

# Alfred the Raider: Capitalizing on the Warrior-King Relationship, Morale, and Reputation to Become the Greatest Anglo-Saxon King

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## *Abstract*

*Despite the vast research on Alfred the Great's Viking Wars, many historians fail to acknowledge the Germanic warrior-king relationship that defined the Anglo-Saxon Age, and how instrumental this relationship was to King Alfred's success. This warrior-king relationship seems to be overlooked for the more exciting stories of blood and gore that overshadow the accomplishments and failures of ninth-century leaders. In the case of Alfred the Great, his achievements as a great military leader did not begin until nearly seven years after he became king, and the triumphs and failures of his earlier reign find their roots in the influence of the warrior-king relationship within Wessex. This research will define what this relationship meant to the kingship in Wessex, and stress how necessary this relationship was in creating shifts in morale between the two opposing armies, as well as Alfred's subsequent success against Guthrum and his Great Summer Army at Edington in 878.*

## Introduction

*I am the oft-defeated King*

*Whose failure fills the land*

*Who fled before the Danes of old*

*Who chattered with the Danes for gold*

*Who now upon the Wessex Wold*

*Hardly has feet to stand*

G. K. Charleston, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, 1911.

The legends surrounding Alfred the Great's reign, which began in 871, have been perpetuated through later literature describing a king who refused to give up, and against all odds, saved his kingdom against a heathen onslaught. These legends seem to skim over the seven-year gap between his succession and his victory at Edington in 878, only focusing on stories that aid in the glorification of a king that found himself alone in the marshes of Somerset.<sup>1</sup> His legacy is defined by military success through major reforms after his victory at Edington against the Vikings, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See descriptions in David Harspool's *King Alfred: Burnt Cakes and Other Legends*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

ramifications of these successes in later English history, but what of his failures prior to 878? In truth, Alfred's succession happened during a time of desperate uncertainty for the kingdom of Wessex, and the period of Alfred's early rule was defined by a series of losses and an underwhelming amount of West Saxon support, despite claims made by primary sources. It is doubtful that Alfred was even expected to become king as the youngest of five, and far more likely that he spent his life studying for a monastic career. Thus, if Alfred was not meant to be king, how then did he become the legend worthy of the title "the Great" and change the fate of Wessex by defeating an enemy that was on the cusp of capturing the last remaining Anglo-Saxon kingdom?

The study of Alfred's reign relies heavily upon two primary sources: Asser's *Life of Alfred* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which was written during the latter part of Alfred's reign, likely 892 or 893, almost always draws directly from Asser's descriptions in *Life* for the later ninth-century period concerning the Viking Wars.<sup>2</sup> The *Chronicle* focuses on the entire Anglo-Saxon age and was most likely commissioned and supervised by Alfred himself.<sup>3</sup> The *Chronicle* served more as a piece of propaganda in the mid-890s following a national crisis occurring with the arrival of a third Viking invasion in Wessex, and portrayed heroic accounts of Anglo-Saxon triumph, including Alfred's own, rather than being intended as a nonbiased record.<sup>4</sup>

Asser's *Life of Alfred* focuses specifically on the second half of the ninth century, and provides a more thorough, in-depth account of Alfred's life and reign. Asser was a Welsh bishop who left his native church in Wales to serve King Alfred in Wessex. Asser claims to have been writing *Life* between 885 and 893, using his own personal knowledge of King Alfred along with what he had learned from other contemporaries in Alfred's court, including Alfred himself.<sup>5</sup> Asser's work is also not without bias; however, just as contemporary authors may be known to relay inaccuracies or exaggerations based in misinformation or bias, the piece should still be regarded as authentic and that its contents are essential to the history of Alfred the Great.<sup>6</sup> Asser's *Life* was published while Alfred was still alive, which provides interesting context for Asser's motives behind his biased descriptions of Alfred, who certainly read this biography. Asser cannot help but shed a positive light upon ill-fated events during this period of Alfred's earlier rule, despite the obvious implications of Alfred's lack of success. Since a king's reputation was crucial to his success in this period, as seen in *Life*, and in descriptions within other primary sources, including *Beowulf* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, this explains why Asser was so concerned with portraying Alfred as a great king, even during this earlier period when, in fact, he was not.

Several modern historians (see footnote) provide further analysis of these primary sources to discredit this idea of a well-loved, successful Alfred during his early reign, and rather focus on other factors, such as unorthodox military strategies, that may have led to his success in 878.<sup>7</sup> Abels and Peddie take this one step further and hint at small shifts in morale occurring after major events in 878, both in the West Saxons under Alfred, and the occupying Great Summer Army under the

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<sup>2</sup> John Peddie, *Alfred, the Good Soldier: His Life and Campaigns*, (Bath, England: Millstream Books, 1992), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Peddie, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Peddie, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Genuine Asser: The Stenton Lecture of 1967*, (Cambridge: University of Reading, 1968), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Whitelock, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), John Peddie, *Alfred, the Good Soldier: His Life and Campaigns*, (Bath, England: Millstream Books, 1992), Alf J. Mapp, *The Golden Dragon: Alfred the Great and His Times*, (New York: M. Evans and Company, 2014), Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isle, 850-880*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Viking hersir Guthrum.<sup>8</sup> However, even Abels and Peddie fail to acknowledge the defining aspects of the Germanic warrior-king relationship that made these morale shifts possible, in this Anglo-Saxon age, or how important these shifts were to Alfred's success during the Viking Wars. The honor, loyalty, duty, service, and reputation that defined the warrior-king relationship, in an age only a few centuries removed from Germanic-tribalism, still defined the ninth-century kingdom of Wessex. This relationship was crucial to Alfred's success in establishing his own reputation among his thegns and creating the morale shifts, among both the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, that contributed to Alfred's victory at Edington in 878.

This thesis will define what this relationship meant to the ninth-century kingship in Wessex, and stress how necessary this relationship was in creating shifts in morale and Alfred's subsequent success against the Vikings. The cultural relationship between Alfred and his Anglo-Saxon thegns was crucial both in Alfred's ability to unite the broken kingdom of Wessex, as well as demoralizing the Viking invaders that adhered to these same cultural expectations under their own leaders. Analysis of additional literature from this period, including both *Beowulf* and Bede's *History*, illustrate this two-way relationship that existed between a king and his warriors: demonstrated both in the warrior's unyielding loyalty to his king through service in battle, and in return, the king's own obligation to provide security and a share in the spoils of war to his warriors for their service. The fact is that Alfred was not, at least initially, the great military commander that he was credited as being in the primary sources, and that he inherited his kingship as an unproven king during a time of uncertainty in Wessex. What mattered was his capacity to recognize the opportunity that was created after his retreat into the marshes of Somerset, and his ability to capitalize on shifts in morale by building a reputation worthy enough to gain his thegns' loyalty and unite his kingdom against the demoralized Viking army that was occupying Wessex.

### Part One:

#### The Warrior-King Culture of the Anglo-Saxon Age

The tribal relationship between king and warrior was originally brought into the British Isles with the Germanic conquerors of the fifth-century invasion.<sup>9</sup> This warrior-king relationship demanded that a king earn his position of power as the fiercest warrior among his tribe. Respect was not an inherited right, and obligations between king and warrior ran both ways. Just as the king demanded loyalty and service in battle, the warrior demanded protection and a share in the spoils of war. Aspects of this tribal relationship between king and warrior were still present in both the Anglo-Saxons of ninth-century Wessex and the great Viking hordes that were invading the kingdom.<sup>10</sup> The resulting influence from this Germanic warrior-king relationship was instrumental in the outcome of Alfred the Great's Viking Wars by setting expectations for both sides.

The Anglo-Saxon *thegn* was a fierce warrior who made up a large part of the fighting force in these early Anglo-Saxon war bands.<sup>11</sup> The term thegn, which originally meant "servant", came to

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<sup>8</sup> Abels and Peddie.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Translated by Leo Sherley-Price, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 62.

<sup>10</sup> See examples of this relationship in *Beowulf*. The exact origin of *Beowulf* is unknown, but it is likely Scandinavian based on the descriptions in the poem. It is possible that *Beowulf* was first recorded during Alfred the Great's reign, further demonstrating the importance that Alfred may have felt in emulating the kingly traits that are portrayed within this poem. What is made clear by the inclusion of awkward, and seemingly out-of-place Christian themes present throughout this poem, is that the first written account must have occurred sometime after the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity, but not so long after the conversion to diminish the importance of the Germanic warrior-king traditions which defined the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

<sup>11</sup> See Mark Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn AD 449-1066*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1993), F.

define a man who held a grant of land from a king or other powerful nobleman in exchange for his military service.<sup>12</sup> The Anglo-Saxon thegn believed largely in fate, and whether or not he would die in battle had already been pre-ordained. By fighting without fear and living by the warrior-code, a thegn felt he was not tempting fate, and if his death came in battle, he was comforted in knowing his fierce reputation would live on through his name.<sup>13</sup> Reputation and loyalty governed the way a thegn lived his life and dishonor through desertion meant a fate worse than death. The personal extent of a thegn's loyalty to his king meant that the death of his leader dissolved his obligation to continue fighting, and that allowing his king to die in battle meant the loss of his reputation through the ultimate mark of shame. In short, the king's death meant a meaningless existence for his surviving thegns.<sup>14</sup>

Further illustrating these expectations of the warrior-king relationship is the epic poem *Beowulf*. The poem follows the hero Beowulf as he destroys two monsters, the Grendel and its mother, in defense of Hrothgar, the king of the Danes. This interaction provides key principles within Germanic tradition that outline what the warrior-king relationship really was, and present ethical values which define loyalty between a king and his clan, as well as provide an example of the warrior-code in defense and vengeance which is owed to a great king. Hrothgar is only approached by Beowulf because he has a proven reputation as a great king as seen in the description of the long-hall he builds for his clan, just as Beowulf is only given the opportunity to battle the Grendel by the confidence Beowulf demonstrates in accepting this task, and by the confidence Hrothgar has in the reputation of Beowulf's proven family name.<sup>15</sup> Even as a great warrior, Beowulf is not regarded well in his native Geatland, and only by his actions against the Grendel and its mother is he proven as a leader among his own tribe, and only through the proclamation of Hygelac, the current King of the Geats, is Beowulf accepted by his people as next in the line of succession.<sup>16</sup>

Among the traits demonstrated throughout *Beowulf*, loyalty and reputation are of utmost importance. This is not demonstrated just by the warrior's loyalty and duty to his king, but by a two-way relationship in which a king must also earn a reputation through his own loyalty and duty to his warriors.<sup>17</sup> As Hrothgar exemplified by building a grand long-hall for his men, to share the spoils of war with his entire kingdom, the king's duty to his people for the services they provided was just as important to the warrior-king relationship as the warrior's service itself.<sup>18</sup> The warrior must maintain his reputation through loyalty to his king and his family. A warrior who failed their king was not often shown remorse, and usually lost all honor and standing from their king, comrades, and family. Likewise, a king who was not loyal to his men would soon scar his own reputation and lose those men to another king.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the *bersir* of a typical eighth and ninth-century Viking war-band followed many of the same cultural expectations of the Germanic warrior-king relationship that defined the kingdoms they were invading.<sup>20</sup> A *hersir* was usually a well-reputed, well-equipped member of a local family

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn AD 449-1066*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1993), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux Publishing, 2000), 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Heaney, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe 300-1500*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Heaney, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholson, 29.

<sup>20</sup> See Mark Harrison, *Viking Hersir 793-1066 AD*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1993), F.

that had earned his spot as the fiercest warrior among them. Reputation and loyalty in kinship created the foundation of the early Viking war-band, but by the ninth century, the distance formed between the raiding Viking hordes and their homeland created a need for non-blood relation loyalties as they became more dependent on each other.<sup>21</sup> The creation of these *artificial clans* resulted in a shift of Viking capabilities by vastly increasing the size of these armies with the merging of several clans under one established leader; proportionately increasing their destruction through their greatest strategic advantage - unconstrained violence.<sup>22</sup> The mobility of these large war-bands along with an unrestricted freedom to mercilessly kill and plunder foreign territory quickly created a need to shift from a mindset in destruction, towards one in the stabilization of conquered land.<sup>23</sup> This created a need for long-term commitment within these war-bands as they shifted into semi-professional armies, and eventually into colonizers during the latter part of the ninth century. However, their ability to make this shift rested solely in the hersir's ability to build his reputation and exemplify the same warrior-king relationship as portrayed by the Anglo-Saxon kings they were now replacing; as reputation was paramount for controlling a kingdom in both cultures.

However, the absence of religious similarities between these opposing forces meant vastly different mind-sets between the two. Although both the early thegn and hersir earned their place as leader through proven warrior abilities within their community, the introduction of Christianity within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms created social stabilization through a unified moral code, which eventually led to the development of nation-states; the hersir who lived in a society free from religious bounds had no such luxury. Various war-gods made up the extent of religious beliefs among the early Vikings, most notably Odin. However, unlike Christianity, which gave the thegns a sense of duty to protect their kingdom from pagan invaders, Viking gods were rather a symptom of war, not the driving motivation behind it.<sup>24</sup> This lack of a central authority through a unified religion within the Viking culture meant that the hersir's ability to stay in power revolved around three key traits: reputation, loyalty, and violence.

The arrival of Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was the defining aspect that separated these two cultures. Oral tradition transitioned into written record and the existing concept of *Metod*, meaning one's measure in the early Anglo-Saxon tribes, became used to define how fate and God had been intertwined after the conversion.<sup>25</sup> Christianity did, however, bring a new obligation for the thegn, that of the protector of the faith against pagan invaders. The church began to play an influential role in war at this point, and as war cries and battle songs transitioned into prayers and hymns, any reluctance in mercilessly slaying the enemy was overcome in its protection of Christ and the absolution of sin.<sup>26</sup>

Demonstrating this shift in cultural expectations of the warrior-king relationship within the Christian Anglo-Saxon kingdoms is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In his *History*, Bede seeks to unite Christian values and the Germanic warrior-king relationship to describe what makes a great king.<sup>27</sup> Alfred the Great is known to have admired Bede, and either translated Bede's *History*

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Harrison, *Viking Hersir 793-1066 AD*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1993), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Harrison, *Viking Hersir*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Bede focuses on the successful rule of three earlier Northumbrian kings to provide an ideal example of kingship; Edwin, Oswald, and Oswy, who owed their success as kings to two traits: their superiority in combat as proven military commanders, and by the intervention of God through their devout faith. By dedicating his work to King

himself, or had it commissioned during his own reign.<sup>28</sup> Alfred surely aimed to emulate the successful kings in Bede's *History*, and was so taken by their stories that he felt it must be translated so that the West Saxons could admire them as well.

A closer look at Bede's *History* reveals that he refers to each of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms by their people, rather than as a conquered territory. Bede was clearly aware of the location of these kingdoms in his writing, the Mercians, the East Angles, etc., and by referring to these kingdoms by their people, rather than as a territory, he is acknowledging that it was the relationships present between the Anglo-Saxon king of each kingdom and his people that defined the kingdom itself, not that it was just merely a conquered territory.<sup>29</sup> This emphasis by Bede shows that this Anglo-Saxon kingship resembled more of the Germanic *kinship*, which is also found within *Beowulf*, and was based on a people acknowledging their king, rather than the earlier Roman system of involuntary territorial governance.<sup>30</sup> Just as in the epic poem *Beowulf*, the relationship between a king and his people revolved around a responsibility to each other through specific obligations, and a failure in this two-way relationship usually resulted in disaster.<sup>31</sup>

The turn of the eighth century saw further change in this warrior-king relationship. As the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became more developed, the distribution of earlier land grants to established thegns evolved from a personal matter between king and warrior, into an inherited right that passed down to kin, creating the hereditary nobleman that came to define much of medieval Europe.<sup>32</sup> These provincial thegns seemed to have lost their personal obligation of attendance to the king as they shifted from bodyguard to nobleman. However, the thegn came to define the capabilities and organization of each kingdom's military as they served as high ranking officers and as the backbone of the armies they provided at the request of the king.<sup>33</sup> By the mid ninth-century, evidence of this elevation in status can be found in Wessex charters which regularly included names of the main body of king's thegns.<sup>34</sup> The thegn's status still lacked any real authority within the kingdom, but it signified a personal relationship between the thegn and his responsibility to serve the king, including his responsibility to answer a call to war, as well as outline his own personal advantage of being under the king's protection in exchange for this service.

Remnants of the old warrior-king culture still proved instrumental within these later ninth-century relationships during the Viking Wars. For example, a Viking hersir must maintain this same relationship with his warriors or risk losing his men to another commander. Likewise, an Anglo-Saxon thegn would respond more quickly and have more confidence if the king had proven himself a capable leader, whether through a shared experience in battle or by creating a reputation as a strong military leader. An unproven king might find himself without the loyalty of his warriors in a time of war if he had not yet proven that he could offer them the benefits of this relationship.<sup>35</sup> By

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Ceolwulf of Northumbria in 731, Bede demonstrated how important he felt it was that Ceolwulf exemplified these kingly traits if he were to become a successful Anglo-Saxon king.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great: The King and His England*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 153-154.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Higham, 140.

<sup>31</sup> See Bede's description of Cadwalla's reign in 633.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>34</sup> Pratt, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998), 139-140.

these later centuries, even with the introduction of hereditary succession within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Germanic warrior-king relationship remained a cornerstone for the success of Anglo-Saxon kings, and by the ninth-century, as seen in Alfred's succession in 871, simply inheriting the kingship was not enough to earn the respect of the West Saxons.

## Part Two:

### The Unproven King: Why King Alfred Lacked the Support of His Own Kingdom

The first recorded meeting between the Scandinavian Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons kingdoms occurred in 793 at Lindisfarne, Northumbria and is described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: “the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-island, by rapine and slaughter.”<sup>36</sup> The early ninth century saw an almost four decade long gap in full scale Viking invasions, but the reoccurrence of raiding in the 830s marked an ensuing onslaught that would only progressively increase in frequency over time as the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms found themselves outmatched by these Viking hordes.<sup>37</sup> As the frequency in these raids increased, the Viking armies began to stay, first in winter camps, then settling the land they had taken from the Anglo-Saxons. The invasion of the Great Heathen Army in 865 marked the beginning of the end for many Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and by 871 parts of Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia had fallen and were already being settled by the Viking conquerors; leading Wessex towards a period of desperate uncertainty as the Vikings set their sights on the last unconquered Anglo-Saxon kingdom.<sup>38</sup>

The year 871 marks one of the most important years for the kingdom of Wessex with two momentous shifts in the political landscape of the Viking Wars with the introduction of new leaders on each side: Alfred of Wessex and Guthrum, the Viking hersir of the Great Summer Army. The year also marked the beginning of Wessex's downfall as the Great Heathen Army that had ravaged other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for the past six years finally established a foothold within the kingdom.<sup>39</sup> A major victory for Wessex under King Æthelred at Ashdown against Halfdan and his Great Heathen Army was a hopeful shift against a dominant Viking force, but losses at Reading and Basing later that year offset any confidence on the side of the Anglo-Saxons. A third loss, this time at Meretun, marked the start of Wessex's downward shift towards Viking conquest.<sup>40</sup> King Æthelred died soon after this defeat at Meretun, most likely due to injuries he suffered in battle. Æthelred's death marked the first of the two political shifts, as his younger brother, Alfred, succeeded to the throne on Easter of 871 and was now in command of a kingdom that had already been defeated.<sup>41</sup>

Only adding to Alfred's untimely succession as king after his brother Æthelred's death was the fact that the kingship was not exactly his to take. Æthelred had two sons, Æthelhelm and Æthelwold, who at the time of their father's death were too young to command a war-torn Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Although his succession was probably not initially contested because of their age, Asser's claim that Alfred “could easily have taken the kingdom over with the consent of all while his brother Æthelred was alive” is unlikely.<sup>42</sup> Up to this point, Alfred had only successfully commanded

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<sup>36</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Translated by Rev. James Ingram and J.A. Giles, (London: Pantianos Classics, 2017), 39.

<sup>37</sup> D.J.V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age, c. 400-1042*, (London: Longman, 1973), 218.

<sup>38</sup> Fisher, 218

<sup>39</sup> Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isle, 850-880*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 240.

<sup>40</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Asser, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, Translated by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 80.

troops once in his military career, and that was while under the command of his brother, King Æthelred, in his victory at Ashdown.<sup>43</sup> Alfred suffered three other defeats prior to being named king and had hardly won the hearts and minds of the people of Wessex in this single skirmish at Ashdown.<sup>44</sup> Even after Alfred's death in 899, his son Edward's succession was challenged by one of Æthelred's son, Æthelwold; a far stretch for a king who apparently took his throne "with the approval of divine will and according to the unanimous decision of all the inhabitants of the kingdom," according to Asser.<sup>45</sup>

To make matters worse for Alfred, he was not, at least initially, the proven warrior leader portrayed in both *Beowulf* and Bede's *History* that the Anglo-Saxon culture demanded from their king. Because Alfred was the youngest of five boys, it is doubtful that he was intended for kingship and much more plausible that he was intended for a monastic or clerical career. Asser's *Life* describes an enthusiastic boy who devoutly prayed, memorized psalms, and even developed a life-long love of reading through the encouragement of his mother.<sup>46</sup> It is likely that Asser exaggerates certain stories regarding Alfred's pre-ordained right to the throne, most-notably in his description of Pope Leo IV anointing Alfred as king during his visit to Rome when Alfred was only thirteen.<sup>47</sup> It should also be mentioned that Asser does not mention a single warrior-like trait in Alfred prior to 871, a noteworthy fact in an age that idolized the warrior-kings of *Beowulf* and Bede's *History*, and only further solidifies the assumption that Alfred had not been raised to become king.

The demand of balancing the warrior-elite lifestyle, most particularly violence, with the moral obligations associated with being a devout Christian, a relationship argued throughout the entirety of Bede's *History*, were especially emphasized for secular nobility and may have been unbearable to Alfred.<sup>48</sup> Chiefly among Alfred's own moral struggles was his fear of being unable to restrain from acting on his own sexual urges, even praying for God to afflict him with disease to strengthen his own resolve, as described in Asser's *Life*.<sup>49</sup> Although probably just a trope of morality used by Asser to elevate Alfred's devoutness, this description does provide evidence for Alfred's poor health starting in his young adult life and spanning until his later years: most likely from piles and Crohn's disease, according to Higham.<sup>50</sup> Alfred's portrayal as a sickly king was most certainly known among his thegns and did not exactly fit the warrior-king standards set by the Anglo-Saxon culture, and thus further illustrates the struggles of this unexpected king.

Within a month after taking the throne in 871, King Alfred encountered a new force at Wilton: the second political shift had arrived, but this time on the side of the Danes. Guthrum and his Great Summer Army arrived around the time of Æthelred's death in 871 and reinforced the depleted Viking army prior to Alfred's encounter at Wilton. Alfred's Wessex army, on the other hand, was exhausted, short-handed, and tired from widespread battle under Alfred's brother. Alfred's army was made up of several fyrds from the area. These fyrds were small local bands of men controlled by provincial thegns throughout Wessex.<sup>51</sup> The problem with the military logistics of calling a fyrd's force into battle in ninth-century Wessex was time and space; both in how long it took to send word of a new conflict across the kingdom, as well the time it took each fyrd to

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<sup>43</sup> Abels, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Higham, 264-265.

<sup>45</sup> Asser, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Asser, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Asser, 69-76.

<sup>48</sup> Higham, 265.

<sup>49</sup> Asser, 89.

<sup>50</sup> Higham, 265.

<sup>51</sup> Abels, 137-138.



organize and answer the king's call. The other issue Alfred faced is that even if he was able to create the time to allow reinforcements to arrive, this new political institution, under an unproven leader, in a kingdom with a crushed morale, that was losing ground daily against a refreshed Viking horde, meant that Alfred did not have the political persuasion to muster such reinforcements even if he had tried. The Anglo-Saxon thegn would only readily respond to a king with whom they had shared the glory and spoils of battle, and Alfred was not yet this king. The result was that Alfred was limited to using men from nearby shires against a Viking force that was consistently larger than his own. Rather than fighting a war of military strategy and tactics, Alfred was fighting a war of attrition as the morale and size of his army dwindled with each ensuing conflict at Wilton.<sup>52</sup> Asser's *Life* describes Alfred's loss at Wilton:

...he fought most vigorously, with a few men who were easily outnumbered against the entire Viking army at a hill called Wilton. When both sides had been fighting violently and resolutely on both fronts for much of the day, the Vikings realized of their own accord the complete danger they were in, and unable to bear the onslaught of their enemies any longer, they turned tail and fled. But alas, scorning the small number of pursuers, they advanced again into battle, and seizing victory they were masters of the battlefield.<sup>53</sup>

Asser's use of the word "entire" is his first implication that Alfred was not only facing the Great Heathen Army from his brother's wars, but that it had combined with the Great Summer Army that invaded in 871. Also, upon further analysis, the implications behind the Wessex pursuit of the Viking army implies how little control Alfred must have had over his army at Wilton. Although the Anglo-Saxon warrior-king model of leadership portrayed the leader in the front lines fighting alongside his men, a great-minded tactician must be in complete control of his entire force and in a position to convey orders to maintain discipline among the ranks.<sup>54</sup> Whether Alfred thought the Vikings to be in retreat is unknown, but the fact that his outnumbered force followed in unorganized pursuit after the Vikings can only be explained in two ways: an unsound strategic decision by Alfred in the heat of battle, or an undisciplined force that took it upon their own accord to pursue an enemy they mistakenly thought defeated. Regardless of the true reason behind the pursuit, Alfred's army was defeated at Wilton and he was forced to pay the Viking *hersir* Halfdan the same Danegeld to remain in power as all the other Anglo-Saxon kings which had fallen before him.

Alfred's payment bought Wessex five more years of peace but did not offer Alfred any additional respect from his kingdom. With the Viking's focus turned back on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the north, Alfred focused on restoring the broken West Saxons. His actions during this brief period of peace are obscure, but scholars agree that he turned towards strengthening the economy through restoring the silver content in coinage and attempted to secure more support from the elite thegns through land grants.<sup>55</sup> Despite his attempts at strengthening Wessex and his own reputation, when Guthrum returned in 876 the kingdom seemed entirely unprepared. For nearly two years, Guthrum's army raided across Wessex and briefly took refuge against Alfred's forces in sieges at both Wareham and Exeter. Both sieges ended in a stalemate and holy oaths for peace until Guthrum finally left Wessex and returned to Mercia in 877 to collect tribute from the puppet king

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<sup>52</sup> Abels, 139-140

<sup>53</sup> Asser, 81.

<sup>54</sup> Abels, 138.

<sup>55</sup> Abels, 147.

Ceolwulf.<sup>56</sup> This peace was again short lived, and Guthrum returned to Wessex after the celebration of the Twelfth Night (January 6<sup>th</sup>) in 878.

Once again, Alfred demonstrated that he was the unproven king of Wessex as the Viking army ravaged across the countryside surrounding Alfred and his unprepared forces at his royal estate of Chippenham. This time Guthrum's motive was different. He was not looking for more oaths or bribes from the broken King of Wessex: he desired conquest. Guthrum exposed Alfred once again as his forces brought devastation upon the nearby areas of Wiltshire, Somerset, and Hampshire.<sup>57</sup> Alfred and a small band of his loyal supporters, most certainly less than one hundred men who were with him at Chippenham, were forced to flee into the marshes of Somerset to seek refuge from the onslaught.<sup>58</sup> The people of Wessex were now faced with a terrible decision: submit to the Viking ruler to keep their land and their lives or remain loyal to a king who had time and time again proven unable to protect his land or people and die. Many chose to submit to Guthrum, and thousands of others fled the country by sea as the Vikings rode down and destroyed anyone who failed to yield.<sup>59</sup> Guthrum's invasion had, in fact, been different this time. Not only had he expelled Alfred's remaining forces with the seizure of Chippenham, but he had utterly destroyed the morale of a kingdom by showing the remaining people of Wessex that their king was no greater than any other Anglo-Saxon king that had fallen before him: or was he?

### Part Three:

#### **Alfred the Raider: How King Alfred Restored the Morale of a Broken Kingdom**

The kingdom of Wessex was now under the control of the Viking hersir Guthrum and the direness of Alfred's circumstances in Wessex had never been worse than they were at this very moment. Alfred's reputation was that of a failed king, and he had proven incapable of providing his thegns with the protection demanded from the warrior-king relationship. Alfred now knew what it felt like to be alone as he found himself a fugitive in his own kingdom.<sup>60</sup> He had failed the people of Wessex for what seemed to be the last time with his loss at Chippenham and was now resorting to living off the land in his childhood hunting grounds within the marshes of Somerset along with a small band of warriors that had remained loyal to their king.<sup>61</sup>

However, Alfred had not fled into the marshes without making his resistance known as he battled in retreat against Guthrum's Summer Army.<sup>62</sup> Alfred made his decision; rather than fleeing his kingdom for the safety of Rome, or submitting to the Viking invaders as other Anglo-Saxon kings had done, Alfred chose to fight, and for the first several months, Alfred and his men simply survived.<sup>63</sup> Alfred's tactics had changed, and if he could not fight as a king within his own kingdom, he would survive as a raider against Viking patrols and the native West Saxons that had dishonored Alfred with their submission to Guthrum, which is described in Asser's *Life*:

At the same time King Alfred, with his small band of nobles and also with certain soldiers and thegns, was leading a restless life in great distress amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had

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<sup>56</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Abels, 152.

<sup>58</sup> Alf J. Mapp, *The Golden Dragon: Alfred the Great and His Times*, (New York: M. Evans and Company, 2014), 60.

<sup>59</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Mapp, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Abels, 155.

<sup>62</sup> Mapp, 61.

<sup>63</sup> Mapp, 60.

nothing to live on except what he could forage by frequent raids,  
either secretly or even openly, from the Vikings as well as from the  
Christians who had submitted to the Vikings' authority.<sup>64</sup>

As a devout Christian, this decision to raid nearby West Saxon settlements would have undoubtedly been troubling for Alfred, but as it was the choice of these West Saxons to dishonor their commitment to the king, Alfred's commitment to these men too was absolved, and his decision led to prolonging the survival of those that had remained loyal to his cause. Alfred had proven that he was, in fact, different from any other defeated Anglo-Saxon king. He had not abdicated his throne, and with this new opportunity that presented itself in his retreat to the marshes of Somerset, the roles were beginning to change in Wessex: as Alfred became the raider, and Guthrum became king of an army that was slowly losing morale against an unorthodox Anglo-Saxon opponent, the likes of which had never been seen before.

This Summer Army that defeated Alfred at Chippenham, although a decisive victor, was not the same Summer Army that had joined with the Great Heathen Army at Wilton seven years earlier. This Summer Army had lost two of its most crucial advantages during its absence from Wessex; both the overwhelming size of the army as well as the tribal cohesion that existed within its ranks had diminished as forces began settling throughout the conquered Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. In 875, Halfdan and the remainder of the Great Heathen Army separated from Guthrum's at Repton and must have greatly reduced the size of this combined force.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Viking colonization of Northumbria beginning in 876, as well as part of Guthrum's own force separating and settling in Mercia in 877, marked the beginning of the end for the existing Viking mentality of Guthrum's army.<sup>66</sup> Guthrum found himself under increased pressure to finally conquer Alfred's Wessex and find land for the rest of his men to settle if he was to remain in power. Alfred had already proven himself to these Viking invaders in 876 during their first invasion since Wilton, which ended with two stalemates at Exeter and Wareham, and their subsequent agreement to leave the kingdom once again. What must have felt like a never-ending cycle, Alfred's inexhaustible attempts to hold onto this last remaining Anglo-Saxon kingdom was crushing the morale of Guthrum's army. The Vikings of the Great Summer Army were now eager to settle land they had already conquered in East Anglia and Mercia, while their leader, who was slowly losing his own reputation among them, continued fighting this war in Wessex against an Anglo-Saxon king he could not defeat.

A shift in morale for the Anglo-Saxons throughout Wessex was quickly becoming apparent by Alfred's growing strength and reputation as support grew and West Saxons still loyal to the king joined him in the marshes. By Easter of 878, which fell on March 23<sup>rd</sup> that year, Alfred's following had grown so large that he was able to establish a small stronghold on the island of Athelney within the marshes of Somerset.<sup>67</sup> The area at Athelney was usually just a wet, densely forested area throughout most of the year, but flooding in early spring presented Alfred with a perfect defensive position for a makeshift stronghold.<sup>68</sup> Athelney was now just a small stretch of high ground, hardly two acres across, deep within the marshes and surround by natural fortifications, dense forest, and waist-high waters. A nearby network of Roman roads gave Alfred new logistical capabilities and the

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<sup>64</sup> Asser, 83.

<sup>65</sup> Smyth, 251.

<sup>66</sup> Smyth, 251.

<sup>67</sup> Abels, 156.

<sup>68</sup> Mapp, 61.

strategic, centralized position of Athelney provided an ideal base to conduct guerilla-style raiding against Guthrum's forces across the countryside surrounding the nearby Chippenham to the east.<sup>69</sup>

The psychological toll that Alfred's raiding had taken on Guthrum must have been unbearable for the Viking hersir. Just as Guthrum had practiced these same tactics against other Anglo-Saxon kings, including Alfred himself, the tables had turned, and Guthrum was all too familiar with the uncertainties and devastation that defined the guerilla tactics that were now being used against his own force. The purpose of Alfred's raiding was not only to supply his men with goods and to defeat the enemy, he now "struck out relentlessly and tirelessly against the Vikings" to crush the morale of this occupying force, and the reputation of their leader, who despite his own efforts, could do nothing to stop it.<sup>70</sup> Guthrum's unfamiliarity with the terrain in Wessex, when combined with the vast network of Roman roads and game trails that Alfred had access too, made any effort to contain Alfred within the marshes futile. Guthrum had undoubtedly received information on Alfred's whereabouts and most likely new his location at Athelney, but without access to water transport, the Viking hersir and his army had no hopes of defeating Alfred in the marshes. In fact, the high grounds adjacent to the Somerset marshes at Langport Hills would have made it possible for Viking scouts, or even Guthrum himself, to at least generally pinpoint Alfred's location in the low lying Athelney, further demoralizing the Vikings in their inability to defeat this last Anglo-Saxon king who was mocking them from his stronghold.<sup>71</sup>

Only adding to Guthrum's problems within Wessex was an Anglo-Saxon victory at Cynuit. Guthrum's only hope of receiving the reinforcements and water transport needed to defeat Alfred in the marshes came with another attack on the coast of Devon. Cynuit, lying west of Alfred's stronghold at Athelney, was an ideal position to create a pincer-type attack against Alfred when paired with Guthrum's forces to the east.<sup>72</sup> The Viking hersir Ubbe, who was brother to the more infamous Halfdan and Ivarr the Boneless, appeared off the northern coastline of Devon with 23 ships and an estimated 1,200 men.<sup>73</sup> His army was met by a small force led by one of Alfred's thegns, Obba, but the Anglo-Saxons were outmatched and were quickly pushed back into their stronghold at Cynuit. Ubbe's forces, certain of their inevitable victory, made camp with plans to begin a siege the next day. Now faced with only starvation or death, Obba and his men made one last effort and unexpectedly rushed from the gates of Cynuit at dawn and took Ubbe's force completely by surprise. Ubbe, along with 840 of his men were killed in the resulting onslaught according to Asser.<sup>74</sup>

Regardless of whether Ubbe's true motives were that of Guthrum's, or that he was simply taking advantage of the situation that Guthrum had created in Wessex, the result was the same.<sup>75</sup> Word of this Anglo-Saxon victory at Cynuit would spread throughout the kingdom like wildfire and spark a glimmer of hope within the hearts and minds of the West Saxons. Ubbe's defeat destroyed Guthrum's hopes of finally putting an end to Alfred's reign in Wessex, and his circumstances in this last Anglo-Saxon kingdom were made uncertain as a creeping thought was now brought to light in minds of the Vikings; the knowledge that the remaining fyrds in the unoccupied parts of Wessex had

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<sup>69</sup> Abels, 157.

<sup>70</sup> Asser, 84.

<sup>71</sup> Peddie, 122.

<sup>72</sup> Abels, 154.

<sup>73</sup> Asser, 84.

<sup>74</sup> Asser, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Abels, 154.

been lying dormant during the Viking occupancy, just waiting for a chance to answer the call of their king.<sup>76</sup>

#### **Part Four: The King's Call: A Reputation of Loyalty**

The time was now right for Alfred's response. Riding on his newfound reputation as a king that refused to give up, and the morale shift created from his successful raiding and the inspiring victory by Obba at Cynuit, Alfred sent out the call to his nearby fyrds so that every loyal thegn and his men would meet the king for battle against Guthrum and his army. Alfred had waited patiently in the marshes of Somerset knowing that his chance of success against Guthrum relied heavily on the size of his own army; a lesson he learned from his loss at Wilton. He must act quickly, as it seemed now, for the first time, Alfred had finally earned the loyalty of his kingdom. By prolonging action against the Vikings, Alfred would only diminish his chance of success as Guthrum responded to the situation. The victory at Cynuit can be credited to Obba's ability to surprise the enemy, and the morale of the men who chose to risk everything rather than die as cowards: two characteristics Alfred could also exploit in his current state as king of the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

The meeting place was set at Egbert's Stone on the seventh week after Easter in 878.<sup>77</sup> The exact location of Egbert's Stone is hotly debated, but Asser puts it on the eastern side of Selwood Forest, a strategic location between the fyrds at Somerset, Hampshire, and Wiltshire, which are also noted by Asser as having made up the majority of the force that answered Alfred's call.<sup>78</sup> The secrecy of Alfred's call and the loyalty it demonstrated between the king and his thegns is apparent by the mere fact that Guthrum and his army were not waiting for Alfred when he arrived, an assumption based solely on the time it took to fulfill the logistical request of calling these fyrds together. Asser describes the scene as the army waiting at Egbert's Stone is met by Alfred and his escort of raiders: "When they saw the king, receiving him (not surprisingly) as if one restored to life after suffering such great tribulations, they were filled with immense joy."<sup>79</sup> This is similar to the scene in *Beowulf* when the hero returns after defeating the "God-cursed" Grendel, a task that surely would have ended in his death, but against all odds, he had saved them.<sup>80</sup> Alfred too was greeted as their savior, their deliverer from evil, and in the case of these West Saxon thegns, their last hope at restoring a kingdom thought lost to Guthrum and his pagan Vikings. Alfred had finally earned his place as king of the West Saxons, and the morale shift in Wessex was now evident in the army amassed at Egbert's Stone.

Now greeted as a hero, and accepted by the kingdom of Wessex, Alfred wasted no time in transitioning for battle, as Guthrum's scouts had surely seen the nearby towns emptying of battle-abled men that were headed towards Egbert's Stone.<sup>81</sup> With time now in Guthrum's favor, Alfred took only one night to organize the present fyrds into one unified army before he marched north and made camp at Iley Oak, a strategic launching point for Alfred's next attack, planned to take place just ten kilometers away near Edington.<sup>82</sup> Iley Oak was set in a dense forest just south of the River Wylfe, providing Alfred's army with fresh water and a natural barrier between his and

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<sup>76</sup> Peddie, 123-124.

<sup>77</sup> Abels, 160-161.

<sup>78</sup> Asser, 84.

<sup>79</sup> Asser, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Heaney, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Peddie, 124.

<sup>82</sup> Abels, 161.

Guthrum's army, as well as provide cover from Viking scouts. By the time Alfred and his army crossed the River Wylfe the next day, Guthrum and his army were already waiting in formation at a fortified position known as Bratton Camp, just outside of Edington.<sup>83</sup> What followed would decide the fate of Wessex forever, as Alfred was finally prepared to make his last stand with what remained of the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and Guthrum had finally found himself with access to the ghost-king that had terrorized his forces from his hidden position in Athelney:

When the next morning dawned [Alfred] moved his forces and came to a place called Edington, and fighting fiercely with a compact shield-wall against the entire Viking army, he preserved resolutely for a long time; at length he gained the victory through God's will. He destroyed the Vikings with great slaughter, and pursued those who fled as far as the stronghold, hacking them down; he seized everything which he found outside the stronghold – men (whom he killed immediately), horses and cattle – and boldly made camp in front of the gates of the Viking stronghold with all his army.<sup>84</sup>

Alfred had finally proven himself, and not just through his perseverance in the marshes of Somerset, but through a decisive victory at Edington alongside his thegns as the warrior-king relationship demanded. Alfred had learned his lesson from previous engagements with Guthrum and his men. He could not leave this battle unfinished, and for two weeks, Alfred's army would mercilessly kill any Viking they encountered during the siege of the Viking stronghold at Chippenham.<sup>85</sup> Irresolution during his brother's reign and again during his own at Exeter and Wareham only brought future conflict from these Vikings; this time there would be no holy oaths for peace or an exchange of hostages, Guthrum would either submit to Alfred in total surrender, or die resisting.<sup>86</sup>

Guthrum's Great Summer Army was now facing starvation after two weeks under the siege of Alfred. With no other option, Guthrum finally surrendered under Alfred's terms; he must surrender as many men to Alfred as the King of Wessex demanded, accept Christ and be baptized along with his most valued warriors, and finally, leave Wessex forever.<sup>87</sup> Alfred's terms did not lack originality, as he was the first Anglo-Saxon king to force the conversion of a ninth-century Viking; certainly building his own reputation among his thegns who saw themselves as defenders of the faith. Alfred sought to ensure that Guthrum's conversion was lasting and legitimate, an idea he surely picked up while reading Bede's *History*.<sup>88</sup> After spending three weeks in Alfred's court at Aller, near the island of Athelney, Guthrum and thirty of his most loyal men were baptized in the name of Christ.<sup>89</sup> Guthrum himself was baptized by Alfred's hand, who then adopted the Viking as his own God-son and gave him the Christian name of Æthelstan, a name Guthrum came to cherish as evident by his use of it in the minting of later East-Anglican coinage.<sup>90</sup> Alfred had successfully proven his dominance and created a lasting bond between himself and Guthrum, who under

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<sup>83</sup> Abels, 161.

<sup>84</sup> Asser, 84-85.

<sup>85</sup> Asser, 85.

<sup>86</sup> Abels, 162.

<sup>87</sup> Asser, 85.

<sup>88</sup> Bede emphasizes the greatness of Northumbrian kings who played crucial roles in the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity. See Bede's description of King Edwin's role in the conversion of King Eorpwald of East Anglia in 627.

<sup>89</sup> Asser, 85.

<sup>90</sup> Abels, 166.

Alfred's guidance, returned to the Viking-conquered East Anglia with his remaining men as a member of the Anglo-Saxon political community, as Æthelstan, King of the East Angles.<sup>91</sup>

Alfred's Wessex was now united under a proven king and, at least for a time, rid of the Viking invaders that had been terrorizing the kingdom for the past thirteen years. With his kingdom and reputation now secured, Alfred turned towards his own obligation to his people by strengthening Wessex through major military and educational reforms. Alfred began by addressing the issues associated with the current *fyrð* system in Wessex by splitting his Army into two forces. By keeping one-half of his army active at all times, Alfred would no longer need to wait on the logistical disadvantages of calling an army into duty from an inactive status.<sup>92</sup> Alfred also established a network of fortified positions across Wessex called *burhs*, which provided his standing army with strategically placed, defendable positions in preparation for future attacks, a system put to the test in 892 with the arrival of another Viking invasion.<sup>93</sup> Secondly, Alfred understood the importance of education and initiated a major educational reform in Wessex. Most notably, was the decades long commission for the translation of texts from Latin to the native Anglo-Saxon language, Old English, including Bede's *History*, to create a diffusion of Christian knowledge throughout the Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>94</sup> The reputation he built during the Viking Wars as a military leader, as well as his peacetime reforms after 878, would be recorded and spread throughout his kingdom.<sup>95</sup> Alfred died of natural causes in 899 after creating the foundation for the future of England, eventually earning him the title "the Great", as the first king of the Anglo-Saxons, an honor that had never been bestowed upon a king before Alfred, nor ever since.

### Conclusion

The future of both Alfred's Wessex, and the survival of the Anglo-Saxon culture in England, rested in this king's ability to prove himself worthy of his thegn's loyalty. Alfred began his journey as the unproven king of Wessex, a kingdom already on the verge of defeat by the Viking raiders when he succeeded in 871. His situation progressively worsened over the next seven years, starting with his loss at Wilton, just one month after becoming king. Despite this period being portrayed in *Life* and *Chronicle* as a period of confidence for the king, further examination of these primary sources reveals that he was anything but successful in these early years. However, recent analysis by modern scholars has attempted to discredit this idea of a well-loved king and instead focuses on identifying other factors that may be responsible for his victory in 878.

The research in this thesis is significant in developing future arguments surrounding the underlying cultural and traditional factors that influenced the outcome of the wars throughout history. These concepts surrounding morale and reputation seem to be overlooked for the more exciting stories of blood and gore that overshadow the success and failures attributed to the decisions of great military minds. In the case of Alfred the Great, his achievements as one of these great military minds did not begin until nearly seven years after he became king, and the triumphs and failures of his earlier reign find their roots in the influence of the Germanic warrior-king relationship that still defined ninth-century Wessex.

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<sup>91</sup> Abels, 165.

<sup>92</sup> Higham, 268.

<sup>93</sup> Higham, 267.

<sup>94</sup> Higham, 268.

<sup>95</sup> Most notably, the creation and distribution of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* by Alfred's court as propaganda for Wessex; likely as a response to a third Viking invasion occurring in 892.

The Germanic warrior-king relationship, defined by loyalty, duty, service, honor, and reputation, is represented in both *Beowulf* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This two-way relationship between king and warrior was a crucial aspect of both the Anglo-Saxon and Viking cultures of the ninth-century Viking Wars, and was necessary in creating the morale shift that occurred between the two opposing armies in 878. In truth, Alfred the Great was not the *Great* king of Wessex during the first seven years of his reign. The transformation of Alfred's success in Wessex, as well as the creation of his lasting legacy as the greatest king of England, is owed both to his capacity to recognize the beginning of the morale shift occurring in his kingdom after his retreat from Chippenham in 878, and his ability to build a reputation worthy enough to gain his thegns' loyalty and unite the kingdom of Wessex against Guthrum's demoralized army at Edington.

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