



SECTION 2. THE AGE OF TORT: ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

A. MAP, CHRONOLOGY AND SHORT DOCUMENTS

CHRONOLOGY

Main Periods:

450?–600 — The invasions to Aethelbert

600–835 — The Heptarchy (overlordships moving from Northumbria to Mercia to Wessex)

(793) 835–865–924 — The Danish invasions

924–1066 — The Kingdom of England

Kings of Wessex and All England:

Alfred — 871–899

Edward the Elder — 899–924 (reconquers Danelaw)

Aethelstan — 924–939 | recovery, loss and

Edmund — 939–946 | recovery of the north

Edgar — 957 (Mercia and North), 959 (All England)–975

Aethelred the Unready — 978 or 979–1016

Cnut — 1016–1035

Edward the Confessor — 1042–1066

SHORT DOCUMENTS

THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH

from Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.15,

in *English Historical Documents* [=EHD],

2d ed., I, D. Whitelock ed. (London, 1979), p. 646[†]

They came from three very powerful nations of the Germans, namely the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes. From the stock of the Jutes are the people of Kent and the people of Wight, that is, the race which holds the Isle of Wight, and that which in the province of the West Saxons is to this day called the nation of the Jutes, situated opposite that same Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, from the region which now is called that of the Old Saxons, came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, the West Saxons. Further, from the Angles, that is, from the country which is called *Angulus*¹ and which from that time until today is said to have remained deserted between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are sprung the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, the whole race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those peoples who dwell north of the River Humber, and the other peoples of the Angles. Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, of whom Horsa was afterwards killed by the Britons in battle, and has still in the eastern parts of Kent a monument inscribed with his name. They were the sons of Wihtgils, the son of Witta, the son of Wecta, the son of Woden, from whose stock the royal race of many provinces trace their descent.

[†] © 1979 Eyre Methuen Ltd

¹ Angeln in Schleswig.

THE CONVERSION OF EDWIN BY PAULINUS

from Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.13,
in EHD I, p. 671-2

When the king had heard these words, he replied that he was both willing and bound to receive the faith which he taught. Still, he said that he would confer about it with his loyal chief men and counsellors, so that if they also were of his opinion they might all be consecrated to Christ together in the font of life. And with Paulinus's assent, he did as he had said. For, holding a council with his wise men, he asked of each in turn what he thought of this doctrine, previously unknown, and of this new worship of God, which was preached.

The chief of his priests, Coifi, at once replied to him: "See, king, what manner of thing this is which is now preached to us; for I most surely admit to you, what I have learnt beyond a doubt, that the religion which we have held up till now has no power at all and no use. For none of your followers has applied himself to the worship of our gods more zealously than I; and nevertheless there are many who receive from you more ample gifts and greater honours than I, and prosper more in all things which they plan to do or get. But if the gods were of any avail, they would rather help me, who have been careful to serve them more devotedly. It remains, therefore, that if on examination you find these new things, which are now preached to us, better and more efficacious, we should hasten to receive them without any delay."

Another of the king's chief men, assenting to his persuasive and prudent words, immediately added: "Thus, O king, the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, appears to me to be as if, when you are sitting at supper with your ealdormen and thegns in the winter-time, and a fire is lighted in the midst and the hall warmed, but everywhere outside the storms of wintry rain and snow are raging, a sparrow should come and fly rapidly through the hall, coming in at one door, and immediately out at the other. Whilst it is inside, it is not touched by the storm of winter, but yet, that tiny space of calm gone in a moment, from winter at once returning to winter, it is lost to your sight. Thus this life of men appears for a little while; but of what is to follow, or of what went before, we are entirely ignorant. Hence, if this new teaching brings greater certainty, it seems fit to be followed." The rest of the nobles and king's counsellors, by divine inspiration, spoke to the same effect.

THE BATTLE OF "BRUNANBURH"

from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A Text, a° 937,
in *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*,
F.G. Cassidy and R.N. Ringler ed., 3d ed. (New York, 1971), p. 163[†]

Hēr Æþelstān cyning, eorla dryhten,
beorna bēahgifa, ond his brōþor ēac,
Ēadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tīr
geslōgon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brūnanburh. Bordweal clufan,
hēowan heapolinde hamora lāfan
afaran Ēadweardes, swā him geæþele wæs
from cnēomægum, þæt hī æt campe oft
wiþ lāþra gehwæne land ealgodon
hord ond hāmas.

(In this year King Athelstan, lord of earls / ring-giver of warriors, and his brother also, / Edmund atheling, undying glory / won by sword's edge in battle / around "Brunanburh." Shield-wall they cleaved, / hewed war-linden [linden bucklers] with hammers' leavings [hammered blades], / offspring of Edward, as was inborn to them / from their ancestry, that they at battle oft / with each enemy defend their land, / hoard and homes.)

[†] Copyright © 1971 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

THE CORONATION OATH OF EDGAR (975 OR 978)

from Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen* 1:214–15,
 in C. Stephenson & S. Marcham, *Sources of English Constitutional History* [=S&M],
 rev. ed. (New York, 1972) 1:18 (No. 10) (the original is in Anglo-Saxon)[†]

This writing has been copied, letter by letter, from the writing which Archbishop Dunstan gave our lord at Kingston on the day that he was consecrated as king, forbidding him to make any promise save this, which at the bishop's bidding he laid on Christ's altar:—

In the name of the Holy Trinity, I promise three things to the Christian people of my subjects: first that God's Church and all Christian people of my realm shall enjoy true peace; second, that I forbid to all ranks of men robbery and wrongful deeds; third that I urge and command justice and mercy in all judgments, so that the gracious and compassionate God who lives and reigns may grant us all His everlasting mercy.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF AETHELBERHT

from Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.5,
 in EHD I, p. 663–4 [some footnotes omitted]

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 616, which is the 21st year after Augustine with his companions was sent to preach to the nation of the English, Ethelbert, king of the people of Kent, after his temporal kingdom which he had held most gloriously for 56 years, entered into the eternal joys of the heavenly kingdom. He was indeed the third of the kings in the nation of the English to hold dominion over all their southern provinces, which are divided from the northern by the River Humber and the boundaries adjoining it; but the first of them all to ascend to the heavenly kingdom. For the first who had sovereignty² of this kind was Ælle, king of the South Saxons [477–91]; the second Caelin, king of the West Saxons [560–90], who in their language is called Ceawlin; the third, as we have said, Ethelbert, king of the people of Kent [560–616]; the fourth, Rædwald, king of the East Angles [c.600–616 X 627], who, even while Ethelbert was alive, had been obtaining the leadership for his own race; the fifth, Edwin, king of the nation of the Northumbrians [616–33], that is, of that nation which dwells on the north side of the River Humber, ruled with greater power over all the peoples who inhabit Britain, the English and Britons as well, except only the people of Kent, and he also reduced under English rule the Mevanian islands³ of the Britons, which lie between Ireland and Britain; the sixth, Oswald, also a most Christian king of the Northumbrians [Saint Oswald, 634–42], held a kingdom with these same bounds; the seventh, his brother Oswiu, governing for some time a kingdom of almost the same limits [655–70], also subdued for the most part and made tributary the nations of the Picts and Scots, who hold the northern parts of Britain. But of this hereafter.

King Ethelbert died on 24 February, 21 years after receiving the faith, and was buried in the chapel of St Martin within the church of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, where also Queen Berhta lies buried. Among the other benefits which in his care for his people he conferred on them, he also established for them with the advice of his councillors judicial decrees after the example of the Romans, which, written in the English language, are preserved to this day and observed by them;⁴ in which he first laid down how he who should steal any of the property of the Church, of the bishop, or of other orders, ought to make amends for it, desiring to give protection to those whom, along with their teaching, he had received.

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² *Imperium*.

³ Man and Anglesey.

⁴ [See below, Sec. 2C. Ed.]

B. ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND, 450–800

in B. LYON, *A CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND* 2d ed. (New York, 1980) 19–26[†]

FORTUNATELY a study of early English institutions requires no detailed account of political history. This statement should relieve those who have attempted to guide themselves through the maze of archaeological, linguistic, and written evidence, the price for understanding the early English settlements, or those who have floundered amidst the lists of kings of the so-called Heptarchy. All that is needed in the way of a background for understanding the growth of English institutions is a sketch of the most significant historical movements between the arrival of the Saxons in the middle of the fifth century and the death of the last Saxon king Harold at Hastings in 1066.

Why did the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes come to Britain? Because, so scholars tell us, the weakness of the Roman Empire enabled them to occupy its provinces, because piratical raids had shown Britain to be a more agreeable and rich land than northern Germany, and because, being overpopulated, they were land-hungry. To these causes we could also add daring and adventure. Although these answers are basically correct, we are still left wondering why these particular Germans turned north across the sea rather than south towards Rome and why their migration began in full force about the middle of the fifth century. Geographic location is largely responsible for the fortunes of these peoples. In looking at a map of fifth-century Europe one discovers that the three principal Germanic invaders of Britain lived along the North Sea coast from Denmark to the mouth of the River Meuse, with scattered groups of Saxons extending as far south as Boulogne in northeast Gaul. The Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Salian Franks, located in what is now Belgium, were the tribes closest to Britain. On looking further one observes that the Saxons to the south along the coast of maritime Flanders and north-eastern Gaul were between the Franks and the Channel. In fact all the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes to the north were hemmed in lower Germany by such tribes as the Salian and Riparian Franks, Thuringians, Sueves, and Burgundians who lived to the south. Such was the position of these tribes after almost four centuries of movement. Blocked by these larger and better organized tribes, the invaders of Britain had no choice but to turn across the sea. Centuries of experience had made them skilled and fearless sailors; in deed the word “Saxon” had become a synonym for pirate. Since the third century they had conducted raids against Britain and were consequently familiar with its topography and defenses. When Roman government and military defense completely cracked during the early fifth century, only the Roman masters and Celts remained to resist invasion. Within twenty years raids had turned into settlement, first by small bands, and then by constantly swelling numbers. The end of effective defense constituted an invitation to conquest.

But we must still determine why such large numbers moved into Britain during the second half of the fifth century. Ferdinand Lot has often warned us against overestimating the numbers of Germans that came over the imperial frontier between the fourth and sixth centuries and has effectively argued that Germany was not overpopulated. In general his conclusion is valid. Referring again to the map, however, we can see that unlike the other tribes, who had room to maneuver, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were cooped up in a small area. It is quite possible that in 450–451 when Attila with his army of Huns and subject Germans moved northwestward from Rumania and Hungary across Germany and into northern Gaul he may have pushed these people farther against the coast. Certainly the sack of such towns as Troyes and Metz proves the proximity of the Huns to the Franks and neighboring tribes, who may have adjusted their location northward to escape the horde of Attila. There must be some connection between the *adventus Saxonum* of 450 in Britain and the continental events of 450–451. Such a movement cannot have failed to cause, at least temporarily, displacement of some tribes. Crowded into an even smaller area, the Saxons and their neighbors reacted as one would expect; they manned their boats and sailed to a prostrate Britain.

But this argument cannot be pressed too far. Other than human forces may also have been at work. A combination of archaeological work and some exacting study in physical geography by German, Dutch, and Belgian scholars has established that the coast of northern Germany and the Low Countries began to change

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radically in the fourth century. Following a cycle shown by geologists to have been in operation for millennia, the coastal areas began to sink under the rising waters of the North Sea. Low even in normal times and cut through by numerous rivers such as the Elbe, Weser, Ems, Ijssel, Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt, this northwestern section seems to have been more severely affected than other parts of northern Europe. Reaching a peak in the fifth century, the high waters remained at an abnormal level at least to the tenth century. New rivers, gulfs, and bays were created; one of these was the Zuider Zee. How many thousand square miles of land and marsh were inundated no one will ever know. No attempt was made to go back into this area and reclaim it from the sea until the eleventh century. The artificial mounds (*Terpen*) thrown up out of the marshes were not large enough for the people to live on, and even most of them were submerged. And as they never could have provided more than a living space, the problem of obtaining food must have been acute. Only one course was open—large-scale evacuation, either farther inland or to the sea. It was to the sea that these people turned from their desolate sodden homes. Though we must again beware of overemphasizing this evidence as a cause for migration, there is no doubt that as research in physical geography continues it will more fully confirm the inundation of the coasts of northern Germany as a major reason for the journey of the Saxons to Britain.

1. THE ANGLO-SAXON CONQUEST (454–600)

Having suggested the reasons for the coming of the Germans to Britain we may now proceed with the main events of the settlement. We have seen that in the first half of the fifth century a local Celtic leader, Vortigern, established his authority over much of Britain and, while engaged in fighting the Picts and Scots from the north, arranged to settle some German war bands in the south in return for their assistance. It was then, some time around 450, that the Saxon or Jutish chieftains Hengist and Horsa with three boatloads of followers established a beachhead. Other Germans poured in under similar arrangements. Legend has it that Vortigern lost his head over the ravishingly beautiful daughter of Hengist and offered the chieftain all Kent in return for the hand of his daughter. We read of the arrival of sixteen and then forty ships of Germans. Hereafter the events are muddled. Vortigern temporarily lost his power to a son, who attempted to drive out the Germans. When the son died suddenly, Vortigern came back to power, and so did the Germans, who continued to take over more land. Then Vortigern fell again from power and disappeared from history. As the area around Kent fell to the Germans similar events were occurring throughout southeastern Britain. Various chieftains and their bands continued to consolidate their gains and win new ground until defeated by the Britons under their leader Ambrosius Aurelianus some time between 490 and 516 at the Battle of Mount Badon, a site on the upper Thames. With this battle and other heroic Celtic resistance to the German advance, legend has connected the mythical Arthur. This battle ended the first stage of the Germans' conquest. For a time their expansion ceased, we hear of no raiding war bands probing deeper inland, and they seem to have established themselves around the coast and streams of Kent, Essex, Sussex, Surrey, Middlesex, and Hampshire in southeastern Britain. During this peaceful interval, extending to the second quarter of the sixth century, the leading chieftains installed their families as dynasties in the small states that developed.

Expanding our investigation to other parts of Britain, we find that the river systems of the Wash and the Thames facilitated the conquest of the eastern Midlands and the southwestern region. Entering East Anglia, various Angle bands then carved it up into small states. This particularism remained until the first quarter of the seventh century when a powerful chief, Redwald, called a Bretwalda by Bede, established his overlordship over the other petty states to form the temporary kingdom of East Anglia. Meanwhile other Angles went west into the central Midlands, where they teamed up with more Angles who were working their way down from the Humber and the River Trent. How this large area called Mercia was settled and divided by these bands, our pitifully scant sources do not say. The best we can do is to imagine a period of consolidation in the sixth century like that in southeastern Britain. Not until 626 do we hear of Penda, the first historical king of Mercia.

There is as yet no agreement on the principal route of the Saxons into southwestern Britain. Archaeological and written evidence suggests three possible routes, two by water and one by land. Arguing that Saxon remains at Dorchester on the upper Thames were already extensive by the year 500, some archaeologists envisage the Saxons landing in East Anglia and following the Wash River inland as far as

Cambridge. From there they went over land towards the Thames, concentrating at Dorchester for further expansion to the west and south. Other scholars see the Thames as the more logical route. The narrative sources relate that two Saxon chiefs, Cerdic and Cynric, landed in 495 near Southampton and fought their way inland through Hampshire and Wiltshire towards the upper Thames. There is no reason why the Saxons could not have used all three routes, converging finally in the region of Dorchester. In the last half of the sixth century Cerdic's successors succeeded in establishing their hegemony over the other Saxon groups and initiated unity among bands that had been mere raiders and pillagers. During his reign (560–591) the ambitious Ceawlin not only strengthened his rule in this region but established the Saxons as far west as Bath and as far east as to include Surrey in his Bretwaldship. It was the Saxon conquest of Surrey that blocked the drive of King Ethelbert of Kent in this direction. Like other early overlords this West Saxon one forged from Dorchester collapsed. A shift of power brought the Mercians south to the upper Thames in the seventh century. By 661 they had conquered Dorchester; henceforth the West Saxons concentrated their power at their new capital of Winchester to the south. From there the more powerful kingdom of Wessex was to emerge.

The Anglo-Saxons never conquered Wales, which stubborn Celtic resistance saved, or Scotland, which remained to the fierce Picts and Scots, but they did settle in Britain north of the Humber, in the area that Bede called Northumbria. As with Mercia, our evidence for the early period of settlement is meager. It is clear, however, that as with northern Mercia the Humber and its tributaries radiating off to the south and north served as a base for the Angles who conquered this northern land. The kingdom of Northumbria was derived from two settlements. The southern half called Deira, located between the Humber in the south and the Tees River in the north, was occupied by Angles coming in by sea during the fifth century. The poorer half, Bernicia, stretching from the Tees River north to the Firth of Forth, was not settled by Angles until 547 when the leader Ida and his followers fought their way in from the east coast. The bands fanned out from two points of concentration, the Tyne and Tweed rivers. Scholars formerly concluded that the Angles had come directly by sea from the Continent. Other opinion held that they pushed overland north from Mercia. Neither view is tenable; large-scale migration from the Continent was over by the middle of the sixth century and movement overland was beset by too many natural obstacles such as water and dense forests. What seems more likely is that Angles from Mercia followed their leaders by boat to natural points of assembly at the mouths of the Rivers Tyne and Tweed. Partitioned into small states both Bernicia and Deira remained apart until the last quarter of the seventh century when Ethelfrith (593–616) reduced both to his rule, becoming another early Bretwalda.

From 450 to approximately 600 the Anglo-Saxons were occupied solely with subjecting the native population of Britain and carving out their kingdoms. In this struggle only the strongest chiefs survived; into their hands fell the lands originally won by the weaker. After 150 years of fighting, the most successful chiefs had established dynasties in seven fairly well-defined regions of Britain—Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex; these kingdoms formed what some historians have called the Heptarchy.

2. THE SUPREMACY OF NORTHUMBRIA AND MERCIA

The next 250 years witnessed the emergence of three kingdoms—Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex—each in its turn to dominate the history of Britain. The kingdom of Northumbria reached its apogee in the seventh century. First, Ethelfrith had established a kingdom between the Irish and North seas and the Humber, Firth of Forth, and Clyde River. Luck had it that three extraordinary successors were to carry on in his tradition. In fact, Edwin (616–632) and Oswald (633–641) were overly ambitious and stretched the resources of their newly formed kingdom too thin. Penetrating south into Mercia, Edwin was slain by the Mercian king Penda in 632 with the result that Northumbria temporarily relapsed into a mosaic of small kingdoms. Oswald managed to restore Northumbrian unity, but when he was killed in battle by Penda in 641 even Deira fell under the lordship of Penda. It was Oswy (641–670) who finally rallied his people to so striking a victory over Penda in 654 that Northumbria remained the dominant power in the north to the end of the century. The death of Oswy's son Aldrith in 704 marks the end of this kingdom as a power. In the eighth century the records speak only of anarchy. Northumbria was not a rich land; she never could support the population needed to keep her a dynamic power. This deficiency plus lack of an established rule for

succession destined Northumbria to impotency. The ablest member of the royal family was considered the best candidate. But who was the ablest member? Only civil war could answer this question.

Mercia, the successor to Northumbrian power and the dominant kingdom of Britain in the eighth century, had no historian like Bede to recount its history. Biased entries from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, charters, correspondence from the Continent, and a document called the *Tribal Hidage* comprise our only evidence. The latter document, drawn up some time in the hundred years following Penda's reign (626–655), records the amount of land belonging to the small tribal states of Mercia in the sixth and seventh centuries, presumably for an evaluation of the taxes due Bretwaldas who had established their rule over a group of small states. From this evidence we know Mercia remained a land of predominantly independent states down to Penda. Beyond this fact all we know of the sixth-century Mercians is that they spread west to the Irish Sea, conquering the forest as they advanced. The remarkable Penda, a leader of striking military talent, not only kept the Northumbrian power north of the Humber but established his overlordship throughout all Mercia to the Thames; for the first time Mercian unity had been achieved. Even Wessex and East Anglia recognized his supremacy. Penda's son Wulfhere (657–674) continued the work of expansion. Forcing Essex to recognize his rule, he acquired the strategic site of London. Both Kent and Sussex recognized him as lord; in acquiring Oxfordshire, Wulfhere pushed Wessex south of the Thames and thus established a natural line of defense between the two kingdoms. But Mercian power declined after his death, an eclipse due partly to the temporary revival of West Saxon power in the next half-century. The foundation laid by Penda and Wulfhere would be finished only in the eighth century.

The history of Mercia in the eighth century is that of its two great kings Ethelbald (716–757) and Offa (757–796). One of the few bits of information the Northumbrian Bede gives us about the rival Mercian power is that in 731 all the kingdoms south of “the boundary formed by the River Humber, with their kings, are subject to Ethelbald, king of the Mercians.” We do not know how or when, but Ethelbald had achieved a lordship over all Britain except Northumbria; even Wessex and the other southern kingdoms came under his power. Offa's success was more striking. He married members of his family into the dynasties of the subject kingdoms and easily subdued all revolt. A keystone of his policy was a *Drang nach Osten* to facilitate relations with the Carolingian Continent and to secure access to the richer lands of southeastern Britain. Kent remained a kingdom recognizing Offa's lordship, but Sussex, Essex, and East Anglia were incorporated into Mercia. Such political reconstruction gave Offa control of London, a center of political strength; Canterbury, the ecclesiastical capital of Britain; and ports near the Carolingian Empire.

The great power of Offa is reflected in developments other than his conquests. He considered himself more than the king of Mercia and overlord of the remainder of Britain. He conceived of himself as ruler of all England and styled himself “king of the English” (*Rex Anglorum* or *Rex totius Anglorum patriae*). His subjects also regarded him as a superior sort of king and his successor King Cenwulf referred to him as the “king and glory of Britain.” Heptarchial provincialism was receding before the concept of a territorial state and royal power including all Britain; the idea of an Anglo Saxon kingdom was in the air. The subject kings had to secure Offa's permission for all important acts such as the alienation of land and privileges. Many dynasties even disappeared, as happened in Sussex, Essex, Kent, and East Anglia. Offa's power was recognized beyond the shores of Britain; he was the first king in Britain to enter into continental affairs. Relations of an intimate nature were established with Rome; in 786 the first legate was sent to Britain by the pope and the church universal had finally recognized the political and ecclesiastical importance of this northern island. Although the mighty Charlemagne disdained a marriage agreement with Offa's family, he concluded commercial agreements with Offa relative to safe-conducts for English merchants in Frankish ports and Franks in English ports. He expressed also a keen interest in the church affairs of Offa's kingdom. Without doubt Offa was the predecessor of the strong kings of Wessex who were to forge the kingdom of England.

Though Offa's successor Cenwulf (796–821) upheld the Mercian hegemony over Britain, a later successor Beornwulf threw it away at the Battle of Ellendun in 825 where he was defeated by the West Saxons under their king Egbert. Mercia soon lost most of the subject kingdoms and was reduced to its original boundaries plus East Anglia. We lack the evidence required to explain satisfactorily the sudden fall

of Mercia. A major cause, however, as we have previously hinted, seemed to be underpopulation and poor land opposed to the superior population and resources of the south.

We have noted that in the last years of the sixth century Wessex, under Ceawlin, extended from Bath to Surrey and from the Thames to the Channel. This political construction collapsed, however, under Mercian pressure. What remained of Wessex was to develop around the area of Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Dorset. Almost until the end of the seventh century Wessex was a conglomeration of small states ruled by subkings who recognized the theoretical lordship of a Bretwalda. The old German custom of splitting up land to provide for all royal successors seems to have produced this loose political confederacy, in which there was no strength to oppose Mercia. A temporary renaissance came between 685 and 726. We lack details as to how King Cadwalla began the restoration of West Saxon fortunes, but within three years he had eradicated all subkings, centralized his rule over their lands, and forced the kingdoms of Sussex, Kent, and Surrey to recognize him as Bretwalda. After such a strenuous three years Cadwalla retired to go on a pilgrimage to Rome.

Cadwalla was followed by Ine (688–726), whom Stenton calls “the most important king of Wessex between Ceawlin and Egbert.” We have the dooms that Ine published, but little other evidence for his remarkable reign. Perhaps the silence of the records stems from a reign relatively peaceful; seldom were there any large-scale campaigns or conquests by force. Ine was content to consolidate the gains of his predecessor and to encourage the peaceful settlement of Devon and East Cornwall by Saxon colonists. When he resorted to force it was to eliminate rivals, of whom there were many among the subkings. That he could compile a collection of laws which reflect a fairly adequate administrative system testifies to his ability. The darkness of Wessex history in the century after Ine’s death serves to emphasize the accomplishments of this Saxon king.

From the death of Ine to the ninth century Wessex was under Mercian domination. It retained its kings but they were often subkings under the lordship of such as Offa. With King Egbert (802–839), however, Wessex again played a leading role in Britain. Tracing his descent back to the brother of Ine, Egbert first appeared as a candidate for the throne of Wessex in 789. Offa, however, supported a rival and Egbert was forced to live as an exile in Charlemagne’s lands until 802. Perhaps it was there that he observed the efficient Carolingian administration and took some lessons in kingship from the great Charles. Certainly it was a special influence that produced the first strong West Saxon king since Ine. At the death of his rival in 802 Egbert was recalled by the West Saxons to be their king; this move amounted to a repudiation of Mercian dominance. Egbert never recognized Mercian lordship and for twenty years worked unobtrusively to restore West Saxon power and to expand his lands farther to the southwest. In 825 he met an invading Mercian army at Ellendun and routed it. This was one of the decisive battles of Anglo-Saxon history, marking the end of Mercian supremacy in Britain and placing all Britain below the Thames under West Saxon power. Immediately the kings of East Anglia, Kent, Surrey, Sussex, and Essex recognized the rule of Egbert. Just before his death he even occupied Mercia temporarily and it is said that the king of Northumbria swore loyalty to him. Mercia soon regained her independence and at the time of Egbert’s death there still remained three Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The balance of power however, had shifted from Northumbria in the north, through Mercia, and south to Wessex, around which the fortunes of England were to revolve for the next two centuries. Just in time had Egbert created a kingdom that would give England a dynamic leadership, for there were signs even before his death that sterner challenges than the unification of England were to be met.

C. ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND, 800–1035

in C. BROOKE, FROM ALFRED TO HENRY III, 871–1272 The Norton Library History of England (New York, 1961) 31–65†

† Copyright © 1961 by Christopher Brooke.

2. THE REIGN OF ALFRED

(1) *England in the Ninth Century*

ALFRED is commonly thought of today as a great pioneer: a man who planned many aspects of a united English kingdom, although he did not live to see his plans completed. But to contemporaries he must often have appeared more like the last heir of a doomed kingdom, a man struggling to save something from the kingdom of Egbert and the inheritance of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs of the eighth century.

By 871 most of the old-established English kingdoms had collapsed. Hitherto England had been divided into a number of kingdoms—tradition says seven, that England had been a ‘heptarchy’; but it is impossible to point to any period in which there were precisely seven kingdoms in the land; and the word ‘heptarchy’ suggests a division of the country far tidier than ever existed in the centuries following the departure of the Romans and the Anglo-Saxon conquest. Over the three and a half centuries preceding 871 the fortunes of the country had mainly depended on the heads of three confederations, of the Northumbrians, the Mercians, and the West Saxons. Each in turn had held hegemony in England—Northumbria in the seventh century, Mercia in the eighth, last of all Wessex, for a short space under King Egbert, had been recognised as the first kingdom in the country. But within thirty years of Egbert’s death the other kingdoms had been overwhelmed by Viking hosts: Kent¹ and East Anglia were Danish bases, Northumbria on the verge of becoming a Norse kingdom, Mercia divided between the Danes and English, with the English kingdom reduced to a mere satellite.

The first mention of Viking raids on this country is in 789; but it was not until the later years of Egbert, King of Wessex, who died in 839, that they became frequent. From then on the tale of attack and disaster is continuous. The movements of heathen hosts—of Danes and Norsemen—is the constant theme of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In 843 ‘King Aethelwulf [Egbert’s son] fought at Carhampton against thirty-five ships’ companies, and the Danes had possession of the place of slaughter’; in 855 ‘the heathen for the first time wintered in Sheppey’; in 865 ‘Ethelred [Aethelwulf’s third son] succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex. And this same year came a great host to England and took winter-quarters in East Anglia.’ In 866 the host moved into Northumbria, in 867 into Mercia; ‘and Burhred, king of Mercia, and his councillors begged Ethelred, king of Wessex, and his brother Alfred to help them fight against the host.’ The two brothers came into Mercia the next year, but without decisive result, and 870 saw desperate fighting in Wessex itself. Three major engagements failed to give the West Saxon leaders an advantage, and after a series of minor conflicts they were compelled to make their peace with the host. It was in these circumstances that King Ethelred died, and his brother, Alfred, succeeded to the throne (871).

In spite of the great energy with which Wessex was being defended in this year, it might have seemed only a matter of time before this kingdom, too, succumbed. The events of the following years could only confirm this impression; and in 878 ‘the [Danish] host went secretly in midwinter [when Alfred and his followers felt secure from attack] after Twelfth Night to Chippenham, and rode over Wessex and occupied it, and drove a great part of the inhabitants oversea, and reduced the greater part of the rest, except Alfred the king; and he with a small company moved under difficulties through woods and into inaccessible places in marshes.’²

878 proved not to be the end of English history, but, in a way, its beginning; and it is our business in this chapter to understand how this could be. When Alfred died twenty-one years later, his kingdom was still precarious; the Danes far from subdued. But Wessex was more settled, more powerful than when Alfred

¹ [Kent was not one of the regions that ultimately became part of the Danelaw, as the map preceding this section shows. Ed.]

² To this period of Alfred’s career tradition has attached the famous story of how he was sitting in a cowherd’s cottage, preparing his bow and arrows and other weapons, when the cowherd’s wife saw her cakes burning in the hearth, and scolded the luckless king for not paying attention to them. The story first appears in a saint’s life written a generation or two after the Norman Conquest; it may be based on ancient tradition, but it may equally well be the author’s invention, like many other things in the book. (See W. H. Stevenson, *Asser’s Life of King Alfred* (Oxford, 1904), pp. 136, 256ff.) [The quotation does not come from Asser. Ed.]

succeeded to the throne; he was the acknowledged leader of the English survivors throughout the south and west of the country; he had shown that Vikings could be defeated, and even baptised. The creation of a united kingdom of England was begun by Alfred's successors, and not fully achieved before the eleventh century; but many essential foundations had been laid. Much of this was due to the unique personality of Alfred. But he was helped by some of the tendencies of the situation; and also, paradoxically, by the Danes themselves.

The Danes were farmers and pirates. Like many pirates, they became in course of time great traders. But it is a mistake to think of Alfred's opponents as traders in any orthodox sense. They valued the things which merchants valued—money, gold (which was very scarce at this time), silver in any form, and all the materials which went to make a man wealthy and proved him to be so. It is clear that the population of the Scandinavian countries was growing in these years; and that their own lands were becoming insufficient to support these peoples by the elementary agriculture and fishing on which they had hitherto depended. But 'land-hunger' can be only a part of the explanation of the rapidity with which they spread all over northern and western Europe, raiding, settling, forming principalities in Russia, northern France, the British islands, and ultimately in Iceland and Greenland; even (in all probability) visiting North America. The deeper explanation of these extraordinary movements lies in the social organisation and the social ideals and aspirations of the Viking peoples. By custom and training they enjoyed adventure, travel, and war; and their upper classes had learned to live by plunder. When on the move they were organised by war bands, with the ship's company as the basic unit. The leaders of companies and hosts had to reward their followers with lavish gifts; and yet to retain still greater wealth in their own hands. The splendour of their armour and their halls, and the ornaments and jewellery with which they could adorn their wives and daughters, were the symbols of their greatness. A man who failed in generosity or became impoverished was lost. Small wonder that it is in the Scandinavian homeland and the Baltic islands that the most wonderful finds of silver coins and silver ornaments of this period have been discovered. They come from the Arab world, from Byzantium, from many parts of Europe, and from England.

The bulk of this wealth was acquired by tribute and by loot. The Viking leaders valued above all a rich country which could be plundered year after year; the raids gave their men exercise, occupied them in their proper and favourite pursuits, and provided for both men and leaders generous pay at no cost to either. A really sophisticated pirate is deeply concerned for the welfare of the trade on which he preys. But pirates are rarely sophisticated, and loot and plunder seem to have been the only concern of the Danes at this time. None the less, they were not out for a speedy conquest of the whole country. For decades they came as raiders and plunderers, and it was only slowly that they conceived the idea of settling. When the host first wintered in Kent and East Anglia, it settled in old fortified places, which it used merely as bases for long-distance plundering in the winter. It was natural that prolonged acquaintance with the country should suggest to the Danes other ways of exploiting it; the decline of its wealth was bound sooner or later to force them to more creative activities, or to abandon the country altogether; and the breakdown of authority tempted the Danish leaders to replace the old monarchs with themselves. The Danish invasions of the ninth century thus passed through many phases. They started as occasional plundering raids. Then large hosts established themselves under kings and jarls (earls) on a more permanent footing. Finally these hosts began to settle in various parts of the country, and the leaders took to rewarding their followers with land as well as with loot. In Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and the north-east Midlands hundreds of place-names deriving from Old Danish roots show us where the Danish peasantry settled thickly at this time; the English had lived in hams and tuns (our 'homes' and 'towns'), the Danes colonised *bys* and *thorpes*. Among the Vikings in England Danes were in the majority; in Ireland, Scotland, and the Western Isles, Norwegians. But in the north of England the two met and mingled. The north-west is thickly studded with Norse place-names, from *Irby*, *Thingwall*, and others in the Wirral peninsula up to the *gills*, *fells*, and *thwaites* of Cumberland.³ East

³ *Irby* is 'the *by* (village) of the Irish', reminding us that the Norse came by way of Ireland; *Thingwall*, 'the field of assembly', the place where the local court or assembly of Wirral (forerunner of the 'hundred' court), the 'thing' familiar to readers of Icelandic sagas, met. *Gill* (ravine with a stream) and *fell* are Norse words; *thwaite* (clearing in woodland) was used both by Norwegians and by Danes.

Lancashire and Yorkshire were more Danish than Norse, though the kings of York were sometimes Norwegian (i.e. Norse from Ireland), and the links between the two peoples were close.

It was only slowly, then, that the Vikings conceived the idea of replacing the native dynasties with their own kings; and only sporadically that they tried to replace existing systems of government with their own institutions. The slow transition gave the kingdom of Wessex a breathing-space; it also gave the leaders of Wessex time to prepare against the challenge of the Danish attack. In these two ways Alfred was helped by the habits of the Vikings to take advantage of what survived of his inheritance in Wessex.

His inheritance consisted, first of all, of a society, of human material moulded by the ancient custom of the English. There were many signs of what we should call civilisation in English life in the eighth and early ninth centuries. The Christian conversion had struck deep roots; with it had come a renaissance of art; literature and learning (after the fashion of the Dark Ages) had flourished in Northumbria in the days of Bede and in the country at large in the mid and late eighth century. More superficial were the traces of a money economy, of permanent markets, of literate government. All these things were to recover and develop during the period covered by this book beyond what anyone could have imagined in the ninth century. Nor were the Anglo-Saxons or Vikings savages: both had lived for centuries in some kind of contact with civilised peoples and civilised standards, and were not unaffected by them. But all this does not alter the fact that English society in the eighth and ninth centuries knew little of what we should call civilisation; that the lay aristocracy consisted of fundamentally barbarian warriors who did not differ greatly from their Viking enemies in aspirations, in methods of war, and way of life.

The qualities of Anglo-Saxon lay society are revealed to us more clearly than those of any other Teutonic people of the period, owing to the survival of a quite large quantity of Old English literature—of poems written to be sung to the harp in the great halls of the English warriors; the staple of entertainment in the early Middle Ages, and, more than that, a vital form of education, moulding the tastes and ideals of generations of warriors. The lay upper classes were illiterate; that is to say, they had no education as we understand the term. But they were brought up to a knowledge of the traditional crafts of their class—the arts of war, justice, and government, hunting and hawking; and their outlook was moulded by the heroic lays of the minstrels. The best known of these poems is an epic, *Beowulf*, probably of the eighth century. *Beowulf* must be read and re-read by anyone who wishes to understand Old English society: it is full of insights into the minds of our ancestors, insights of a kind normally very difficult to obtain. In one way it is probably untypical. Most of the early lays and epics were tales of blood feud and human glory; blood and thunder stories of war and plunder and revenge. *Beowulf* is the work of a Christian cleric determined to point a moral: blood feuds are kept well in the background, and Beowulf slaughters dragons and not men—indeed, it is specifically noted that Beowulf's own people were astonished at his prowess, because he had none of the previous record of slaughter which usually preluded a glorious career.

But if the author of *Beowulf* has attempted to suppress the more barbarous elements in such stories, he none the less makes Beowulf display very clearly the proper heroic qualities: courage and prowess in war, and loyalty—loyalty to his kin, loyalty to his chief, and loyalty and generosity to his followers; and after Beowulf has become king he maintains justice and the rights and privileges of his people. Here we are shown the characteristics of Anglo-Saxon society at its best. It is a society in which kinship and personal loyalty are the principal bonds. It is an aristocratic society: above the clans of kindred are the tribal chiefs and the kings; and every chief and every king is surrounded by a company of followers, the 'following' or *comitatus*. This crucial institution in all Germanic peoples meets us in the first century A.D. in the *Germania* of Tacitus, meets us in the military following of barbarian leaders in the fifth and sixth centuries, in royal and princely courts of the seventh, eighth, and ninth; meets us again in the knights of a feudal lord in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and in the knights of the Round Table as they were described in the twelfth. Followers were drawn from a number of sources, from the chief's own kin, from the leading warriors of his land, and from other tribes or kingdoms: it was a common practice for kings and nobles to send their younger sons to the courts of neighbouring princes to be brought up and to learn the art of war and the skills of a warrior. These followers gave their chief unstinted support in his enterprises, and in return he asked their advice, protected them and kept them. It was a similar relationship which compelled the Viking leader

to shower gifts upon his followers; and even in the more settled Anglo-Saxon courts gifts were still vitally important, although the followers of an Anglo-Saxon lord expected first and foremost a landed estate.

There are in *Beowulf* two common synonyms for a king—'the giver of treasure' or 'the lord of rings'. In the poem, the treasure consists of gold cups and gold ornaments; the rings are golden rings. But there was very little gold in eighth century England. In this as in other respects there is an archaic flavour about the poem: it holds up the past as a mirror to the present. And since it was already about a century old before Alfred was born, it may seem to have little bearing on the relations of Alfred and his followers. But for two reasons this is not so. First of all, it is the representative of an oral literature which changed comparatively little over the generations. Alfred was apparently brought up on just such heroic stories, although we cannot tell if he knew *Beowulf* itself. 'He listened attentively to Saxon poems day and night,' writes his biographer, 'and hearing them often recited by others committed them to his retentive memory.' Although his taste in literature developed and matured, he never lost his fondness for the heroic lays of his own people. Furthermore, the minstrels were still busy composing their own versions of this kind of poem, and some of the meagre survivors from the ninth and tenth centuries reveal that the same emotions and qualities were preserved in them as appear in *Beowulf*. Finest of all is the poem on the battle of Maldon, which describes very movingly the last stand of an English leader against the Danes. The incident took place much later than Alfred's time, in the second wave of Danish invasions at the end of the tenth century; ealdorman (or earl) Brihtnoth fell in 991. Thus the poem serves to show the continuity in the ideals of English warriors. It is very short. It opens with an account of the preparation for the fight; it tells how Brihtnoth deployed his men: 'he rode and gave counsel and taught his warriors how they should stand and keep their ground, bade them hold their shields aright, firm with their hands and fear not at all. When he had meetly arrayed his host, he alighted among the people where it pleased him best, where he knew his bodyguard to be most loyal.

'Then the messenger of the Vikings stood on the bank, he called sternly, uttered words, boastfully speaking the seafarers' message to the earl, as he stood on the shore. "Bold seamen have sent me to you, and bade me say, that it is for you to send treasure quickly in return for peace, and it will be better for you all that you buy off an attack with tribute, rather than that men so fierce as we should give you battle. There is no need that we destroy each other, if you are rich enough for this. In return for the gold we are ready to make a truce with you. If you who are richest determine to redeem your people, and to give to the seamen on their own terms wealth to win their friendship and make peace with us, we will betake us to our ships with the treasure, put to sea and keep faith with you."

'Brihtnoth lifted up his voice, grasped his shield and shook his supple spear, gave forth words, angry and resolute, and made him answer: "Hear you, searover, what this folk says? For tribute they will give you spears, poisoned point and ancient sword, such war gear as will profit you little in the battle. Messenger of the seamen, take back a message, say to your people a far less pleasing tale, how that there stands here with his troop an earl of unstained renown, who is ready to guard this realm, the home of Ethelred my lord [the King], people and land; it is the heathen that shall fall in the battle. It seems to me too poor a thing that you should go with our treasure unfought to your ships, now that you have made your way thus far into our land. Not so easily shall you win tribute; peace must be made with point and edge, with grim battle-play, before we give tribute."

'Then he bade the warriors advance, bearing their shields, until they all stood on the river bank.' There the two armies waited as the tide went out and left them dry land on which to fight. For all their heroism, the English company was defeated, and their leader killed.

'Brihtwold spoke and grasped his shield (he was an old companion [follower]); he shook his ash-wood spear and exhorted the men right boldly: "Thoughts must be the braver, heart more valiant, courage the greater as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord, all cut down, the hero in the dust. Long may he mourn who thinks now to turn from the battle-play. I am old in years; I will not leave the field, but think to lie by my lord's side, by the man I held so dear."'" Another member of the following also encourages them to battle, leads his men against the Vikings, falls in the strife; and there, as suddenly as it began, the poem ends.

The old follower's speech is one of the most moving things in Anglo-Saxon literature; it also catches to perfection the finest spirit of the German heroic lay—courage in defeat. This was no doubt the theme of

many of the Saxon songs which King Alfred learned by heart; and it was this element in the tradition of the English warrior families which enabled them in the end to react so powerfully to the Danish challenge.

But the warrior aristocracy was itself only one element in English society, and not the only one which played its part in King Alfred's success. His armies were partly manned by peasants; and in any case, as Alfred himself said, a king needed 'men who pray, and soldiers and workmen'. It is time to look at those who prayed and those who worked.

The conversion of the English had been accomplished in the seventh and early eighth centuries; from then on, England was a nominally Christian country, even if some of the missionary work had to be done again after the coming of the Danes. With Christianity came literacy, at least for the small band of educated clergy. In the Byzantine Empire in this period, and especially in the capital, Constantinople—incomparably the greatest centre of culture and learning in the Christian world before the twelfth century—literacy was widespread among laymen as well as among the clergy. In contrast, there existed throughout western Christendom a sharp distinction between the literate, educated, Latin-speaking clergy and the lay aristocracy, illiterate, bred for war. The upper clergy were at once the mediators of the Christian tradition and of the learning and civilised standards of the ancient world. They were usually very few in number, and partly for that reason their standards of learning were precarious. Learning and the knowledge of Latin literature rose and fell in the early Middle Ages with astonishing rapidity, largely because they depended on a small number of good teachers and their pupils. In the days of Bede and Alcuin, in the eighth century, England was famous for its learned men. But there is no reason to think that Alfred was exaggerating much when he said of his own youth: 'So completely had learning decayed in England that there were very few men on this side the Humber who could apprehend their [Latin] services in English or even translate a letter from Latin into English, and I think that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot even recollect a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom.' The upper clergy were few, and the educated clergy almost non-existent.

Who were the upper clergy? In the last chapter I defined them as bishops, archdeacons, canons, and monks; and distinguished them from the lower clergy, the parish priests, most of whom were socially and economically much less privileged, often of peasant stock and semi-literate at best. This general picture is true of the period after the Conquest; for the ninth century it needs two major qualifications. Before the Conquest the upper clergy were small in numbers. The staffs of bishops and cathedrals were usually modest compared with what they later became; no hierarchy of officials separated the bishop from the parish clergy there was no-one comparable to the later archdeacon or rural dean. In 1066 there were well under 1,000 monks. In Alfred's time the figures must be scaled down still further. Outside the small and struggling community he himself established at Athelney, there were no monks at all—no monks, that is, in the formal sense of men living in community according to a monastic rule. On paper there were about sixteen bishoprics. Of these, at the time of Alfred's death, four or five were in places occupied by the Danes and had long been vacant; two (Dunwich in Suffolk, later surrendered to the sea, and Leicester, revived only in very modern times) were allowed to lapse. The rest reappeared in the course of the tenth century. How active the remaining cathedrals were we have little means of knowing; but they were certainly not centres of vigorous intellectual or religious life. The disappearance of most of the old monasteries meant that the libraries, on whose shelves books might survive for centuries, even if no-one read them, were tending to be lost. The future of learning in England depended on a thin trickle of tradition, or on the chance of a great patron appearing who could restore links with the scholars and the libraries of Europe. The only gleams of light in the island at the beginning of Alfred's reign were the frequent visits of Irish scholars to the court of Gwynedd in North Wales, and their journeys through England on their way to the Continent; and it was to Wales and Ireland—whose schools still retained much of their ancient tradition of learning—as well as to the Continent that Alfred looked when he tried to revive English schools and libraries.

Compared with later times, the lower clergy were also few. The parish system was only beginning to be formed. Christianity had originally been a religion of the town, based on the cities of the Roman Empire; and it was slow to accommodate itself to the needs of the village-dwelling peoples. At first the cathedral clergy were the clergy of the diocese; then other large churches, 'ministers', were built, where small communities of clerks could live and serve the needs of a large area. This might suit a missionary church,

but was a makeshift in a settled Christian country. And so local lords and the leading men of the villages laid out the money to build churches, and paid their tithes for the support of priests. Gradually the parish system spread about the country. Even by the Norman Conquest it was far from complete, especially in the north and west. In Alfred's day the parish church was far from being the common sight it later became; and in the areas occupied by the Danes, it must have been virtually unknown. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the Danelaw that churches were built most rapidly in the tenth century; and partly for this reason, partly on account of the availability of stone for building, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire have more visible traces of Saxon architecture than any other counties. The English Church was weak; the English monarchs therefore possessed very few tools for creating even the first beginnings of literate government.

About the great mass of the English peasantry, 'those who work', we are singularly ill-informed. A few glimpses reveal to us a peasantry divided into *geneatas*, *cotsetlan*, and *geburas*; and in Domesday Book (1086) we are given a rich vocabulary of peasant groups. The *gebur* was the normal peasant of early medieval society, much like the Roman *colonus* or the later villein in status; provided with a plot of land on which he and his family could maintain a living, though sometimes a meagre one, in return for services often very burdensome; personally free, but often tied to the land he held. The *cotsetla* was a cottager, with or without a small holding of land; a man whose livelihood could not entirely depend on what he grew, but must expect some supplement from wages earned by occasional or regular labour on other men's estates. The *geneat* was the aristocrat of the Anglo-Saxon peasantry; the 'free man' or 'sokeman' of Domesday Book or even something more. He was sometimes a substantial small farmer. The boundary between him and the *gesith* or *thegn*, the lord or the lord's companion, was not always very great or impassable.

The *gebur* was personally free: he could not be bought and sold; he lived on his own plot of land. But there were also in eleventh-century England large numbers of slaves— 25,000 of them are recorded in Domesday Book. The number was declining: the freeing of slaves was a work of mercy, and the *gebur* or villein suited the farming ideas of the Norman lords better than did the slave. The slaves performed the function later carried out by the wage-labourer, and one reason for their disappearance was that the increasing use of money in late Saxon and early Norman times meant that it was easier for a lord to pay for labour when he wanted it than to feed and care for a team of slaves in and out of season. But throughout Saxon times the slaves must have been a familiar sight in many English villages; and even in the late eleventh century it required a special mission to Bristol by the Bishop of Worcester, St. Wulfstan, to suppress the trading of English slaves to Ireland.

(2) 878–99

At the end of March 878 Alfred and his following established themselves in a secret base among the marshes of Somerset, at Athelney; and from there resistance was planned. Alfred summoned the 'fyrd' or militia of Somerset, Wiltshire, and western Hampshire—that part of Wessex with which he could still keep in touch—to be ready for a rapid attack on the Danes early in May. And with these forces he fell on the Danes at Edington, pursued them to their camp, and after a fortnight's siege compelled them to surrender. Three weeks later the Danish king, Guthrum, and thirty of his leading followers were baptised in Alfred's presence.

Decisive as was the battle of Edington in saving Wessex from total destruction, it did not lead to any lasting peace. In the mid eight-eighties war was renewed, and this time Alfred had the opportunity to take the initiative. In 886 he captured London, and put it in charge of his close ally, Ethelred, Ealdorman of the Mercians, who shortly after married Alfred's daughter, Aethelflaed. Soon after 886 another truce was made between Alfred and Guthrum, which established a temporary frontier between English and Danish England. It divided the lowland zone into two, by drawing a line along the Thames from its mouth, skirting north of London, then running north-west to Bedford, and so along Watling Street (now the A5) to the Welsh border. But it did not lead to peace. From 892 to 896 a new Danish army was at large in England; and throughout the last decade of Alfred's reign there was the threat of raids from the Danish kingdom of York.

Alfred was never free from wars or rumours of wars. But in the last ten years of his life he was able to reorganise the English defences and establish a military organisation which saved the country from a repetition of the disastrous winter of 877–8, prepared the way for the successes of Edward the Elder and

Athelstan, Alfred's son and grandson, and in some respects provided the model on which another distinguished Saxon, Henry the Fowler, repaired the defences of German Saxony against the Magyars a generation later.

The Danes had the great advantage that they were highly mobile, could move great distances by sea, and very frequently achieved surprise. Alfred was concerned to meet them on their own terms. First of all, he built ships, large and swift, 'neither after the Frisian design nor after the Danish, but as it seemed to himself that they could be most serviceable'. The interest Alfred took in designing the ships is characteristic of his restless inquiring mind and searching imagination, and also reveals the attention to detail of the fine administrator. But the Danes were not only mobile by sea. Their armies were always in being, and could be swiftly mobilised. The disaster in 877–8 had occurred because the English militia took so long to mobilise. Alfred simplified its organisation and divided it, so that manpower was available to supply the militia, man the fortresses, and till the soil at the same time. Hitherto the militia, the 'fyrd', had been exceedingly reluctant to remain under arms for more than a short campaign, or to move any distance. This division meant that their work at home was not totally neglected, although we do not know how the arrangement worked in detail. A large, and perhaps increasing, part of the English army consisted of nobles and their retainers, the more permanent military class, the thegns and their followers. A division of the thegns similar to that of the fyrd made longer campaigns possible for them too.

The militia was not a new instrument, but an old royal right reorganised. Another public obligation developed by Alfred was that of building and repairing fortresses—a duty incumbent on almost all holders of land. Alfred in fact began, and Edward the Elder completed, the construction of a national network of fortifications. By the early tenth century no village in Sussex, Surrey, or Wessex was more than twenty miles from one of these fortresses. They provided defence in depth against an enemy who might come from any direction—from land or sea; and they provided refuge for men and cattle against an enemy whose chief motive was plunder. The fortresses were normally large enclosures, walled towns rather than castles: and many of them were sited in or later became, towns. Indeed, the building of the *burhs* (our 'boroughs') by Alfred and his son marked an important stage in the recovery of English towns and so in the long run of trade and economic life generally.

Alfred's achievement in saving Wessex from the Danes and laying its defences on a more stable base was remarkable enough. What is even more remarkable is that in the brief intervals of war and defence he showed so much concern for the general welfare and for every aspect of the life of the kingdom whose very existence still lay in the balance. He had a vision of a kingdom more stable, more peaceful, and more civilised than anything he could hope to live to see. These points are remarkably illustrated by his *Laws* and his translations.

The written laws of Anglo-Saxon kings were not comprehensive codes. The main body of the law was customary and unwritten. When custom had to be altered, or clarified, or emphasised, it might be put in writing. The result is that the law-books from the time of King Ethelbert of Kent to King Cnut are at once very particular and precise and very fragmentary. It appears that Alfred, in issuing his code, was reviving a custom which had not been exercised for a century. During this period law-making as a royal right disappeared in the French kingdom; the revival in England under Alfred may have saved it from a similar oblivion.

Human law was felt to be a reflection of divine law. Alfred had the conviction that the divine law was the source of first principles; and that the Bible, which contained the divine law, might provide texts of more particular application too. Alfred's laws have a long introduction attempting to tie English law on to Biblical (Mosaic) law and the law of the early Church, as deduced from the Acts of the Apostles. The rest of the book is an attempt to select and record what was valuable and necessary from earlier collections. 'Then I, King Alfred, collected these together and ordered to be written many of them which our forefathers observed, those which I liked; and many of those which I did not like, I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and ordered them to be differently observed. For I dared not presume to set in writing at all many of my own, because it was unknown to me what should please those who should come after us. But those which I found anywhere, which seemed to me most just, either of the time of my kinsman, King Ine

[688–726], or of Offa, King of the Mercians [757–96], or of Ethelbert [King of Kent, 560–616], who first among the English received baptism, I collected herein, and omitted the others. Then I, Alfred, King of the West Saxons, showed these to all my councillors, and they then said that they were all pleased to observe them.'

This is the first description of English law-making, and it is altogether more informal than later processes. The custom of his predecessors, for the most part, was treated with great respect; nothing was done without the advice of his councillors. Yet Alfred knew his own mind. 'I, King Alfred, collected these together and ordered to be written . . . those which I liked.' Especially significant is his use of the Mercian laws. He was King of the West Saxons; but he felt a responsibility to all the English—even to the English subjects of King Guthrum, whose interests he protected in the peace treaty.

'Judge thou very fairly. Do not judge one judgment for the rich and another for the poor; nor one for the one more dear and another for the one more hateful.' This sentiment was introduced by Alfred into the introduction to his Laws from the Book of Exodus; but the sentence has been a good deal elaborated in the course of translation, and has become a full expression of one of Alfred's basic beliefs. In a similar way in his translations Alfred interprets the thought of his source, expands, annotates, and illustrates it; makes it his own.

'His unique importance in the history of English letters,' writes Sir Frank Stenton, 'comes from his conviction that a life without knowledge or reflection was unworthy of respect, and his determination to bring the thought of the past within the range of his subjects' understanding.' Here is Alfred's own account of the genesis of his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, a manual on the office of a bishop. 'When I remembered how the knowledge of the Latin language had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could read things written in English, I began in the midst of the other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to turn into English the book which is called in Latin *Pastoralis* and in English *Shepherd-book*, sometimes word for word, sometimes by a paraphrase; as I had learned it from my Archbishop Plegmund, and my Bishop Asser, and my priest Grimbald and my priest John. When I had learned it, I turned it into English according as I understood it and as I could render it most intelligibly; and I will send one to every see in my kingdom.'

This describes, in a nutshell, Alfred's concern and his method. His subjects were ignorant of Latin. The treasures of ancient literature must be translated. He himself had neither time nor the fluency in Latin to translate alone; so he presided over a seminar of learned men who assisted and advised him. It is an astonishing story. A warrior king on his own initiative feels the lack of learning in himself and his people; struggles to learn to read and write; collects scholars; presides over their work and as time passes himself takes a hand in it; founds schools in which not only churchmen but laymen, too, may learn. His immediate success was slight—there was too much ground to be covered; his lay followers were not accustomed to learning and not seriously amenable to it. But on a longer view the achievement was extremely impressive.

...

3. THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH KINGDOM, 899–1035

(1) 899–959

THOUGH Alfred was never free to dwell in his enclosure at ease winter and summer, and though Danish raids continued right to the eve of his death, the most serious threat to the survival of Wessex had passed. His practical measures and his great prestige had strengthened the material and psychological defences of his kingdom. The impetus of the Viking attacks, meanwhile, had weakened. In Ireland, Scotland, England, and northern France, as the ninth century turned into the tenth, the Viking bands were turning from pillage to settlement; they had reached the limits of their expansion.

The end of the great Viking offensive did not mean an end to the problems of English defence. Alfred's son and successor, Edward the Elder (899–924), was as frequently engaged in war as his father; and, in his way, as notable a warrior. Kingship was a very personal thing in the Middle Ages. However strongly one king might build up the bases of his power, his successor's position always depended to a great extent on his own achievements. Alfred's positive achievements, however sensational, did not give Wessex stability or

permanent security. His work would have foundered if he had not been succeeded by a line of able kings. It was carried on, and in certain respects completed, by his remarkably able descendants, notably by his son Edward, his grandson Athelstan (King, 924–39) and his great-grandson, Athelstan's nephew, Edgar (959–75). After Edgar's death the throne passed to lesser men, and the long rule of Ethelred II (978–1016) coincided with the renewal of Danish attacks. With Ethelred the dynasty collapsed, though not, as we shall see, the kingdom.

For the first ten years of Edward's reign no further progress is recorded in the recovery of English territory from the Danes. Danish armies indeed supported a cousin of Edward in rebellion against him. Apart from this there were signs that relations between English and Danes were becoming more peaceable, that Edward and his thegns were finding opportunities for peaceful infiltration. In 909 the armies of Wessex and Mercia attacked the Northumbrian Danes and dictated terms of peace to them. In the following year the Danes retaliated by raiding English Mercia, but their army was caught on its way home near Tettenhall in Staffordshire, and annihilated. From then on the leaders of Wessex and Mercia were free to reconquer the southern Danish kingdoms without serious interruption from the north. Ethelred, Ealdorman of Mercia, died in 911, but co-operation did not cease with his death. His place was filled by his wife, Edward's sister, Aethelflaed, 'Lady of the Mercians', who continued her husband's work in close association with her brother until her own death in 918; from then on Wessex and Mercia were united.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle had hitherto devoted most space to the doings of the 'heathen', the 'host'—that is, the Danes. First compiled in the reign of Alfred, not perhaps under his direct inspiration, but clearly reflecting the literary revival of his time, its main entries for the mid and late ninth century tell the tale of attack and disaster in plain, unemotional, but effective prose. In Alfred's later years more is said of the King's activities; one senses the feeling that at last the initiative is shifting. But the hosts are frequently the subject of annals still. In 914 a great pirate host of Danes came from Brittany and attacked south and central Wales, but it was turned back on the English border. This apart, the main burden of the annals from 911 to 925 is the steady progress of Edward's reconquest.

After the Ealdorman Ethelred's death in 911, Edward took over London and the south-east Midlands, leaving the rest of English Mercia to Aethelflaed. The building of fortresses and the advance east and north went on steadily through the following years. In 914 Aethelflaed built a fortress at Eddisbury (Cheshire) and at Warwick; in 917 she captured Derby; in 918 Leicester, and but for her death that year she might have received the submission of York. In 912 Edward built a *burh* at Hertford, and prepared for campaigns to east and north. In 914 and 915 he received the submission of Bedford and Northampton; in 916 he built a *burh* at Maldon in Essex; in 917 he and his followers defeated a great counteroffensive mounted by the Danes, and occupied Essex and East Anglia, restoring the *burh* at Colchester. In 918 he was at Stamford and Nottingham. These places had been two of the crucial Danish centres of power south of the Humber; it is likely that a third, Lincoln, also submitted to Edward in this year. By these surrenders he became lord of the Danelaw up to the line of the Humber; by his sister's death he was lord of Mercia; and in the same year the kings of several leading Welsh kingdoms accepted his overlordship.

The offer by the Danes of York to submit to Aethelflaed—an offer not repeated to Edward after her death—and the rapid submission of the Danish armies of the north Midlands and of Lincolnshire was partly inspired by the progress of another Viking power, this time of Norse origin and leadership. Many of the place-names in the Wirral peninsula in north west Cheshire, in the angle between Wales and the Mersey, are of Norse origin; and the Norse settlements in this area date from the first decade of the tenth century. The Norsemen came, immediately, from Ireland. If the Wirral was their chief point of entry, their settlements must have spread all along the coast of Lancashire and Cumberland and south-western Scotland. In 919 the most powerful of the Irish-Norse leaders, Raegnald, established himself as King of York.

The Norse kingdom of York acted as a check on the English advance for a number of years, but it forms only a slight qualification to Edward's remarkable tale of success. His last years saw the rebuilding of more *burhs*, and as a final coping-stone to his prestige, after the building of the *burh* at Bakewell in the Peak of Derbyshire in 920, 'the king of Scots and the whole Scottish nation accepted him as "father and lord": so also did Raegnald [King of York] and the sons of Eadwulf and all the inhabitants of Northumbria, both

English and Danish, Norwegians and others; together with the king of the Strathclyde Welsh and all his subjects.'

In 924 Edward died, and was succeeded by his eldest son, Athelstan. Athelstan had been brought up in the household of the Lord and Lady of the Mercians, and was as readily accepted as king in Mercia as in Wessex. In his time the local particularisms of these two countries were rapidly breaking down. But it is still too early to talk of a united English kingdom. The north of the country was only slowly conquered; and Athelstan was lord over an assemblage of peoples, English, Danes, and Norse, with diverse traditions and diverse motives for allegiance and disaffection. The royal scribes pronounced the unity of his kingdom in Latin of immense portentousness and obscurity. They protested too much; though the words of one of the charters, 'most glorious king of the Anglo Saxons and the Danes' came near the truth. But true unity was not to come to the English peoples until a Dane sat on Alfred's throne, in 1016.

The first years of Athelstan's reign saw him established as king in almost every part of England, and received as overlord by the border kingdoms in Wales and southern Scotland. His relations with the Welsh princes were closer and more effective than had been established by any of his predecessors. The methods of his government, his coinage, and his laws all seem to have influenced the most distinguished of these princes, Hywel Dda of Dyfed, whose name became traditionally attached to later editions of Welsh law-books. Of more immediate importance to the English kingdom was Athelstan's conquest of the Norse kingdom of York.

His relations with the Scottish kings soon broke down. In 934 he paraded a large army through Scotland, as a demonstration of power, but the Scots avoided battle. In 937 an Irish king, son of the last king of York, joined the kings of Scotland and Strathclyde in a combined invasion of England. Their army was met by a large English force led by Athelstan and Edmund, his brother; and the decisive English victory at Brunanburh (the site has not been identified) is recorded in the Chronicle in stirring verse. 'With their hammered blades, the sons of Edward clove the shield-wall and hacked the linden bucklers. ... There the prince of Norsemen ... was forced to flee to the prow of his ship with a handful of men. ... There, likewise, the aged Constantine [King of the Scots], the grey-haired warrior, set off in flight, north to his native land. No cause had he to exult in that clash of swords, bereaved of his kinsmen, robbed of his friends on the field of battle.'

When he died in 939, Athelstan was recognised as one of the leading princes of western Europe. The composition of his court from time to time reflected his sway over the princes of Wales, the Scottish border, and Scotland. The solemn language of his charters evidently reflects a court conscious of its distinction, concerned to cut a figure in the world. In 926 one of his sisters married the Duke of the Franks. This was the response to an embassy carrying rich gifts to the King, including jewels, perfumes, and relics—of which Athelstan was a princely collector. In 928 another sister married the heir of Germany, the future Otto the Great, reopening traditional links between old and new Saxony, between the English and their Saxon homeland. These were the most impressive symbols of the European reputation of Athelstan, which involved him in the affairs of Brittany and Lotharingia (Lorraine), and brought him also friendship with the King of Norway. We should like to know more about him as a man: what we do know suggests some likeness to his grandfather.

With Athelstan's death in 939 English rule over the Norse kingdom of York became extremely precarious; and a great part of the reigns of his brothers Edmund (939–46) and Eadred (946–55) was spent in the attempt to re-establish Athelstan's supremacy in the north. The key to much of the fighting of this period is the growing antagonism between Norse and Dane in the kingdom of York, and the close links between the Vikings and their Scandinavian homeland. Norse war-lords were established between the Humber and the Tees, and Norse settlers in the north-west. But in the Danish areas south of the Humber the Norse kings of York were never popular, and never won more than a temporary supremacy. Late in Edmund's reign and early in Eadred's, the English kings were successful for brief periods in mastering the north. But in the middle years of Eadred's reign two distinguished Vikings, one from Ireland and one from Norway, held sway at York. Eric Bloodaxe indeed had been King of Norway for a time, and had made a considerable name for himself for violence and adventure. After his expulsion he twice succeeded in

winning the kingdom of York (948–9, 952–4). But it was difficult even for a great Viking leader like Eric to establish himself on English soil for any length of time. In 954 the Northumbrians expelled him, and Eadred ruled over the whole of England. In the following year he died.

Thus, after some vicissitudes, the inheritance of Edward the Elder and Athelstan passed into the next generation intact and well established. It was well that it did so, because the next generation was represented by Edmund's sons, of whom the elder, Eadwig, cannot have been more than fifteen and the younger, Edgar, was twelve. Eadwig lived only four years after his accession; long enough to acquire an evil reputation in those circles to which we owe record of his reign, not long enough to redeem it by any notable act. It is noteworthy that several of the leading associates of his brother, Edgar, had already been promoted under Eadwig; but that Eadwig quarrelled with the greatest of Edgar's colleagues, St. Dunstan. It was probably to this quarrel, whose true origin is quite obscure, that Eadwig owed his bad reputation.

(2) 959–75: *Edgar and the Monastic Revival*

Edgar began his reign while still a boy and died in his early thirties; the prestige he acquired is all the more remarkable. As a soldier, Edgar acquired little glory, because, as one version of the Chronicle has it, 'God granted him to live his days in peace'. But his reign was not weak, and his prestige stood very high. In 973, at the age of thirty—the age when a man might be ordained priest—Edgar was solemnly anointed and crowned king by Archbishop Dunstan, in a ceremony which laid special emphasis on the analogies of kingship and priesthood, and provided for the first time in England a fully elaborated coronation service on the Frankish model. The coronation emphasised the divine source of royal authority, and the close bonds between king and Church. Later in the same year, in an equally famous scene at Chester, Edgar received the submission of seven Welsh and Scottish kings—who rowed him, as legend has it, on the Dee, between his palace and the church of St. John. This show of power was accompanied by an act of policy which was probably characteristic of Edgar. The King of Scots became Edgar's man; in return Edgar granted him Lothian, the land between the Tweed and the Forth, a country always remote from English authority and difficult to control. The grant was the first step towards establishing the present frontier of England and Scotland. Within England itself, Edgar recognised that English and Danes lived by different customs, and he allowed the Danes to regulate their own customs; thus recognising the existence and native rights of a vital minority in his kingdom.

The coronation ceremony in 973 was the climax of the collaboration between the King and his chief councillor, Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury. Like Lanfranc and Stephen Langton in later days, Dunstan combined the fullest appreciation of the spiritual aspect of his office with political statesmanship of a high order. The dual capacity of a bishop's office, on the one hand, that of royal councillor and leading subject, on the other, that of spiritual leader, was often an embarrassment to a conscientious medieval bishop. Dunstan, like Lanfranc, lived both lives to the full. In Dunstan's case the difference was hidden by his strong conviction that Church and state were one; that the king was natural ruler of the Church, 'king and priest'. This union of offices did not give the king the specifically clerical function of performing the rites and administering the sacraments of the Church; but it meant that in return for protection and patronage the Church recognised in him God's instrument for controlling its government. The close liaison of king and Church gave a special character to the English Church; and the Church's support made possible the dramatic developments in English government in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. ...

(3) 975–1016: *Ethelred II and the Danes*

Edgar died suddenly, while still a young man, in 975, and was succeeded in turn by his two sons, Edward (975–8) and Ethelred (978–1016). Edward was very young, yet he managed in his brief rule to alienate a number of his subjects by his insufferable manners and bad temper. In 978 he was treacherously murdered, and replaced by Ethelred, who was then still a boy.

The crime which brought him to the throne cast a shadow over the reign of Ethelred and may partly explain the stunted weakness of his character throughout life. It was not the violence of the murder but the treachery of it—betrayal of a lord by his subjects—which shocked contemporaries. In 1008 Ethelred issued a code including this clause: 'The councillors have decreed that St. Edward's festival is to be celebrated over all England on 18 March.' In this ironical fashion Ethelred was compelled to celebrate the event which had

made him king. The name Ethelred means literally 'noble counsel'. We do not know whose wit first devised the pun 'no counsel', 'unr'd', for the unfortunate king; the nickname is first recorded in the thirteenth century. But the word had other meanings too, including 'evil counsel', 'a treacherous plot'. If it was devised in his lifetime, it would certainly have got home. The subtlety of the nickname has been lost in the modern corruption 'Ethelred the Unready', though that too is not inappropriate.

The death of a king of high prestige was commonly followed by disorder among leading nobles hitherto held in check by fear or respect for the dead man. To the disorder following Edgar's death was added the horror of Edward's 'martyrdom'. But greater misfortune than these was in store for the unfortunate Ethelred. The mainland of Scandinavia, remarkably quiescent since the fall of Eric Bloodaxe, was ready for another wave of expansion; Viking attacks began again; and the unsettled politics of England combined with England's growing wealth to make it a favoured target.

The second wave of Danish attacks began, like the first, with plundering raids. But the attacks of the period 980–1016 differed fundamentally from those of the ninth century. From the early nine-nineties they became large-scale, highly organised raids, planned by the leading figures of the Scandinavian world, conducted by highly professional armies. This phase lasted until 1013, when Swein, the Danish King, decided to take over the government of his prey, and came in person.

The first of the great leaders of the Vikings in the nine-nineties was Olaf Tryggvason, who came in the raid of 991 which led to the battle of Maldon, celebrated in the poem quoted in an earlier chapter. Olaf shortly after became the first Christian King of Norway; but he never ceased to be a Viking adventurer. In 994 he came accompanied by Swein, heir to the throne of Denmark, at the head of a formidable host. There was talk of making Swein King of England; but his alliance with Olaf was precarious and his campaign not wholly successful, so he agreed to peace for a payment of £16,000. In most years after this, down to 1006, a Danish host attacked England and levied plunder or tribute—the 'Dane-geld'—or both. Then came a gap of two years, when Ethelred and his councillors made feverish attempts to prepare the country's defences against further attacks. From 1009 the attacks were continuous, and aimed for the first time at the conquest of the kingdom.

More than one of the Icelandic sagas describes the legend of how Harold Bluetooth, Swein's father, had built a great fortress at Jomsborg, near the mouth of the Oder, on the German mainland. It consisted, so they tell us, of a fort and fortified harbour; a large military base, accommodating several thousand professional soldiers, on a permanent war footing. The leaders of these troops in the fortress included Thorkell the Tall, and Swein himself. It has long been disputed how much truth there is in the legend, and the existence of Jomsborg is still in doubt. But the part of the story which was at one time most generally doubted was the size and nature of the camp. In recent years the general truth of this picture has been dramatically confirmed by archaeology. Four forts similar in character to that described in the sagas have been discovered in Scandinavia itself. Three of them, capable of holding about 3,000 men each, probably belong to Swein's own time; the fourth and largest was constructed somewhat later. Clearly a large professional army existed in the time of Swein; and this formidable force would have daunted a more capable warrior than Ethelred.

Swein's armies in 1009 were led by three experienced Vikings, including Thorkell the Tall and one of his brothers. From 1009 to 1012 they raided many English shires systematically. In 1012 they made peace with the English in exchange for an immense ransom, assessed in the *Chronicle* at £48,000. But before the Danes would disperse, they demanded an extra ransom from their most illustrious prisoner, Aelfheah, Archbishop of Canterbury. Aelfheah first agreed, then felt this concession to be wrong and withdrew it. Thorkell struggled to control his men; but they were in ugly mood and murdered the Archbishop in barbarous fashion. Before the end of the year Thorkell and forty-five ships from the Danish fleet went over to Ethelred. It is likely that the two incidents were connected.

In 1013 Swein himself came to England for the third and last time—he had raided in the country in 994 and 1003. This time he was determined on conquest, and after a rapid campaign described in brief but vivid phrases by the chronicler he was accepted as king over most of the country. Then in February 1014 he suddenly died. The period between the death of Swein and the final acknowledgment of his son, Cnut, as king, at the end of 1016 is exceedingly confusing. At the time of his father's death Cnut was about eighteen,

and the sudden access of responsibility was evidently too much for him. He withdrew hastily from England; and when he returned, he was supported by three great Viking leaders, his elder brother, Harold, King of Denmark, Eric, the Regent of Norway, and Thorkill the Tall, who had returned to his old allegiance. At one point Cnut held Wessex and Mercia, while Edmund 'Ironside', Ethelred's son, held the northern Danelaw—both in defiance of King Ethelred, who was still holding out in the south-east. It was Cnut's unheralded withdrawal which had alienated the Danelaw and made Edmund's intrusion there possible; while in spite of the momentary recovery of Ethelred in 1014 and 1015, there was treachery in the English court, which aided Cnut to overrun Wessex and Mercia. Ethelred died in April 1016; a few months later Edmund was decisively beaten by Cnut, and the uneasy truce which followed was quickly ended by Edmund's sudden death. The events of the civil war had shown that there was no simple division of loyalty between English and Danes, and that a number of leading thegns and jarls were prepared to support a monarch from either side, if he proved more competent than Ethelred, and capable of holding the allegiance of his subjects. It was this circumstance which made possible the notable success of the young Cnut.

(4) 1016–35: *The Reign of Cnut*

King Edgar had recognised that his subjects lived by two divergent sets of customs, English and Danish. The events which followed his death had shown that Viking leaders from Scandinavia could still find allies in the Danelaw; and that under exceptional pressure, both English and Danes were prepared to submit to a Viking lord. At first sight it seems surprising that the first ruler of a really united England should have been a Dane; but on closer inspection the paradox is easy to understand. Divergent customs and language, links with the north and memories of past glory would tend to make the Danes and Norwegians uneasy subjects of a native English king. The Danes in England, however, had had some generations' experience of English rule—of the rule, that is, of the most considerable monarchy, apart from the German, in northern Europe. They had experienced some of the benefits of a regime more stable than those to which they had been accustomed in Scandinavia, while suffering as much as the native English from the constant passage of armies and levying of tribute in Ethelred's later years. Cnut was thus doubly attractive to them: as a Danish overlord and as a man who could restore peace and stable government. In other ways too Cnut was ideally placed for binding both peoples together in allegiance to himself. Swein had been accepted by a large proportion of the thegns as king; and, as Swein's son, Cnut had some show of legitimacy. This he confirmed by marrying the young widow of King Ethelred, Emma, a Norman princess, whose advent foreshadows the events of fifty years later. In 1019 he became King of Denmark on his brother's death, and to this he added Norway for a time, and even claimed some part of Sweden. He was for most of his reign in England far and away the greatest lord of the Viking world, and so a natural centre of loyalty for English Scandinavians, and a guarantee of peace to his English subjects.

In the north he reigned as a Viking king; in England as the successor to King Edgar. In England he was a model of piety and good government; in Denmark the regency of his English concubine, Aelfgifu of Northampton, and her son, symbolised an irregularity of life not uncharacteristic of the Viking world shortly after its conversion to Christianity. At Oxford in 1018, 'King Cnut with the advice of his councillors completely established peace and friendship between the Danes and the English and put an end to all their former strife,' as the official record describes it. The councillors 'determined that above all things they would ever honour one God and steadfastly hold one Christian faith, and would love King Cnut with due loyalty and zealously observe Edgar's laws.' As well as needing exhortation to piety the Danes needed to be paid off, and a levy of Dane-geld which the *Chronicle* assesses at the enormous figure of £82,500 was necessary for this. Forty ships and a number of Viking leaders remained with Cnut; the rest sailed for Denmark. From then on Cnut's reign in England saw remarkably little incident. He was very well served, both in defence and lay administration by his Danish earls, led by Thorkell and Eric, and in all the aspects of government requiring literacy by his bishops and the clerks of his chapel, led by Wulfstan II, Archbishop of York (1002–23). Through the influence and writings of this distinguished preacher and statesman the character of the English Church and of English government as laid down by Edgar and Dunstan was preserved. Wulfstan first made his mark in the reign of Ethelred, whose laws he framed, denouncing the while the chaos and wickedness of Ethelred's England. Under Cnut he continued to be a leading councillor, to draft laws and to represent in other ways the continuity of English government. Monastic influence in

Church and government was still strong; but there were beginning to be signs of an influential secular (i.e. non-monastic) element in the upper clergy. The clerks of the royal chapel, the men who sang daily mass before the king and maintained all the services of the royal court, and also wrote his letters and charters and carried out any business demanding a literate or an educated hand, were beginning once again in Cnut's later years to find their way to bishoprics. But in most respects the English Church maintained the traditions of Edgar's day; including the tradition of royal patronage and royal authority. In other respects, too, Edgar was regarded as the model of English kingship. The councillors at Oxford in 1018 'determined that ... they would ... zealously observe Edgar's laws', thus ignoring Ethelred and the period of anarchy and misgovernment which had intervened since Edgar's death.

In some respects English traditions of government were developed; in one respect considerably modified. In Denmark and Norway the authority of the kings had always been qualified by the considerable measure of freedom which they were compelled to allow to their leading jarls or earls. A strong king kept his earls in check, won their steady support. A weak king was ruled by them, or ignored or deposed by them. In conquering England, Cnut owed a great deal to his leading supporters. They naturally expected a corresponding reward. A number of them attained high positions in Cnut's court, and he was regularly attended by his Danish bodyguard, his housecarles, who from this time formed the permanent nucleus of the English army. It is a symptom of the change in personnel that the title of the Old English ealdorman came to be replaced by the Scandinavian jarl, or earl. Six of the sixteen earls of this time whose names are known were English, but only one family maintained through Cnut's reign the power it had had under Ethelred. Leofwine, Ealdorman of the Hwicce (Gloucestershire and Worcestershire), was succeeded by his son Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and Leofric's grandsons survived into the reign of William the Conqueror. Another Englishman, Godwin, who became Earl of Wessex, owed his position to his loyal service to Cnut. (Godwin's sons in due course became earls also of Northumbria, East Anglia, and the home counties, and the most famous of them, Harold, was to be the last of the Old English kings.) In Cnut's time the other great earldoms, Northumbria and East Anglia especially, were in Danish hands. Northumbria went first to Eric of Norway, later to Siward, 'old Siward' of *Macbeth*, whose long reign on the northern border ended only in 1055, and whose son survived the Norman Conquest. Thus the great earls, at first primarily the pillars of Cnut's court and leaders of his army, gradually acquired immense possessions and a territorial power comparable to that which they might have held in Denmark or Norway. In every way but this, Cnut's reign was a constructive period in the history of the English monarchy. When his strong hand was removed by his early death in 1035, the earls came near to dismembering the state.

In 1027, like several of his predecessors, Cnut went on pilgrimage to Rome, to visit the tombs of the apostles and all its many other sanctuaries and holy places. He chose his time well. His visit coincided with the coronation of the Emperor Conrad II by the Pope, and all the princes of the Empire were there; 'and they all received me with honour, and honoured me with lavish gifts' as Cnut himself proudly said in a letter which was sent on his behalf to England to describe the scene. At the same time he won privileges for English pilgrims to Rome, and no doubt took the chance to hold conversations with the Emperor, since the frontier between Denmark and Germany was uneasy. The pilgrimage was the characteristic act of a man of conventional piety, and a distinguished patron of the Church; it also underlined Cnut's determination to act in the tradition of the English kings—and to cut a figure in European society. He was the greatest monarch in northern Europe in his day, and was evidently much flattered to be well received by Pope and Emperor.