texts see Nora K. Chadwick, 'Early culture and learning in North-Wales', in Nora, K. Chadwick, Kathleen Hughes, Christopher Brooke and Kenneth Jackson (eds.), *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 29-120, esp. pp. 82-93.

[41] N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (London, 2002), pp. 188-189.

[42] For the appeal to Brittany contained within the poem and an even later dating see David N. Dumville, 'Brittany and the *Armes Prydein Vawr*', *Études celtiques* 20 (1983), 145-159.

will come together in council, in a single party, of one mind with the Mercian(?) incendiaries.'[43] West Saxons are now realigned as analogous with the Mercian incendiaries and this description is indicative of the changing complexion of West Saxon and Celtic relations concurrent with the downturn in diplomatic associations after the death of Edward the Elder.[44] The West Saxon kings were beginning to emphasise more their apparent 'Englishness' and promoted this label as a means to closer ethnic solidarity with the Mercians, provoking a potent Celtic reaction.[45] Where they were once tolerated, the West Saxons have now become the 'scavengers of Thanet' and Mercians and West Saxons alike are now viewed by the poet as equally destructive influences.[46] The reign of King Æthelstan most probably provided the inspiration behind the poem's composition for his rule was perceived as particularly tyrannical and repressive.[47] But the poet also claimed that in the future '*Cymry* and the Saxons will meet together [in battle]' and the Saxons would be driven out of these islands because of their 'boasting' and their 'oppressive rule [which] will give rise to sorrow.'[48] *Armes Prydein* preached a future where the island of Britain would be freed from the Saxon yoke and the poem essentially proselytised the wholesale reversal of the *Adventus Saxonum*.[49] The author of *De raris fabulis* appears to use a tone that mirrors the

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[43] *Armes Prydein*, lines 107-109, pp. 8-9.

[44] For the political background leading up to the composition of the poem, D. P. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda: Anglophil?', *Welsh History Review* 8 (1976-1977), 1-13.

[45] Bryan Ward-Perkins, 'Why did the Anglo-Saxons not become more British?', *EHR* 115 (2000), 513-33, at 516

[46] *Armes Prydein*, line 40, pp. 4-5.

[47] *Ibid.*, line 17, pp. 2-3; Athelstan is most likely to have been the 'Great King' referred to by the poet as *mechteyrn*.

[48] *Ibid.*, lines 54 and 26, pp. 4-5.

[49] Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 196-197. For the Welsh perception of the Saxon origin myth viewed through the lens of the *Historia Brittonum*, first put together in the third decade of the ninth century, see Nicholas Brooks, 'The English origin myth', in his *Anglo-Saxon Myths: State and Church 400-1066* (London and Rio Grande, 1995), pp. 79-89 and David N.

belligerent political agenda of *Armes Prydein* where the 'Saxons' are punished by God because of their pride. As this anonymous author's own tale of Britonic victory over the Saxon enemy unfolds, it is quite evident that he holds anti-Saxon sentiments, although he is not quite as openly rabid about these as is the *Armes Prydein* poet. These particular Saxon invaders 'fell on account of their pride', and because of their sinful arrogance they were, he claimed, 'humbled by God.'[50] The confrontational political milieu of the 920s and 930s possibly provided the mnemonic focus that triggered these remembrances of an earlier tale of God venting his reckoning upon the Saxons. The prevailing belief in Celtic righteousness contained in *De raris fabulis* emphasises substantially similar aspirations to those expressed by the *Armes Prydein* poet, albeit in a retrospective rather than a prophetic voice, and both texts employ politically subversive allusions that suggest that they were both products of the same pervasive atmosphere.

The Battle of Conway was memorialised as an essentially celebratory and providential victory and these traditions seem to have been preserved at the see of Bangor in the ninth century and later transcribed by Caradoc of Llancarfan in the twelfth. Caradoc's text, including many strong localised elements, possibly formed the basis for the elaborate narrative found within this later history of Wales. This source suggests that it might have been Æthelred who led the Mercians into battle and who was eventually repulsed from Wales along with his army. Æthelred and his Mercians were

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Dumville, '*Historia Brittonum*: an insular history from the Carolingian age', in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter* (München, 1994), pp. 406-34.

[50] *De raris fabulis*, ch. 22, pp. 28-29.

once more portrayed as being humbled by the Welsh and ended the battle paying tribute in the form of hostages, further compounding the military failure. Yet the Welsh sources do not tell the whole story. If it was Æthelred who led the Mercians at Conway, then he escaped capture and continued his campaigns into Wales undeterred by this setback. Æthelred's unrelenting military pressure may well be behind his reported Celtic epithet of long hair (*Wallthir*) that is found in the later source. Long hair also forms an evocative feature in *Armes Prydein* where it is used to denote the ferocity and warlike qualities of the warriors whom the poet anticipated would come from Ireland to help expel the hated Saxons. They were, the poet noted, 'valiant long-haired warriors, adept in fighting.'[51]

Asser lends some near-contemporary support for Æthelred's independent authority over Mercian external politics before 883. Writing in 893, but looking back to the time when he was first introduced to King Alfred in either 883 or 885, Asser makes veiled references to Æthelred's participation at Conway.[52] Asser declared that the primary motive behind the submission of the Welsh kings to Alfred's overkingship was that they

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[51] '*Gwyr gwychyr gwallt hiryon ergyr dofyd*, *Armes Prydein*, lines 147 and 148, pp. 12-13. For an excellent survey of hair as a distinguishing characteristic throughout the medieval period, see Robert Bartlett, 'Symbolic meanings of hair in the middle ages', *TRHS* 6th series 4 (1994) 43–60 at 60. As he has pointed out, representations of hair were open to many variations depending on circumstances. It was, he has suggested, 'like all language prone to many interpretations.'

[52] D. P. Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', *Studia Celtica* 6 (1971), 12-35, at 18 has suggested that Asser first met with King Alfred in 883. However, Kirby's analysis is dependent upon a deliberate exaggeration by Asser of the phrase *multo ante* in Asser, ch. 80. For a different view that Asser first met King Alfred in 885 see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 213-4, n. 24.

were 'driven by the might and tyrannical behaviour of Ealdorman Æthelred' thus possibly providing his own Welsh judgment on Æthelred that conceivably mirrors the Celtic texts analysed above.[53] Asser, as a Welshman, had a point. By 883, Æthelred had possibly forced Hywel ap Rhys, king of Glywysing and Brochmæl and Ffernfæl ap Meurig, the kings of Gwent into making diplomatic approaches to King Alfred's court.[54] This Welsh appeal to King Alfred implies that Æthelred may have continued to mount a sustained military campaign against them, despite the obvious Mercian setback at Conway, and Asser's description of the Mercian as both mighty and a tyrant is at least suggestive of Æthelred's earlier independence from the West Saxon king. Asser's version of events implies that King Alfred and Æthelred were not entirely in political harmony during the initial years of their alliance, at least where Wales and the Welsh were concerned.[55] This was a conflict that Alfred had to rectify otherwise his prospects of gaining overkingship of all those not subject to the Danes, and this included the Welsh, would be jeopardised by continuing Mercian belligerence on the western borders.

Æthelred, for his part, was merely behaving towards the Welsh exactly as a Mercian king habitually would.[56] Mercian military pressure had been exerted upon

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[53] Asser, ch. 80. For a full discussion of this submission see David N. Dumville, 'The "six" sons of Rhodri Mawr: a problem in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', in his *Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1993), pp. 5-18. I have argued in chapter two of this thesis that the exact wording of Asser's text concerning the terms of submission for both the Welsh kings and Æthelred should be treated with the utmost caution.

[54] Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', at 18-19. For an attempt at charting the rather complex chronology see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 262-263, n. 183.

[55] Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Alliances, godfathers, treaties and boundaries', in M. A. S. Blackburn and David Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 47-61.

[56] On the continuance of Mercian capacity for warfare, despite the dynastic problems they encountered in the ninth century, see Gareth Williams, 'Military institutions and royal power', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 295-309, esp. pp. 306-9.

much of north Wales for a large part of the ninth century and Æthelred's attempts to maintain military supremacy were merely manifestations of this Mercian preoccupation with their western boundaries, the most visible reminder of which remains the structure known as Offa's Dyke.[57] At certain intervals the Mercians succeeded in their ambitions and they held an intermittent hegemony over some of the areas of lowland territory around Cheshire and Flint at least as far as the Conway.[58] If Æthelred was campaigning against the Welsh in around 881, it raises the possibility that the Mercians could have already elected him as their king and that he may have been recognised as such by the Welsh, if not by the West Saxons. Though it may well be that the West Saxons under Alfred had also accepted Æthelred's kingly status, at least initially.

If Æthelred had assumed the Mercian kingship the most likely date for his elevation is 879 directly following King Ceolwulf II's disappearance from the political stage. Both their names appear in an eleventh-century regnal list where Ceolwulf II is allocated a reign of five years with Æthelred's reign following directly afterwards.[59] Unfortunately, there is no specified end date for Æthelred's reign which has led to a certain amount of conjecture.[60] David Dumville has claimed that Æthelred's kingship

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[57] For the latest observations about the possible origins of Offa's Dyke see Margaret Worthington, 'Offa's Dyke', in David Hill and Margaret Worthington (eds.), *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia, Papers from a Conference held in Manchester in 2000*, Manchester Centre for Medieval Studies, *BAR* British Series 383 (Oxford, 2005), 91-96 and David Hill and Margaret Worthington, Margaret, *Offa's Dyke: History and Guide* (Stroud, 2003).

[58] Wendy Davies, 'The Welsh and the English', in her *Patterns of Power in Early Wales: O'Donnell Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford 1983* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 61-79, at p. 69.

[59] *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiæ Wigorniensis*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1723) i. 242. Sir Frank Stenton in D. M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton* (Oxford, 1970), p. 372 dated the manuscript to the tenth century.

[60] *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiæ Wigorniensis*, 1, 242.

lasted right up to his reported death in 911 but his argument is far from conclusive.[61] Æthelred is the only Mercian king in this list who was not allotted specific regnal years and dates are given for every other Mercian king from Penda's thirty-two years to Ceolwulf II's five years.[62] This lack of a specific end-date for Æthelred's reign is troublesome, but the regnal-list does imply that his kingship began in 879 and was interrupted for reasons which remain obscure today. Keynes has made the suggestion that Æthelred may have either renounced his royal title, and presumably his kingship at some date, or perhaps, had them taken from him.[63] This suggestion is worth pursuing. When promulgating his laws, King Alfred may have drawn upon what he thought to have been King Offa of Mercia's earlier legislation.[64] At times Offa protected his own status as king and overlord by removing the rights to kingship of those he conquered and Offa may have provided Alfred with the inspiration for Æthelred's demotion.[65] There are acute interpretational problems associated with assessing the duration of Æthelred's putative kingship, but it remains preferable to accept the king-list at

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[61] David N. Dumville, 'The Anglian collection of royal genealogies and regnal lists', *ASE* 5 (1976), 23-50, at 30, n. 3. Dumville, 'The terminology of overkingship', at p. 360 has more recently suggested that 'Æthelred seems to have come to the throne of Mercia in 879, and only to have accepted King Alfred as his overlord in the 880s, perhaps by 883, certainly by 886 at the latest. In 887, a royal marriage between Æthelred and Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd confirmed the relationship. Throughout his long reign (879-911) Æthelred II continued to exercise royal prerogatives in Mercia: these powers were assumed by his queen after his death, and exercised further until 918.' However, John Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1994, reprinted 1998), pp. 15, 96-97 and 194, n. 11 has argued that Dumville's argument is 'bold.' It should be noted that Dumville's argument about Æthelred exercising full royal authority right through to the year of his death in 911, is far too bold without enough evidence to back up this claim.

[62] *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiæ Wigorniensis*, i. p. 242.

[63] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', p. 21.

[64] Patrick Wormald, 'In search of King Offa's "law code"', in his *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image and Experience* (London and Rio Grande, 1999), pp. 201-223 argued that Offa's code may well have been more akin to Carolingian *capitulae*; at p. 221 he wrote that it may be that: 'what Alcuin meant by "the customs which Offa instituted", and Alfred by the "judgements established in the time of King Offa", was simply the papal legates' Latin text.'

[65] For Offa and his policies see Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century', in Michelle P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 310-328, p. 14.

something approaching face-value rather than to make assumptions around it or to ignore it. The list, at the very least, establishes that Æthelred was remembered by some as a former king of the Mercians if only for an unspecified number of years.

Although the *Chronicle* rhetoric sets great store by the general submission to Alfred of all those not subject to Danish authority in 886, the defining year for West Saxon ambitions in Mercia was 883. As the charter from the Worcester archive demonstrates, by 883 Æthelred had already submitted to King Alfred's lordship and this was probably the same year that saw London fall into West Saxon hands, perhaps following a lengthy siege.[66] It was also the year that the Welsh petitioned King Alfred concerning continued Mercian aggression.[67] Alfred, in order to protect his own prospects for dominion over the Welsh – even if this was to be a superficial hegemony – required the cessation of Mercian aggression along what were now his western boundaries. To achieve this Alfred had to reassure the Welsh that he held sufficient clout to subdue the territorial ambitions of Æthelred and his Mercian *fyrd*. With all the complexities of Mercian politics and the difficulties of source appraisal, it has been suggested that in order to achieve these aims King Alfred 'tried to obliterate the existence of Mercia as a separate kingdom, insisting its ruler (his own son-in-law) be termed not king but ealdorman.'[68] At first glance, this is an appealing argument, yet it

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[66] Sarah Foot, 'The making of *Angelcynn*: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th series (1996), 25-49, at 26.

[67] Abels, *King Alfred: War, Kingship and Culture*, at p. 182 has also argued that the year 883 was pivotal for West Saxon ascendancy over the Welsh kings and the Mercian leadership. Although his suggestion that this primacy was brought about by Æthelred seeking out King Alfred's military protection against the Welsh, following the catastrophic Mercian defeat at Conway, is at odds with Asser's version of events.

[68] Janet L. Nelson, 'The political ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Kings and Kingship* (London, 1993), pp. 125-157, at p. 149.

could also be construed as an over-simplification, especially when the opaque qualities of Æthelred's charter styles are taken into account. If Æthelred accepted Alfred's policy of demotion it constituted merely one aspect of the political arrangements necessary for what was to all intents and purposes the termination of the Mercian kingship. There may have been a *quid pro quo* suitable for the continuance of Mercian identity; one that rewarded the Mercian leader for agreeing to so great an alteration of his status. This was partially achieved by Alfred giving his daughter's hand in marriage to the Mercian leader. But Alfred may have extended further inducements to Æthelred and his Mercians.

The disruption to Æthelred's kingship may not have been intended to be the permanent end of the Mercian royal line. The evidential ambiguities that have been highlighted in this chapter suggest that King Alfred never sought the obliteration of the Mercian kingdom, but intended to replace the old kingship with a new one of his own making. The deliberate circumlocutions, with their constant allusions to Mercian identity and conformity, are suggestive of a strategy arranged to encompass this proposal. Some time before 888 Æthelred married King Alfred's eldest daughter Æthelflæd and further cemented the Mercian future to Alfred's personal authority and his dynastic lineage. This event, more than any other, suggests that there are grounds for interpreting the combined source material as an intended re-birth of the Mercian kingdom with a new, and vibrant leadership. As a number of later commentators, most notably Æthelweard, were concerned, Æthelred was remembered as a king of the Mercians and he was at the very least much more than a mere ealdorman; he was in

receipt of a special status granted to him uniquely by Alfred.[69] This is reflected in Alfred's will where the only legacy of a personal nature is to Æthelred who received the gift of a sword worth one hundred mancuses.[70] There may also be more than merely authorial confusion behind Æthelweard's claim that Æthelred was entitled to be called a king; it has been suggested that Æthelweard himself may have been born in Mercia.[71]

Despite Æthelred's demotion and acceptance of King Alfred's terms, Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd, provided the bulwark that would protect the future of the new Alfredian kingdom of the Mercians. It is to this aspect of West Saxon/Mercian relations that this chapter will now turn.

Mercian independence during the reign of Edward the Elder

One of the most vexing questions in Anglo-Saxon history remains what became of the kingdom of the Mercians following the death of King Alfred in 899? One view is that the Mercian polity was almost completely consumed by the dominant West Saxons under Alfred's son Edward the Elder.[72] Against this argument, has been the suggestion that the Mercians retained their autonomy up to the death of Edward's sister Æthelflæd

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[69] Æthelweard, *s.a.* 893; Æthelweard refers twice to Æthelred as *rex*; once when he came to Edward's aid at Thorney and again when confronting the Danes at Benfleet.

[70] *EHD*, 96. See also Sean Miller, ed. *The Charters of The New Minster, Winchester* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 3-11.

[71] The Elizabethan antiquary Thomas Allen (1542-1632) stated that Æthelweard was a Mercian and based his suggestion on the authority of a manuscript copy of Æthelweard's chronicle which he had allegedly seen in 1588. Æthelweard's chronicle itself, however, may have been produced in Dorchester. See *Leland's Itinerary*, ed. T. Hearne, 11 vols. (2nd edition, Oxford, 1744), ix. 131; cited in E. E. Barker, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle used by Æthelweard', *Historical Research* 40 101 (May, 1967), 74-91, at 90 and n. 4.

[72] On this issue see Simon Keynes, 'Edward, king of the Anglo-Saxons', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 40-66, esp. pp. 42-45.

in 918 and perhaps even beyond. Pauline Stafford has argued that the Mercians kept their own separate identity, including their entitlement to self determination, up to the time of Æthelflæd's death. She has warned that it could prove unsafe to assign undue prominence to the apparent solidarity at court for the unification of Wessex and Mercia into a single polity, or to the notion that Mercia was merely the poor relation in a primarily one-sided political arrangement. The total dominance of Wessex over a subordinate Mercia should not be taken for granted and the independence of the latter may have lasted 'in a real form until the death of Æthelflæd in 918.'[73] This cautious approach invites further deliberation and the remainder of this chapter will concentrate on the relationship between the two kingdoms during the period up to the watershed year of 918 when the much-admired Æthelflæd died, and, according to Stafford, so did any Mercian right to self-determination.

The kingdom of the Mercians preserved much of its independence through the later part of the ninth century and two centres in particular, Worcester and Gloucester, became the powerhouses of a rejuvenated Mercia early in the tenth century.[74]

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[73] Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: a Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London, 1989), p. 26. Stafford's other works have made major contributions to this debate and include the following: *The East Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1985); 'The king's wife in Wessex', 800-1066', *Past &Present* 91 (1981), 5-27; 'The Danes & the Danelaw', *History Today* 36 (October, 1986), 17-23; 'Political women in Mercia, eighth to early tenth centuries', in Michelle, P. Brown and Carol A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), pp. 35-49; 'Succession and inheritance: a gendered perspective on Alfred's family history', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 251-264.

[74] For the history of both centres see Nigel Baker and Richard Holt, *Urban Growth and the Medieval Church: Gloucester and Worcester* (Aldershot, 2004) and for Gloucester see Carolyn Carolyn, 'Anglo-Saxon Gloucester to AD 1000', in Margaret L. Faull (ed.), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement*, Oxford University Department for External Studies (Oxford, 1984), pp. 35-52 and Michael Hare, 'Kings, crowns and festivals: the origins of Gloucester as a royal ceremonial centre', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 115 (1997), 41-78.

Gloucester's re-emergence and rise to prominence was initially supported by King Alfred as a charter of 896, documenting the assembly of the Mercian *witan*, reveals:

> Æthelred ealdorman summoned all the *witan* of the Mercians together at Gloucester, bishops and ealdormen, and all his chief men; and did that with the knowledge and leave of King Alfred. And they there deliberated how they might most righteously govern their people, both before God and before the world; and also do right to many men, both of divine conditions and worldly; both in lands and more of the things which had been with-held from them.[75]

While the scriptorium of Worcester provides evidence that Æthelred and Æthelflæd were generous in their endowments of their new 'kingdom' the principal Mercian seat of government was centred on Gloucester.[76] Gloucester acquired all the attributes necessary for a 'royal' centre and consequently it has been described as 'Æthelred and Æthelflæd's capital.'[77] As a ceremonial hub, Gloucester had replaced the traditional royal site of Tamworth, where Mercian kings from Offa to Burgred had often held their Christmas and Easter courts. Tamworth itself seems to have been initially suppressed by the West Saxon kings in the ninth century and then 'symbolically dismembered' by them in the tenth century when the boundary between Staffordshire and Warwickshire was run deliberately through the heart of the borough of Tamworth.[78] The suppression of Tamworth as a Mercian royal centre may have been part of Æthelred's emergence to power, emphasising his dependent status to King Alfred. Construction of the imposing New Minster at Gloucester began during the reign of King Alfred and provides valuable clues as to how far any independent Mercian aspirations were allowed within the

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[75] S 1441; *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. F. E. Harmer (Cambridge, 1914), no. 14, pp. 24-5 and pp. 56-7. Timothy Reuter, 'Assembly politics in Western Europe', in Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 432-450, at pp. 335-336, argued that political assemblies were not just 'confined to *regnal* communities. 'Princes with quasi-regal status' at times also held the centre stage at these gatherings.

[76] For the Mercian leadership's generosity, see John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 306-307.

[77] A. T. Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester: early ecclesiastical organization in two Mercian *burhs*', *Northern History* 18 (1982), 199-210, at 209.

[78] Hare, 'Kings, crowns and festivals', at 48.

overarching Alfredian polity.[79] Its foundation should be compared with Edward's establishment of the New Minster at Winchester and as well as providing a focal point for the Mercian leadership, the minster was intended to become a Mercian 'dynastic' mausoleum.[80] King Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd, may have further projected the influence of this newly-forged Mercia through the production of a 'dynastic' chronicle as well.

The Mercian Register

The so-called *Mercian Register* consists of a series of discrete annals recording events from 902 to 924. They begin with a brief account of the battle of the Holme in 902 and until 907 the entries are sparse dealing only with the notification of an eclipse and the appearance of a comet.[81] In 907 the annalist begins to report on political events from a Mercian perspective with a brief account of the restoration of Chester. At some stage

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[79] William of Malmesbury, in both his *Gesta Regum* and *Gesta Pontificum*, noted the benevolence of the Mercian leadership. See *GP*, ch. 155; *GR*, ii. 126.2; Æthelred's foundation of the minster is not just supported by William of Malmesbury. A later transcript, possibly from a charter produced in the year of King Æthelstan's consecration in 925, also preserves the tradition that it was Æthelred who had the minster built. G. O. Sayles, ed. and trans. *Select Cases in the court of King's Bench under Edward 1*, vol. iii. Publications of the Seldon Society 58 (London, 1939), 141 and Michael Hare, 'The documentary evidence for the history of St. Oswald's, Gloucester to 1086 AD', in Carolyn Heighway and Richard Bryant (eds.), *The Golden Minster: The Anglo-Saxon Minster and Later Medieval Priory of St. Oswald at Gloucester*, Council for British Archaeological Research Report 117 (York, 1999), 33-45, at 43, n. 22 and 43, n. 21; 'the minster called New, where the mortal remains of the holy body of the blessed martyr Oswald rest in felicity and that that aforesaid minster was founded and built by Æthelred outside the old wall of the town of Gloucester and circumscribed with very definite boundaries.'

[80] Carolyn Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire* (Gloucester, 1987), p. 45. For the foundation of the New Minster at Winchester see *The Charters of The New Minster, Winchester*, ed. Sean Miller (Oxford, 2001), 12; Simon Keynes, ed. *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester: British Library Stowe 944: together with leaves from British Library Cotton Vespasian A. viii and British Library Cotton Titus D. xxvii* (Copenhagen, 1996) and Hare, 'The documentary evidence', 41.

[81] David Dumville, 'What is a Chronicle?', in Erik Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicle*, 2 vols. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Medieval Chronicle, Driebergen/Utrecht, 16-21 July 1999 (Amsterdam-New York, 2002), ii. 1-27, at 19 has suggested that the Mercian annals may have originally been derived from a nineteen-year paschal cycle.

this series of annals were incorporated into certain manuscripts of the main *Chronicle*, probably compiled at Winchester.[82] The Mercian annals, although they appear alongside the main *Chronicle* narratives in some editions, should not be viewed as an integral portion of the host text, however.[83] Long ago Charles Plummer demonstrated that the *Chronicle* was a composite work subject to all manner of external influences ranging from dynastic considerations to scribal idiosyncrasies during its production.[84] One of these external authorities was the collection of annals now known as the *Mercian Register*. Building upon Plummer's original foundations, Paul Szarmach has argued that certain entries which form part of the *Mercian Register* are essentially a text within a text that might be better viewed as 'the Annals of Æthelflæd.'[85] It may even be, Szarmach has further suggested, that 'somewhere in the genesis of the *Mercian Register* is a Latin account, or perhaps a poem, that offers us a lost *gesta Æthelflædi*.'[86]

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[82] For the Winchester provenance of the Parker Chronicle; M. B. Parkes, 'The palaeography of the Parker Manuscript of the *Chronicle*, Laws and Sedulius, and historiography at Winchester in the late ninth and tenth centuries', *ASE* 5 (1976), 149-71. The *Mercian Register* was entered in a block format into the 'B' and 'C' manuscripts and possibly existed in the 'BC' prototype.

[83] MS. D of the *Chronicle* preserves the *Mercian Register* in a version where the scribe has attempted to 'merge' the two narratives together. See F. T. Wainwright, 'The chronology of the Mercian Register', *EHR* lx (1945), 385-392, at 385.

[84] C. Plummer and J. Earle, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892 and 1899), ii. lxxii-lxxiii.

[85] Paul E. Szarmach, 'Æthelflæd of Mercia: *Mise en page*', in Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (eds.), *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honor of Fred C. Robinson* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 105-124 at pp. 106-7 and 118-119 and see also the same author's 'Æthelflæd in the *Chronicle*', *Old English Newsletter* 29.1 (Fall, 1995), 42-4 and Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii. lxxii-lxxiii.

[86] Szarmach, 'Æthelflæd of Mercia: *Mise en page*', pp. 118-119. This additional idea is more troublesome than the first but may possibly account for a literary reference to a certain *Elfledes Boc* mentioned in the catalogue of the Cathedral Library at Durham; *Catalogi Veteres Librorum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Dunelm, Catologues of the Library of Durham Cathedral at Various Periods, from the Conquest to the Dissolution*, Publications of the Surtees Society 7 (London, 1838), 5; for discussion of the Durham catalogue see Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii. lxxii-lxiii, n. 1; R. M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (2nd edition, London, 1970), pp. 75-76; R. M. Wilson, 'More lost literature in Old and Middle English', *Leeds Studies in English* v (1936), 1-49, 7-9. However, Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories: Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2001), at pp. 65 and 188-190, n. 10, has questioned Szarmach's conclusions about a possible *gesta Æthelflædi*.

Whatever the merits of this second suggestion, it does seem more than likely that parts of the *Mercian Register* were inspired by Æthelflæd herself and the annals were probably produced for her at Worcester or perhaps at Gloucester.[87]

That the *Mercian Register* at times focuses upon Æthelflæd's right to govern demonstrates an autonomous Mercian agenda away from the main thrust of the West Saxon *Chronicle* narrative. Some entries in particular accentuate Mercian self-determination and even advance a notion that God's will lay behind Æthelflæd's personal dominion over the Mercians and their affairs. In 917, two of Æthelflæd's successful campaigns against the Danes, at Derby and at Leicester, the *Mercian Register* claimed, were delivered through God's benevolence.[88] As a literary strategy, invoking the will of God was normally the imperative of kings, and Æthelflæd appears to have inherited from her father a concept of promoting rulership through the medium of annalistic writing. Viewed through the lens of the *Mercian Register*, Æthelflæd's emancipation from her brother's kingship is perceptible and this independent and divinely-inspired 'royal' agenda is perhaps mirrored by certain numismatic iconography. Although there are no coins issued in the name of any Mercian rulers after Ceolwulf II and no direct coinage of either Æthelred or Æthelflæd has been discovered, a number of extant coins may suggest that as an individual Æthelflæd exerted some personal influence over the Mercian mints. These issues may be said to demonstrate further what

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[87] Cyril Hart, 'The B text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *Journal of Medieval History* 8 (1982), 241-299, at 254-5 has suggested Worcester for the composition of these annals while Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), p. 456 has argued for Gloucester.
[88] Stafford, 'Political women in Mercia', p. 48.

Stafford has described as Æthelflæd's 'quintessentially regal activity' as portrayed within the *Mercian Register*.[89]

In the 880s and 890s the mints of Gloucester, London and Oxford issued coins for King Alfred and a significant proportion of those produced for Edward the Elder are attributed by numismatists (on grounds of design or the lettering style) especially to mints in western Mercia, even during the period when his sister Æthelflæd was acting in her capacity as the 'Lady of the Mercians'. It would, therefore, be a major assumption to claim that Æthelflæd had any control over the profits of Mercian mints, and referring directly to 'Æthelflæd's coinage' may be going one step too far. But certain numismatic symbolism appears to reflect similar autonomous aspirations to those expressed by the Mercian annalist. A number of 'ornamental' or 'exceptional' reverse types issued during the period *c.* 910-918 bear the legend *Edward rex*, but were produced at Mercian mints and their designs may have been influenced by Æthelflæd herself. This can be tentatively adduced from their inherent iconography. The potent symbolism found on these coins conceivably replicates the military and political agendas portrayed for Æthelflæd in the Mercian annals and they too may also represent independent Mercian aspirations.[90] It could be that Edward allowed his sister a degree of governmental freedom which enabled her to guarantee the loyalty of the Mercian

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[89] *Ibid.*

[90] See C. E. Blunt, B. H. I. H. Stewart and C. S. S. Loyn (eds.), *Coinage in Tenth-Century England: From Edward the Elder to Edgar's Reforms* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 42-43 and p. 266. Stewart Loyn, 'The coinage of Edward the Elder', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder, 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 67-78, at pp. 70-73 has suggested that the Hand of God type may have originated from Shrewsbury, Hereford and Gloucester. For the relationship between mints and *burhs* see Mark Blackburn, 'Mints, burhs, and the Grately code, cap. 14.2', in David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble (eds.), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 160-175.

nobility. Catherine Karkov has argued that the 'tower' symbol on one of the series is resonant with important Mercian events at two gateways during Æthelflæd's campaigns.[91] She has also noted that the 'Hand of God' symbol, which appears on one of the issues, closely mirrors Carolingian royal iconography.[92] This 'Hand of God' symbolism is perhaps the most intriguing and it may, like the *Mercian Register*, represent an autonomous Mercian agenda, inspired by Æthelflæd herself.

(From Stewart Loyn, 'The coinage of Edward the Elder', in Higham and Hill, (eds.), Edward the Elder, p.70.)

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[91] Catherine E. Karkov, 'Æthelflæd's exceptional coinage?', *Old English Newsletter* 29 number 1 (Fall, 1995), 41.
[92] *Ibid.*

In Carolingian political thought, the Hand of God provided a crucial visual aspect to kingship and its legitimacy. Many portraits of Carolingian kings revealed the Hand of God as reaching down from Heaven imparting divine favour upon the rightful ruler. In some cases, God's hand may even be seen placing the crown itself upon the king's head just as God the Father was thought to have bestowed the crown to Christ for his triumph upon the Cross. Carolingian royal power and legitimacy was thus articulated by this symbolism and it was also an essential Carolingian invocation of law and order.[93] On this particular Mercian coin issue, the Hand of God symbolism fundamentally replicates the way in which the *Mercian Register* advocated that Æthelflæd's victories in 917 were delivered through God's grace. It is also important to note that, following Æthelflæd's death in 918, these issues seem to have been suppressed by Edward and replaced by a reversion to the 'horizontal type' as part of the king's 'concerted action to discourage any revival of Mercian separatism.'[94]

If parts of the *Mercian Register* were produced under Æthelflæd's guidance then there are strong grounds for resurrecting Plummer's original observations about the text. Plummer did not 'dismiss the account of her deeds as an interpolation in some idealised view of what the *Chronicle* should contain, neither levelling nor erasing it.'[95] Plummer treated these extracts separately from the *Chronicle*, a policy that has not always been

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[93] For Carolingian illustrations of the Hand of God see Marie-Pierre Lafitte, Charlotte Denoël, Marianne Besseyre and Jean-Pierre Caillet, eds. *Trésors caroliongiens : Livres manuscrits de Charlemagne à Charles le Chauvre* (Paris, 2007), esp. pp. 26; 33 and 188 and for the Hand of God symbolising the giving of law see Elizabeth Leesti, 'The Pentecost illustration in the Drogo Sacramentary', *Gesta* 28.2 (1989), 205-216. For the Drogo Sacramentary and other examples of the Hand of God in Carolingian art: http://gkoziol.berkeley.edu/history155/slides/kingship/Manuscripts/Carolingians/index.html

[94] Blunt, Stewart and Loyn, *Coinage in Tenth-Century England*, pp. 42-43 and 266.

[95] Szarmach, 'Æthelflæd of Mercia: *Mise en page*', at pp. 106-7; Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii. lxxii-lxxiii.

replicated by later commentators. There has indeed been a recent historiographical tendency to 'level' the obviously Mercian dimensions contained in these discrete annals and to amalgamate them into the greater narrative framework of the *Chronicle*. This idealised view of what the *Chronicle* should and should not contain is problematic. One entry in particular stands out: the retrieval of the relics of Saint Oswald from Bardney in Lincolnshire in 909, which is perhaps indicative of this type of textual integration. Because there has been a tendency to mingle the *Chronicle* and the *Mercian Register* together the full significance behind this episode may have been obscured, and it is therefore, necessary to unravel the events of 909.

The importance of the Mercian raid on Bardney

In 909 the Edwardian *Chronicle* reported an extended punitive campaign deep inside Danish held territory when 'King Edward sent an army both from the West Saxons and the Mercians, and it ravaged very severely the territory of the northern army, both men and all kinds of cattle, and they killed many of those Danes, and were five weeks there.'[96] This was a campaign of considerable importance and was undertaken by both the West Saxon and Mercian *fyrds*. Yet, for their respective accounts of 909, it is also apparent that the authors of the *Chronicle* and the *Mercian Register* had different agendas. While the *Chronicle* concentrated upon the military significance of the campaign, the *Mercian Register* focused solely on the retrieval of important religious

[96] *ASC*, 909, MS. A.

relics and their later internment within the bounds of Mercia. The *Mercian Register's* version of the same year only reported that: 'St. Oswald's body was brought from Bardney into Mercia.'[97] The silence of the *Chronicle* concerning the transference of the earthly remains of Saint Oswald contrasts with the *Mercian Register's* discernible interest in the fate of the relics. This textual discrepancy has led to corresponding differences in the scholarly source appraisal.[98] Some have drawn certain inferences about the events of 909 that may go beyond the bounds of what the sources actually say.

It has been argued elsewhere that all of Edward's combined West Saxon/Mercian initiative was undertaken in the vicinity of Bardney, situated in the former kingdom of Lindsey. One such suggestion states that 'in 909 a joint West Saxon and Mercian force raided Lindsey, provoking a Danish raid into Mercia in 910.'[99] The *Chronicle* is, however, vague about both where the campaign actually took place and also whether or not both *fyrds* were acting together as one. Whilst it is very probable that the retrieval

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[97] *ASC, Mercian Register,* 909.

[98] Nicola Cumberledge, 'Reading between the lines: the place of Mercia within an expanding Wessex', *Midland History* xxvii (2002), 1-15, at 6 has suggested that the *Chronicle* entry for 909 demonstrates that King Edward was working hand in glove with his sister, Æthelflæd, against the Danes. However, she makes no reference to the liberation of the relics of Saint Oswald, as reported by the Mercian chronicler, in her analysis. On the other hand, D. M. Hadley, *The Northern Danelaw: Its Social Structure, c. 800-1100* (Leicester, 2000), at p. 266 has argued that the entire venture was inspired by Edward and that it was the king who was responsible for rescuing the relics and that 'the relics of Saint Oswald were removed [from the abbey at Bardney] by West Saxon agency to Gloucester.' And Carolyn Heighway, 'Gloucester and the New Minster of St. Oswald', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001) pp. 102-111, at p. 110 and in her *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire* (Gloucester, 1981), at p. 119 has argued that the retrieval of Saint Oswald's remains formed part of a joint venture between Edward and his sister; a strategy that also included the subsequent internment of the relics at Gloucester. In contrast, others have observed these particular events in a different light, attributing the retrieval of the relics to the Mercian leadership acting independently of their West Saxon king. These include Cyril Hart, *The Danelaw* (London and Rio Grande, (1992), at p. 241, who attributes the removal of Oswald's relics to Æthelflæd herself. However, Ian W. Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England* (Stroud, 2000), p. 92 attributes the acquisition of Saint Oswald's remains to Æthelred of Mercia personally.

[99] Ann Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England* (Basingstoke and London, 1999), p. 82.

of the relics either coincided with, or took advantage of, an ongoing military campaign, the only precise geographical location is the one from the *Mercian Register*. In the pursuit of a more far-reaching narrative these two independent entries appear to have been conflated to make a single story-line.[100] The corollary is that, because the abbey of Bardney is situated within the former kingdom of Lindsey, then *a priori* this is where the joint West Saxon/Mercian incursion into the Northern Danelaw took place. However, this need not have been so. There is a distinct possibility that the two forces were not acting in tandem but were operating quite independently of one another in simultaneous operations. This leads to the second inference that the relics were obtained during a combined operation as spoils of war. Viewed from the independent perspective of the *Mercian Register*, however, the Bardney raid takes on a far greater consequence if seen separately, than if perceived as merely one by-product of Edward's incursion into the Danelaw. As Michael Hare has pointed out, the Bardney raid looks to have been primarily a Mercian affair.[101] This argument is strengthened by the strong historical connections that existed between Saint Oswald and the Mercian kingdom, whereas there were only tenuous links between the relics and the West Saxons.[102] The bonds between Saint Oswald and the two kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria had a

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[100] On the difficulties of constructing historical narratives see the comments of Bernd Schneidmüller, 'Constructing the past by means of the present; historiographical foundations of medieval institutions, dynasties, peoples, and communities', in Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried and Patrick J. Geary (eds.), *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory and Historiography* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 167-192, at, pp. 167-8.

[101] Hare, 'The documentary evidence', 33-35, has also suggested that the West Saxon chronicler's comment that Edward 'sent an army' may mean that the king's direct participation is nothing more than later conjecture.

[102] The most fragile, if ingenious, of these associations remains the tentative claim, made originally by the Rev. C. S. Taylor, that King Alfred named his daughter Æthelflæd in honour of Ælflæd, the daughter of King Oswiu and niece of King Oswald of Northumbria. See Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii, 118 and Janet L. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a royal family: reflections on Alfred', in Ian Wood and Neils Lund (eds.), *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 47-66, at p.53, n. 37.

long and productive association and these historical links were once more re-kindled in the tenth century. The liberation of these potent symbols appears to have been a planned Mercian operation organised to capture them and return them safely into Mercia. Their successful recovery was subsequently trumpeted as a substantial accomplishment by the Mercian annalist. It also seems to have had two distinct functions: one political and one spiritual. The Mercia-inspired retrieval of Saint Oswald's relics from the Danelaw merits further discussion; starting with the more obvious political motives and then moving on to the less apparent spiritual ones.

The relics of Saint Oswald: encouraging political 'rapprochement'

The speed with which relic-cults developed in Anglo-Saxon England from the ninth century onwards was stressed by Christine Fell.[103] Relics, especially royal ones, contributed to the successful execution and assimilation of royal power and could even encourage political integration.[104] The patronage of a royal saint promoted legitimisation, especially on the occasion when a new dynasty supplanted an older one, as was the case in Mercia during Æthelred's tenure as ruler.[105] The reburial of Oswald's relics at Gloucester was of direct political consequence for the Mercian leadership and these potent symbols assisted in protracted efforts to extend Mercian

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[103] Christine E. Fell, 'Edward king and martyr and the Anglo-Saxon hagiographic tradition', in David Hill (ed.), *Ethelred the Unready, Papers from the Millenary Conference*, *BAR* British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978), 1-13.

[104] D. W. Rollason, 'Relic cults as an instrument of royal policy *c.* 900-1050', *ASE* 15 (1987), 91-103 and D. W. Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1989), esp. pp. 133-163.

[105] Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 240.

influence.[106] William of Malmesbury remarked that Æthelred and Æthelflæd translated the relics to Gloucester because all of Mercia was under their power (*quod omnis Mertia eorum pareret imperio*), and while this may be a later viewpoint, it may, on the other hand, represent local traditions concerning the Mercian leadership's political aspirations.[107]

The translation of Saint Oswald can be linked with other similar acts where important relics were relocated and at times these translations coincided with the establishment of Mercian controlled *burhs*.[108] For example, Oswald's cult was strongly connected to Æthelflæd's personal translation of Saint Werburgh to Chester.[109] But the relics of Saint Oswald also possessed a unique potency for political *rapprochement* between the Mercians and Northumbrians which the relics of lesser saints did not.[110] The West Saxons under King Alfred had previously held an interest in Northumbrian politics, and similarly, Æthelflæd actively pursued ambitions of her own in this

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[106] Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester', 199-210; David Rollason, 'The shrines of saints in later Anglo-Saxon England: distribution and significance', in L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (eds.), *The Anglo Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture and Archaeology in Honour of Dr H. M. Taylor*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report, 60 (London, 1986), 32-43, at 40.

[107] *GP*, iv. 155.

[108] Carolyn Heighway and Michael Hare, 'Gloucester and the minster of St. Oswald: a survey of the evidence', in Carolyn Heighway and Richard Bryant (eds.), *The Golden Minster: The Anglo-Saxon Minster and Later Medieval Priory of St. Oswald at Gloucester*, Council for British Archaeology, Research Report 117 (York, 1999), 1-29; Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester', 199-210 and Catherine Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 3 (Woodbridge, 2004), 77 and for further discussion of the construction of the *burhs* themselves Daniel G. Russo, *Town Origins and Development in Early England, c. 400-950 A. D.* (Westport, Connecticut and London, 1998), esp. pp. 193-229.

[109] Henry Bradshaw, *Life of Saint Werburge of Chester*, ed. C. Horstmann, Early English Text Society lxxxviii (London, 1887), 139-153; Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester', 202-206 and Alan Thacker, '*Membra Disjecta*: the division of the body and the diffusion of the cult', in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stanford, 1995), pp. 97-127 at p. 120.

[110] However, D. J. Craig, 'Oswald [St Oswald] (603/4–642)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20916 [accessed 30th Aug 2006] has referred to the continued Mercian royal interest in the cult of Oswald as 'surprising.'

direction. In the final year of Æthelflæd's life, the Mercian chronicler reported that following her victory at Leicester 'the people of York had promised her – and some had given pledges, some had confirmed it with oaths – that they would be under her direction.'[111] In light of the *Mercian Register's* claim, Richard Hall has posed the question: 'was York itself realistically within her grasp just before the time of her death?'[112] Æthelflæd's untimely demise means that this question remains essentially unanswerable, but it does seem reasonable to view the *Mercian Register's* account as at least an Æthelflædian initiative to foster closer relations with the ruling élite in York.[113] Æthelflæd's retrieval of Saint Oswald's relics from Bardney might further suggest that she intended to make her presence felt more at York, in which case the patronage of Saint Oswald could only have aided her in these ambitions. These potent relics may have provided Æthelflæd with a conduit for forging a closer relationship between Mercia and Northumbria. Conversely, if her intention was to be more aggressive towards York, her seizure of the relics negated the possibility of them acting as potent *foci* for Northumbrian separatism. Either way, the evidence suggests that Æthelflæd was aware that important royal relics were invested with this kind of political power, including a considerable potential for acculturation. The *Old English Martyrology* (probably composed during the reign of Alfred) includes references to the continental patron saints, Denis and Michael, and from these it may be adduced that by the tenth century, the West Saxon royal house understood how veneration for a patron saint could

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[111] *ASC*, *Mercian Register*, 918.
[112] Richard Hall, 'A kingdom too far: York in the early tenth century', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 188-199, at p. 190.
[113] M. R. Davidson, 'The (non) submission of the northern kings', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 200-211, p. 203.

underpin their political aspirations.[114] Oswald's posthumous reputation was arguably on a similar level to that of the continental Saints Denis and Michael. As Eric Cambridge has stressed, by the later eighth century, Saint Oswald had acquired the status of a Christian father to the Northumbrians.[115] But Saint Oswald's potency for political *rapprochement* was also exceptional; Oswald possessed all of the attributes necessary to bring about political syncretism between Mercia and Northumbria. He had assumed near-apostolic status, he had been martyred in battle fighting the heathens, and, he already possessed a long-established cult that had been associated with both Northumbrians and Mercians alike.

The links between the Mercian royal line and the legend of Oswald of Northumbria were strong and went all the way back to the death of the saint at the hands of the pagan king Penda of Mercia at *Maserfelth* in 642.[116] Thus, the Mercians were directly responsible for the martyrdom of King Oswald. Saint Oswald's posthumous association with the Mercian kingship began with the partial translation of the relics to Bardney by the Mercian King, Æthelred, in collaboration with his Bernician wife, Osthryth - herself a niece of the martyred King Oswald - in around 679.[117] This initial internment may be viewed as a gesture of atonement by Æthelred for Oswald's death.

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[114] Alan Thacker, '*Peculiaris Patronus Noster*: the saint as patron of the state in the early middle ages', in J. R. Maddicott and D. M. Palliser (eds.), *The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell* (London and Rio Grande, 2000), pp. 1-24, at pp. 9 and 20.

[115] Eric Cambridge, 'Archaeology and the cult of St. Oswald in pre-Conquest Northumbria', in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, 1995), pp. 128-163, at p. 159.

[116] The site is possibly Oswestry in Shropshire on the border between Mercia and Powys. This identification dates to the twelfth century. See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: a Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988), p. 244, n. 1. For the Celtic perspective, see Doris Edel, *The Celtic West and Europe: Studies in Celtic Literature and the Early Church* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 137-153.

[117] Bede, *HE* III, 2; see Wallace-Hadrill, *Commentary*, p. 103.

After an initial period of suspicion by the monks at Bardney, probably motivated by local political tensions, the cult of Saint Oswald grew. As Catherine Cubitt has suggested, Oswald 'clearly had to transcend political barriers before he could be adopted in other kingdoms.'[118] Yet, it is testament to the virtues of Oswald that his cult overcame these initial obstacles and his enshrinement at Bardney eventually ushered in a period of stability between the two kingdoms of Bernicia and Mercia and helped cement the conquest of Lindsey into the realm of greater-Mercia.[119] The Mercian veneration of Oswald's cult continued subsequently and Alcuin wrote that King Offa sumptuously: 'adorned the tomb with silver, gold, gems, and much finery, making it a splendid and enduring monument, and winning great rewards for such small effort.'[120] Peter Godman has also stressed Oswald's posthumous reputation for encouraging political harmony when he suggested that Offa was displaying deference to the great Northumbrian saint at a time when Mercian diplomatic relations with Northumbria were at there most amicable.[121] Offa, it seems, was determined to keep these ties agreeable and it was in 792 that he gave in marriage one of his daughters to King Æthelred of Northumbria. The relics' reputation for aiding political conciliation was one motive for the later Mercian intervention at Bardney, leading to their retrieval into Mercia, at the probable instigation of the 'Lady of the Mercians' personally.

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[118] Catherine Cubitt, 'Universal and local saints in Anglo-Saxon England', in Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe, (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 423-453, at p. 452.
[119] Alan Thacker, 'Kings, saints and monasteries in pre-Viking Mercia', *Midland History* 10 (1985), 1-25, at 2-3.
[120] Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ed. Peter Godman (Oxford, 1982), pp. 34-5. This is the only contemporary eighth-century source for Offa's munificence towards Oswald.
[121] Godman, *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, pp. xivi-vivii.

The spiritual aspects of the translation of Saint Oswald's relics

There were also possible spiritual reasons behind the translation of Saint Oswald from Bardney to Gloucester that need to be considered as well. Ealdorman Æthelred's complete omission from both the *Chronicle* from 894 on, and the entire *Mercian Register*, until the report of his death in 910 is suggestive that all was not well with the Mercian leader. Although Æthelweard declared that in 909 the Danes broke a peace agreement with King Edward and Æthelred 'who then ruled the Northumbrian and Mercian areas', Æthelweard does not specify that Æthelred participated in any of the subsequent military engagements, merely that he ruled over those territories.[122] Æthelred's name does appear in certain charters but it may be that his ability to participate fully in Mercian affairs, especially his capacity to conduct military campaigns, was severely restricted.[123] F. T. Wainwright made a strong case that Æthelred suffered from some kind of prolonged infirmity, and argued that for a considerable period, possibly from as early as 902, his wife Æthelflæd had been the *de facto* ruler of Mercia.[124] It also seems likely that contemporaries were well aware of Æthelred's indisposition. Although the origins of the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* are difficult to ascertain, their preoccupation with events inside Mercia is not contrived.

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[122] Æthelweard, *s. a.* 909-910.

[123] Æthelred appears in the following charters of King Edward: S 361 for 904; S 367 for 903; S 367a for 903 and S 371 for 903. Two of Æthelred's own diplomas are later than 900; S 221 for 901 and S 222 for possibly 911; the latter of these is suspicious and is not actually a charter but is a memorandum of a renewed grant. See *The Early Charters of the West Midlands*, ed. H. R. P. Finberg (2nd edition, Leicester, 1972), no. 270.

[124] F. T. Wainwright, 'Æthelflæd Lady of the Mercians', in Peter Clemoes (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in some Aspects of their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickens* (London, 1959), pp. 53-69, esp. pp. 55-56. Wainwright followed the lead of earlier scholars in this. In particular, J. M. Lappenberg, *A History of England Under the Anglo-Saxon Kings*, translated from the German by the late Benjamin Thorpe, revised new edition by E. C. Otté, 2 vols. (London, 1881), i. 11 and 90 and F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (2nd edition, (Oxford, 1947, reprinted 1950), p. 320.

They are based on contemporary Irish traditions surrounding the Norwegian involvement in the Wirral peninsula.[125] The Irish sources are important for Mercian affairs in general and they lay an 'almost ridiculous' range of emphasis upon Æthelred's illness.[126] Perhaps in 907 they reported that:

> After that Ingimund with his troops came to Æthelflæd, Queen of the Saxons; for her husband, Æthelred, was sick at the time. (Let no one reproach me, though I have related the death of Æthelred above, because this was prior to Æthelred's death and it was of this sickness that Æthelred died, but I did not wish to leave unwritten what the Norwegians did before leaving Ireland). [127]

Once more, in possibly 918, the Irish chronicler further observed that:

> It was then that the King (who was on the verge of death) and the Queen sent messengers to the Irish who were among the pagans (for the pagans had many Irish fosterlings). Life and health to you from the King of the Saxons, who is ill, and from the Queen, who holds all authority over the Saxons, and they are certain that you are true and trustworthy friends to them.[128]

An independent later medieval source offers a similar account. Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, wrote that:

> Æthelflæd, the lady of the Mercians, who was ruling the kingdom of Mercia under her sick father [*recte* husband], Æthelred, built the *burh* at *Bremesbyrig*. In King Edward's eighteenth year, Æthelred lord of the Mercians, and father [*recte* husband] of Æthelflæd, who had been ill, died, and gave his land to his daughter [*recte* wife], because he had no son.[129]

Æthelred's possible incapacity may offer a further motive for the translation of Saint Oswald's relics into Gloucester. The translation of important relics had a number of functions and need not be seen solely as a political act.[130] The creation of Gloucester as

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[125] F. T. Wainwright, 'Ingimund's invasion', in F. T. Wainwright, *Scandinavian England: Collected Papers by F. T. Wainwright* (ed.), H. R. P. Finberg (Chichester, 1975), pp. 131-161. See also *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. and trans. Joan Newlon Radner, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (Dublin, 1978), pp. 206-207, 429 and pp. 209-210, n. 459.

[126] F. T. Wainwright, 'North-West Mercia, A. D. 871-924', in F. T. Wainwright, *Scandinavian England: Collected Papers by F. T. Wainwright* (ed.), H. R. P. Finberg (Chichester, 1975), pp. 63-129, at p. 83. A short critique of Wainwright's comments about the Irish sources can be found in Pauline Stafford, 'Political women in Mercia', at p. 45, n. 11.

[127] *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, *s.a.* ?907, pp. 167-9.

[128] *Ibid.*, *s.a.* ?918, pp. 171-3.

[129] Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford, 1996), v. 16, pp. 304-7.

[130] Martina Caroli, 'Bringing saints to cities and monasteries: *translationes* in the making of a sacred geography (ninth and tenth centuries)', in G. P. Brogiolo, N. Gauthier and N. Christie (eds.), *Towns and*

a focus for the sacred as well as the political was possibly orchestrated by Æthelflæd using the relics of Saint Oswald for her own purposes. Peter Brown has memorably termed Christian saints and martyrs as 'the very special dead.'[131] The spiritual reputation of Saint Oswald suggests that, to Æthelflæd, he may have been very special indeed.

One principal rationale of Oswald's cult has perhaps been overshadowed by the more obvious political considerations resulting from the translation of the relics to Gloucester in 909. By concentrating primarily upon the secular characteristics of the translation of Oswald's relics, the provision of the miraculous may have been undervalued. Oswald's most distinctive saintly virtue was his reputation as a healer of the sick. Bede implies that this potency for miracles had its foundation in Oswald's life, where the king never shirked in his duties towards the sick and the needy.[132] After his death, Oswald achieved sanctity extremely quickly and his 'great faith in God and his devotion to heart were also made clear after his death by certain miracles.'[133] Oswald's fame as a healing saint grew rapidly and people travelled widely so that 'as the days

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their Territories Between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Leiden, 2000), pp. 259-274 at p. 274; '*translationes* can thus be an instrument capable of reshaping the sacred geography of a land in times of change, an instrument kept in the hands of powerful people, and an instrument used to define hierarchical relationships between places, and to (re)construct the memory in the frame of a space deeply modified by the ongoing diffusion of Christianity.'

[131] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), p. 69.

[132] Bede, *HE*, III. 9-10; see John Corbett, 'Two early Anglo-Saxon holy men: Oswald and Cuthbert', in J. Douglas Woods and David A. E. Pelteret (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxons: Synthesis and Achievement* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 63-75, at p. 68. Contrast Victoria A. Gunn, 'Bede and the martyrdom of St, Oswald', in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, Studies in Church History 30 (Oxford, 1993), 57-66 who has suggested that Oswald may not have been a martyr in the accepted sense of the word. She has argued that Oswald's sanctity was established during his lifetime. She has further suggested, that Bede's description of King Oswald offers a unique picture of sanctity based on Oswald's faith whilst the king was still alive. However, I am not wholly convinced by her arguments. The manner in which Bede describes Oswald's death at the hands of the pagan Penda carries all the hallmarks of a traditional martyrdom, especially the way in which the body was ritually dismembered.

[133] Bede, *HE*, III, 9.

went by many began to frequent the place [of his death] and there obtained the grace of healing for themselves and their friends.'[134] There are many references to Saint Oswald's capacity for healing, perhaps more than any other Anglo-Saxon saint.[135] Oswald's reputation as a healing saint was one that flourished all the way into the later middle ages. One example is the tale recounted by the twelfth-century chronicler Hugh Candidus when, during the opening ceremony for the new church at Peterborough in 1140, many sick people were healed and saved from demons by Saint Oswald.[136] The initial partial translation of the saint to Bardney in around 679 also inspired a series of miracles and 'an extraordinary chain of the passing-on of curative virtue' took place when his relics were interred.[137] Saint Oswald's cult should be set into a context of healing royal saints alongside the sixth-century King Sigismund of Burgundy, with whom Oswald shares a place on a twelfth-century reliquary made for Henry the Lion.[138]

The West Saxon royal house had already made an earlier appeal for saintly intercession to heal an apparently incurable ailment. The spiritual aspects of Æthelflæd's translation of Oswald's relics into Gloucester may have their foundation in Asser's account of her father's wedding celebrations. King Alfred had recalled to Asser his attempt to find a cure for the mysterious affliction that had baffled the court

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[134] *Ibid.*, III. 10.
[135] Wilfred Bonser, 'The magic of Saint Oswald', *Antiquity* 9 (1935), 418-23.
[136] *Per merita autem sancti Osuualdi, et per ipsam aquam lauacionis eiusdem brachii, multi infirmi saniti sunt, et a demonibus liberati, et paralitici, et frigoretici curati.* See Hugh Candidus, *The Chronicle of Hugh Candidus, A Monk of Peterborourgh* ed. W. T. Mellows (Oxford, 1949), p. 106.
[137] Charles Thomas, *Bede, Archaeology, and the Cult of Relics* (Jarrow Lecture, 1973), p. 7.
[138] Peter Clemoes, *The Cult of St. Oswald on the Continent* (Jarrow Lecture, 1983), p. 7. For Sigismund and his cult see Frederick S. Paxton, 'Liturgy and healing in an early medieval saints' cult: the mass in *Honore Sancti Sigismundi* for the cure of fevers', *Traditio* 49 (1994), 23-43 and Frederick S. Paxton, 'Power and the power to heal. The cult of St. Sigismund of Burgundy', *EME* 2.1 (1993), 95-110.

physicians.[139] Alfred's illness was unfathomable to earthly minds: it 'could continue so many years without remission, from his twentieth year up to his fortieth and beyond.' In his despair, fearing he would be 'rendered useless and contemptible', King Alfred 'beseeched the Lord's mercy, so that Almighty God in His bountiful kindness might substitute for the pangs of the present and agonising infirmity some less severe illness.'[140] Sometime later, whilst out hunting, King Alfred 'made a detour to a particular church in which St. *Gueriir* lies in peace and [the king] lay prostrate in silent prayer.'[141] The motivation for Alfred's visitation to the shrine of this obscure Celtic saint lay in the latter's reputation as a healer of infirmities. Although little is now know of Saint *Gueriir*, the origins of his name probably lies in a corruption of the Cornish *gweres*, to help, relieve, or most significantly, to heal.[142] Following his visit to the shrine Alfred 'felt himself divinely cured from his malady … just as he had asked in his prayers.'[143] Asser's account may not be merely apocryphal and could have reasonably secure foundations, for it may be that Alfred regularly hunted in Cornwall; Alfred held lands in north-east Cornwall after Dungarth, the region's last remaining Celtic king,

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[139] Asser describes the medical persons involved as *omnibus medicis*. For the role of the medieval *medicus* see Valerie J. Flint, 'The early medieval 'medicus', the saint and the enchanter', *Social History of Medicine* 2 (1989), 127-145 and concerning the Anglo-Saxons and illnesses in general see Audrey L. Meaney, 'The Anglo-Saxon view of the causes of illness', in Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall and David Klausner (eds.), *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture* (Toronto, Basingstoke and London, 1992), pp. 12-33.

[140] Asser, ch. 74. For King Alfred's ability to act as a strong and devout ruler despite his illness see Janet L. Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and masculinity', in D. M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London and New York, 1999), pp. 121-142, at pp. 135-138.

[141] Asser, ch. 74.

[142] David Pratt, 'The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 30 (2002), 39-90, 61-62 for this suggestion; otherwise very little is known about St. *Gueriir* as can be adduced from David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, first published 1978, 1992 reprint), p. 220. For further discussion about King Alfred's incapacity see Paul Kershaw, 'Illness, power and prayer in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, *EME* 10.2 (2001), 201-224. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Amelia Stockdale for allowing me access to her work: 'The suffering king: a study of King Alfred and his illnesses' (unpublished BA dissertation University of Sheffield, 2006).

[143] Asser, ch. 74.

died in 875.[144] King Alfred also held other territory in the region and he bequeathed Stratton in north-east Cornwall to his son Edward. [145] Moreover, the king 'unexpectedly' granted Asser 'Exeter with all the jurisdiction pertaining to it in Saxon territory and in Cornwall.'[146]

Like Alfred's, Æthelred's putative illness may have been a debilitating one. Æthelflæd may therefore have sanctioned a mission seeking out a saint with a similar healing reputation to the Cornish holy man Alfred had approached. The willingness to accept the intercession of a saint renowned for his, or her, healing capacity should not be minimised; it was important and it had 'evolved to answer the genuine needs of an educated élite.'[147] Brought about vicariously through the corporeal remains of the holy person involved, this special intercession from God through the conduit of the earthly remains (*auxilium*) of the saint was a prerequisite to the curing of the sick.[148] Moreover, the *memoria* of a saint's cult not only encouraged the commemoration of the subject but also those virtues that were epitomised by the saint.[149] With her husband's state of health possibly a pressing issue, Oswald's reputation for healing should be seen as a further motivation for Æthelflæd's personal role in the translation of the relics and the manner in which the mission was reported by the *Mercian Register*.

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[144] Nicholas Orme, *The Saints of Cornwall* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 133-134.
[145] J. R. Maddicott, 'Trade, industry and the wealth of King Alfred', *Past & Present* 123 (1989), 3-51, at 39.
[146] Asser, ch. 81.
[147] Paul Anthony Hayward, 'Demystifying the role of sanctity in Western Christendom', in James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middles Ages; Essays on the contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 115-142, at p. 141.
[148] Corbett, 'Two early Anglo-Saxon holy men', p. 70.
[149] Catherine Cubitt, 'Memory and narrative in the cult of early Anglo-Saxon Saints' in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 29-66, at p. 29 and p. 57.

Edward the Elder's 'annexation' of Mercia

The Mercian aristocracy's submission to Edward the Elder's authority in 918 has recently become the subject of renewed scrutiny.[150] Edward's acquisition of the kingdom of the Mercians has been viewed traditionally as a forcible annexation by the West Saxon king and in general scholars have followed the lead of the author of the *Mercian Register*. However, a new view sees these events less confrontationally as a Mercian endorsement of West Saxon authority not an enforced submission to Edward. Thus, the submission by the Mercians to Edward's kingship should now be perceived as being predominantly harmonious. Accordingly, the circumstances behind Edward's actions deserve a re-examination. Even from the West Saxon account of 918 it is evident that Edward moved both swiftly and purposefully following his sister's death. The *Chronicle* reported that King Edward 'occupied the borough of Tamworth, and all the nation in the land of the Mercians which had been subject to Æthelflæd submitted to him.'[151] Edward's precipitate reaction to the news from Tamworth appears both surprising and excessive, if he was already regarded as the rightful monarch throughout Mercia. Sean Miller has noted this and has suggested that the Mercian submission to Edward's authority 'seems at first glance an unnecessarily martial transfer of power' and has additionally argued that this was a move designed to 'secure the loyalty not of the English Mercians, but of the Danish Mercians' at Tamworth.[152] But there remain

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[150] Simon Keynes, 'Edward, king of the Anglo-Saxons', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 40-66 and Sean Miller, 'Edward [Edward the Elder] (870s?-924)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8514 [accessed 15th Sept 2005]

[151] *ASC*, 918, manuscript 'A'.

[152] Sean Miller, 'Edward [Edward the Elder] (870s?-924)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8514, [accessed 15th Sept 2005]

strong grounds for seeing the *Chronicle* testimony as predominantly accurate and that this constituted a dynamic action by Edward not to secure the co-operation of the Danes at Tamworth, but one to secure the future loyalty of Æthelflæd's supporters; a strategy that has been rightly interpreted by earlier commentators as a *coup d'état*.

King Edward first learned of his sister's death at Tamworth on the twelfth of June 918 while conducting a campaign against the Danes at Stamford. His immediate reaction to events at Tamworth sets the tone for further investigation into the strength of Mercian autonomy during, and beyond, Æthelflæd's lifetime. The *Chronicle* account of the king's actions when he entered Tamworth does not reveal the full implications for West Saxon political ascendancy during the whole of this crucial year and it seemingly ignores certain actions. It attempts to report the Mercian submission to Edward as a straightforward realisation of his rightful authority and any significant Mercian dissension remains essentially invisible. Yet, even the *Chronicle* tacitly acknowledges that there were underlying tensions in 918, with its concession that previously the Mercians had owed their allegiance to Æthelflæd and not Edward. This is an important admission and forms an enduring theme that the *Mercian Register* amplifies. The Mercian version of events, describing the remaining months of the year of 918, not merely Edward's occupation of Tamworth in June, tells an altogether different story from the one that emanated from the West Saxon court.

If the West Saxon chronicler presented the Mercian submission to Edward at Tamworth as one acclamation among many – stressing emphatically Edward's rightful

overkingship – the Mercian annalist did not.[153] By failing to mention Edward's role as king, the *Mercian Register* reflected upon 918 as a capitulation to West Saxon authority and a loss of Mercian independence. The *Mercian Register* asserted that the primary allegiance of the Mercians remained not to Edward but to Æthelflæd. It also underlined how this mandate had previously been bound and that Æthelflæd was 'in the eighth year in which with lawful authority she was holding dominion over the Mercians.'[154] The author of the *Mercian Register* was thus invoking recollections of a successful earlier arrangement between the two peoples, one that was endorsed by the West Saxon king. He may have omitted that this process came at a price - the loss of Mercian control over Oxford and London - but he did maintain that that this was a continuation of lawful Mercian government.[155] The Mercian annalist's clear inference is that it was previously Æthelred and not the West Saxon king who was the legitimate holder of Mercian dominion before Æthelflæd. This theme of dynastic continuity persists through his portrayal of the fate of Æthelred and Æthelflæd's daughter, Ælfwynn, and this entry, along with the one for Æthelflæd's death, should be viewed as a single annal.[156] The following discussion will concentrate on the concept of Mercian continuity and will

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[153] *ASC*, 918; the *Chronicle* also records the submission to Edward's authority of the kings in Wales and all those who had settled inside Mercia, whether English or Dane, at Nottingham.

[154] *ASC, Mercian Register*, 918.

[155] The *Chronicle* reports that Edward 'succeeded to London and Oxford and to all the lands which belonged to them.' The *Mercian Register* does not mention this concession but continues to report Æthelflæd as being in command of the Mercian forces. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, p. 324, argued that this formed the initial part of Edward's overall strategy against the southern Danes and it was his sister's guardianship of Mercia that allowed him the freedom to act. However, as David N. Dumville, 'The Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum', in his *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 1-27, at p. 27, has pointed out, Alfred gave Æthelred much more than the guardianship over London. Æthelred was also given Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Middlesex. These facts were omitted from the annal for 886 and are essentially the lands recovered by Edward following Æthelred's death.

[156] Wainwright, 'The chronology of the Mercian Register', p. 388.

argue that Edward's actions were driven by the fear of fragmentation of his composite realm.

Set against the backdrop of Edward and Æthelflæd's joint military efforts against the Danes, one piece of evidence to suggest that Edward undertook a militant political takeover of Tamworth is the way he abruptly concluded his campaign at Stamford. That Edward chose to curtail a vital push into Danish-held territory and make haste towards an already secure region directly upon receiving the news of Æthelflæd's death is indicative of his concerns. By 918 the *burh* at Tamworth had been a Mercian stronghold for some five years and had recently been the base for Æthelflæd's campaigns against Derby and Leicester, waged between 917 and 918.[157] Edward abandoned his own military push into the strategically essential vicinity of Stamford, which controlled the access to both of the Rivers Nene and Welland, in order to secure for himself the 'English' safe bastion of Tamworth. To find out why Edward chose this course of action it may be profitable to approach the events through the later chronicle of John of Worcester.[158] John described Edward's occupation of Tamworth as a forceful appropriation and he declared that the king 'subjugated it to his rule' (*domnio subiugauit*).[159] This version suggests that Edward was required to compel a somewhat

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[157] F. T. Wainwright, 'North-West Mercia, A. D. 871-924', in *Scandinavian England: Collected Papers by F. T. Wainwright*, (ed.), H. R. P. Finberg (Chichester, 1975), pp. 63-129, at pp. 92-3.

[158] Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, ii p. lxxxiv noted that John (Florence) of Worcester made extensive use of material that was found within the 'Mercian Register complete, not merely the fragments of it embodied in [manuscript] D' of the main *Chronicle* texts. See also Cyril Hart, 'The early section of the Worcester Chronicle', *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983), 251-313, who has advanced unconvincing theories concerning the origins of the *Chronicle* of John of Worcester, but as he also noted that for most of the tenth and eleventh centuries, it is indeed the most authoritative source for Mercian events.

[159] JW, i. *s.a.* 919. *Tomwurðigene mox properauit, eamque suo dominio subiugauit.* The use of the word 'rule' by the text's translators is only one possibility. 'Lordship' is another possibility and would accentuate the personal motives behind Edward's actions including the absolute right of ownership (of this authority).

recalcitrant Mercian nobility and populace into accepting his royal supremacy. This was a crisis for Edward and he imposed his personal authority upon his sister's entourage and her people with some vigour. Even the *Chronicle* reported that Edward 'ordered the borough on the south side of the river to be built; and all the people who belonged to the more northern borough submitted to him.'[160] In the words of Stenton, 918 was a decisive year both for Edward and for the West Saxons since it was 'the first time in a generation, [that] the Mercian aristocracy was free to give its allegiance to whom it would.'[161] It was only following this successful suppression of Mercian opposition to his authority at Tamworth that Edward re-ignited his military drive against the remaining Danish controlled boroughs of Nottingham and Lincoln. The king's dramatic march to Tamworth may have been motivated by personal grief for his sister, but the manner with which this event was reported also suggests that the submission of the Mercian nobility to Edward's personal authority took precedence over all else in June 918. In order to prevent the Mercian *witan* from conspiring to select a leader in opposition to the West Saxon king, Edward acted both swiftly and systematically.

Edward's display of royal authority did not end with the demands for loyalty from his sister's followers at Tamworth for there was residual opposition to his kingship still to be dealt with. Some months following the Mercian submission at Tamworth, Edward's concerns over the transmission of royal supremacy within Mercia had apparently heightened and he committed what has been bluntly described as 'a violent

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[160] *ASC*, 918.
[161] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition, pp. 329-330.

act of power.'[162] Following his narration of Æthelflæd's death, the Mercian chronicler lamented the abrupt termination of Mercian independence when 'the daughter of Æthelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all authority in Mercia and taken into Wessex, three weeks before Christmas. She was called Ælfwynn.'[163] This last pithy sentence makes the Mercian scribe a poignant witness to the events of 918. Clearly troubled by the chain of events, his testimony is a direct criticism of the king, whom he judged had perpetrated a royal abduction. As Eric John suggested, a significant number of the Mercian nobility wanted to preserve their independence and there may have been 'an important and intransigent Mercian faction opposed to the West Saxon connection' who mourned the taking into Wessex of Ælfwynn.[164] Ælfwynn's possible abduction suggests that a significant number of influential Mercian magnates were determined to have Ælfwynn as their ruler.[165] As long as the king's niece remained at large inside Mercia, she posed a substantial threat to Edward's direct authority inside this newly-volatile territory. The risks were acute and Edward seems to have taken resolute action and had Ælfwynn, the only child of his sister Æthelflæd and her husband Æthelred, forcibly taken into custody.

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[162] *Ibid.*, p. 330. On the chronology of this episode and that it may in fact form a continuation of the previous annal see F. T. Wainwright, 'The chronology of the Mercian Register', *EHR* 60 (1945), 385-392; Dorothy Whitelock, ed. *English Historical Documents c 500-1042* (Second edition, London, 1979), p. 217, n. 2 and W. S. Angus, 'The chronology of the reign of Edward the Elder', *EHR* 53 (1938), 194-210.

[163] *ASC, Mercian Register*, 919.

[164] Eric John, 'The age of Edgar', in James Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (Harmondsworth, first published in 1982, 1991 reprint), pp. 160-189, at p. 161. See also Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1996), p. 91.

[165] Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, p. 33.

Ælfwynn: last of the Mercian royal line

Ælfwynn's absence from the sources after 918 has generally been interpreted as a sign that she retired into the religious life, but the evidence that she ever became a nun is exceedingly flimsy.[166] An original charter of King Eadred's, dated to 948 from Christ Church Canterbury, refers to a certain Ælfwynn as a religious woman, but this is the only document that can be linked conceivably to Æthelflæd's daughter taking the veil. There is no particular reason to assume, however, that the Ælfwynn of this charter and the Mercian royal princess were necessarily the same person; if they were, by 948 Ælfwynn would have been approximately sixty years of age.[167] Apart from this one questionable reference, Ælfwynn vanishes from the historical record completely once Edward had her taken into Wessex and her eventual fate can only truthfully be surmised.

The significance of Ælfwynn's removal from the political epicentre of Mercia has, however, been marginalised in certain quarters and her disappearance dismissed somewhat flippantly as 'an enforced Christmas vacation.'[168] This description of Ælfwynn's possible appropriation by Edward comprehensively undervalues the continuing menace that she posed towards her uncle had she been allowed to remain in the political spotlight within Mercia.

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[166] For instance, Lesley Abrams, 'The conversion of the Scandinavians of Dublin', *ANS* 20 (1997), 1-29, 22, n. 145; 'on Æthelflæd's death Edward the Elder sent his niece off to a nunnery'.

[167] S 535; Keynes,'Edward, king of the Anglo-Saxons' at p. 57.

[168] Maggie Bailey, 'Ælfwynn, second lady of the Mercians', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 112-127 at p. 117 plays down the arguably decisive role played by Edward the Elder in his niece's disappearance in 918. 'The Chronicle remains entirely silent about Ælfwynn apart from its description of her enforced Christmas vacation in Wessex.' In point of fact, the West Saxon-focussed *Chronicle* does not mention Ælfwynn at all. She is only remembered in the *Mercian Register* and these two texts should not be viewed as being synonymous.

While there is insufficient evidence to claim conclusively that Ælfwynn became a nun, the proposal is not without either merit or precedent. This may have been Ælfwynn's first viable opportunity to fill a vocation to chastity denied to her by her exceptional royal status. Alternatively, it is possible that Ælfwynn accepted the veil at her uncle's insistence. By setting Ælfwynn aside the king effectively negated the continuance of the Mercian kingdom as an autonomous entity, at least as one that was not dependent on the West Saxon line. Ælfwynn's isolation from the secular hub was necessary; it minimised the prospect of any enduring Mercian sympathies erupting into full-scale insurgency. Another possibility therefore, is that Edward had his niece murdered. This, however, seems unlikely; a politically-motivated murder could be viewed as counter-productive and would have more liable to have compounded Edward's problems rather than solved them. In death, Ælfwynn may have become a focus for separatist sympathies and out of the two possibilities, the most appealing remains that Edward had Ælfwynn securely locked away inside a religious foundation within Wessex. If Edward had Ælfwynn enclosed behind the walls of a nunnery there were a number of West Saxon royal foundations to choose from, some of which were founded by Edward himself.[169]

There are many Frankish parallels for the suggestion that Ælfwynn underwent a politically-inspired incarceration. A number of royal religious communities in Francia

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[169] The inadequacy of the source material for the foundation dates of female religious houses makes it very difficult to establish just when some of them were actually created. For a thorough appraisal of the problems see Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, 2000), i. esp. 156-171. Edward the Elder is said to have founded Romsey by John of Worcester. However, as Foot has pointed out, there are two further versions of the foundation of this institution; JW, ii. 416-418.

served as secular exclusion zones and a West Saxon version would have been a realistic political solution to a awkward problem. Edward's rule over Mercia was not universally applauded and he was in a similar situation to a number of the earlier Carolingian kings. As Paul Fouracre has argued, it was the Carolingians' inherent insecurity that made them generally more lenient towards dangerous political prisoners than their Merovingian predecessors had been.[170] This was an enduring legacy from when the Carolingians had fundamentally usurped the kingship and it left behind a residue of reluctance towards outright confrontation and violence. Moreover, Mayke de Jong has recently provided a fresh approach to the topic of *Klosterhaft*, the royal confinement of dangerous political dissidents within religious establishments inside Francia.[171] She has argued convincingly, that forcible tonsure or religious incarcerations were the milder forms of politically-inspired aggression and they were generally perpetrated against royal kin.[172] Because violence against the *stirps regia* was generally something to be avoided, internment in the form of *libera custodia* remains a very plausible end for Ælfwynn. There were accepted rules that dictated behaviour, and for as long as the 'prisoner' remained within the confines of the religious establishment, no physical harm would be forthcoming.[173] Likewise, there was an existing Anglo-Saxon tradition of placing unwanted females into religious institutions, at least for

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[170] Paul Fouracre, 'Attitudes towards violence in seventh-and eighth-century Francia', in Guy Halsall (ed.), *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 1998, reprinted 2002), pp. 60-75, at p. 70.
[171] Mayke de Jong, 'Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms', in Mayke de Jong, Franz Theuws with Carine Van Rhijn (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 291-328, at p. 299.
[172] *Ibid.*, p. 299.
[173] *Ibid.*, p. 298. Confinement of this nature did not have to be permanent.

economic reasons. As Stafford has argued, 'nunneries were emphatically the favoured way of disposing of surplus daughters.'[174]

Following Edward's seizure of Tamworth in June 918, there seems to have been a six-month hiatus before the king took his eventual action against Ælfwynn during December. Wainwright suggested that this interval reflected a period of arbitration where Edward, primarily as an act of conciliation, had allowed Ælfwynn to hold some 'nominal position' inside Mercia following her mother's death.[175] Wainwright's original argument has since been refined, and it has now been suggested that 'Edward initially allowed Æthelflæd's daughter 'to hold a nominal rulership over the Mercians. After six months, however, she was deprived of all authority in Mercia and carried off into Wessex.'[176] Neither of these interpretations of this lull in proceedings is overly convincing, however. A likelier possibility than either of the above is that King Edward's prompt action in securing Tamworth denied the Mercian nobility the initial capacity to support Ælfwynn. Edward's decisive occupation of Tamworth meant that he essentially held power in Mercia throughout 918, although his authority over some of the Mercian aristocracy probably remained shaky. It also seems likely that Edward's grip on Mercian political affairs became more precarious as the year wore on. As long

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[174] Pauline Stafford, 'Sons and mothers: family politics in the early middle ages', in Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind T. Hill on the Occasion of her Seventieth Birthday*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 1 (Oxford, 1978), 79-100, 97. See also Foot, *Veiled Women,* i. esp. 39-46.

[175] Wainwright, 'Æthelflæd Lady of the Mercians', p. 323 and F. T. Wainwright, 'North-West Mercia', p. 93.

[176] Marios Costambeys, 'Æthelflæd (*d.* 918)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8907 [accessed 29th Sept 2005]

as Ælfwynn remained at court she was a visible reminder of past independence and a focus for any Mercian malcontents.

As for Ælfwynn, she was demonstrably Mercian, even more so than her redoubtable mother had been, and it was her exceptional status that posed so great a threat to Edward and his royal jurisdiction within Mercia.[177] Consequently, the Mercian annalist's remarks should be read in a different context to the ones offered above. When the Mercian scribe recounted how Ælfwynn was 'deprived of all authority in Mercia' he was not describing a current act of exclusion from political rank by the king towards his niece. King Edward had not actively withdrawn Ælfwynn from some token role in his new Mercian government, where he had previously placed her as a symbolic gesture of open-handedness. The annalist was making a robust political statement at this juncture. He was referring to a future political authority that Edward's swift and decisive action had denied Ælfwynn and her supporters. Once more John of Worcester's evidence is worth consulting. He wrote that Æthelflæd died 'leaving Ælfwynn, her only daughter by Æthelred, the under-king [*subregulus*] as heiress to her kingdom [*heredem regni reliquit*] and that Edward 'entirely deprived his niece Ælfwynn of rule in the kingdom of Mercia [*regni Merciorum*] and ordered her to be taken into Wessex.'[178] That Æthelflæd may have designated Ælfwynn as the heiress to the Mercian realm is perhaps a troublesome claim.[179] But, it most probably includes

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[177] Pauline Stafford, 'Political women in Mercia', p. 47 who states that Ælfwynn was 'more emphatically Mercian' than her mother had been.

[178] JW, i. *s.a.* 918.

[179] In 1127, Henry I of England acknowledged his sister Matilda as his own particular heiress and John's similar reference to Ælfwynn, and her status, could conceivably reflect twelfth-century perceptions and language. John of Worcester's chronicle contains the most comprehensive account of the oath-taking ceremony at Westminster, where Henry's troubled succession was debated and it 'was discussed between

authentic Worcester traditions, reflecting that Ælfwynn's political cause was a popular one in some quarters. If Ælfwynn had support from an element of the Mercian nobility, it suggests that some were prepared to disregard the policies already arranged by the West Saxon and Mercian leadership in the late 890s. If the evidence is interpreted in this way, it suggests that Ælfwynn may have been a direct rival to the king's authority within Mercia and the continuance of West Saxon-inspired kingship within that kingdom. The possibility of Ælfwynn becoming more than just a focus for Mercian separatist tendencies must also be considered as a valid reason for Edward's apparent ruthlessness. Ælfwynn would have been an ideal match had she been betrothed to a member of the Mercian high aristocracy.

This last observation brings up one of the more tricky points about this whole affair, namely why had Ælfwynn never married when she was perhaps almost thirty years of age in 918?[180] Alex Woolf has suggested that the reason may lie in the changes to ecclesiastical procedures and the Church's progressively negative views on marriage between close kin. He has further speculated, that Ælfwynn may have been betrothed to her first cousin, the future King Æthelstan, and that this particular match was made

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them all who would succeed as ruler when the king died and an heir was lacking. Finally all agreed to the king's wish, that his daughter, the widow of Henry, emperor of the Romans should receive the English kingdom under Christ's protection.' See JW, iii, 178-80.

[180] Ælfwynn first appears in the historical records in a Worcester charter of 904; S 1280. This suggests that Ælfwynn was at least twelve years old in 904 and was possibly somewhere between twenty-six and thirty years of age at the time she disappears from view. However, Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England*, at pp. 122-3 has argued that 'Æthelflæd had been an adult woman with a strong character and considerable experience of rule. In contrast Ælfwynn was a young girl with little experience whose character remained untried.' Walker's argument is full of unfounded suppositions. For instance, we know nothing whatsoever about Ælfwynn's character or whether of not she had any experience of rule. Considering who her mother was though, it seems likely that Ælfwynn would have been instructed in the ways of both government and of warfare.

impossible within the new reforming climate.[181] If there were tighter restrictions of marriage because of consanguinity, then it could be that the Mercian *witan* had decided that the royal princess should be found a suitable Mercian husband.[182] But it will also be argued in chapter five of this thesis that Woolf's suggestion of a putative betrothal of Ælfwynn to her cousin Æthelstan, one that was deemed as unlawful in the current religious climate, may have been impossible for other, more pressing, reasons.

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[181] Alex Woolf, 'View from the West: an Irish perspective', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 98-101, at p. 99. On the issue of clerical attitudes towards marriage see also Sheila Sharp, 'The West Saxon tradition of dynastic marriage', in N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder 899-924* (London, 2001), pp. 79-88 at pp. 81-2.

[182] Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1996), p. 91, suggested that Edward was aware that plans existed for such an eventuality.