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ALFRED THE GREAT

Asser's Life of King Alfred
and other contemporary sources



TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
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Introduction

1. King Alfred the Great

The reign of King Alfred the Great (871-99) is among the most stirring periods of English history. It saw the kingdom of Wessex taken from the brink of Viking conquest to the threshold of an undertaking that led eventually to the political unification of England. It is a story of enduring personal interest, for Alfred himself emerges as a man who had to overcome considerable difficulties in effecting the survival of his kingdom, and whose practical intelligence and vision contributed both materially and spiritually to the future prosperity of his country.

The general pattern of events during the reign is clear. A Viking army, described by contemporaries as 'a great heathen army', invaded England in 865 and met little effective resistance as it passed through the ancient kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia, forcing each in turn to sue for peace. It was only a matter of time before the Vikings turned their attention to Wessex, and indeed when Alfred became king of the West Saxons in 871 his kingdom was already in the throes of a desperate struggle against the invading army. Under Alfred's leadership the West Saxons fought and bargained for their survival, though their fate remained in the balance until Alfred's famous victory over the Vikings at Edington in 878. His success discouraged another Viking army, which had arrived in the Thames in the same year, from seeking its fortune in Wessex, and while that army directed its efforts to ravaging on the Continent, Alfred embarked on a comprehensive programme of reform. He devised a new system for the defence of his kingdom and overhauled procedures of royal government, but most remarkably he initiated a scheme for the encouragement of learning and involved himself personally in its implementation. When the Viking army returned to England in 892,

DOMINO MEO VENERABILI PISSIMOQUE
OMNIVM BRITANNIE INSULAE XPIANO
RVM . RECTORI . ALFRED . ANGLORVM SAXO
NYM . REGI . ASSER . OMNIVM . SERVO
RVM DEI ULTIMVS . MILLE MODAM
ADVOTA DESIDERIORVM . VTRIVSQUE
VITAE . PROSPERITATEM .

ANNO DOMINICAE
INCARNATIONIS . DCCC . XLIX . NATVS
EST ALFRED ANGL SAXONVM REX IN VLLA
REGIA QUE DICITVR MANATING MILL APAGA
QUE NOMINAT² BERROC SCIRE QUE PAGAZAH TER
UOCATUR ABERROC SILVA UBIBUXUS BABUNDAN
EISSIME NASIT² CUIVS GENELOGIA TALIS TALIS ERIT

Facsimile of the beginning of Asser's Life of King Alfred in Cotton
Otho A.xii, written c. 1000. (The facsimile was published in 1722, a few
years before the manuscript itself was destroyed by fire: see pp. 223-5.)

TO MY ESTEEMED AND MOST HOLY LORD, ALFRED, RULER OF
ALL THE CHRISTIANS OF THE ISLAND OF BRITAIN, KING
OF THE ANGLES AND SAXONS, ASSER, LOWEST OF ALL
THE SERVANTS OF GOD, WISHES THOUSANDFOLD PROSPERITY
IN THIS LIFE AND IN THE NEXT, ACCORDING TO THE DESIRES
OF HIS PRAYERS.

1. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 849 Alfred, king of the
Anglo-Saxons,¹ was born at the royal estate called Wantage,² in the
district known as Berkshire (which is so called from Berroc Wood,
where the box-tree grows very abundantly).³ His genealogy is woven
in this way:⁴ King Alfred was the son of King Æthelwulf, the son of
Egbert, the son of Ealhmund, the son of Eafa, the son of Eoppa, the
son of Ingild. Ingild and Ine, the famous king of the West Saxons,
were two brothers; Ine journeyed to Rome, and honourably ending
this present life there he entered the heavenly land to reign with
Christ. They were the sons of Cenred, the son of Ceolwold, the son
of Cutha, the son of Cuthwine, the son of Ceawlin, the son of
Cynric, the son of Creoda, the son of Cerdic, the son of Elesa, the
son of Gewis (after whom the Welsh call that whole race the Ge-
wisse),⁵ the son of Brand, the son of Bældæg, the son of Woden, the
son of Frithuwald, the son of Frealaf, the son of Frithuwulf, the son
of Finn, [the son of] Godwulf, the son of Geat (whom the pagans
worshipped for a long time as a god). The poet Sedulius mentions
Geat in his poem *Carmen Paschale*, as follows:⁶

Since the pagan poets sought in their fictions to swagger either in high-
flowing measure, or in the wailing of tragedy's speech, or with comedy's
absurd Geta, or by means of any sort of verse whatever to relate the violent
crimes of evil deeds and sing of monumental wickedness, and with scholarly
application commit these many lies to paper: why should I – a poet accustomed
to chanting the measures of the harp in the manner of David, and of taking
my place in the holy chorus and hymning heavenly melodies in pleasing
diction – be silent concerning the renowned miracles of Christ who brought
us salvation?

Geat was the son of Tætwa, the son of Beaw, the son of Sceldwa, the
son of Heremod, the son of Itermon, the son of Hathra, the son of
Hwala, the son of Bedwig, the son of Seth, the son of Noah, the son
of Lamec¹, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, [the son of
Jared], the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, the son of Enos, the
son of Seth, the son of Adam.

2. Concerning his mother's family. Alfred's mother was called Osburh, a most religious woman, noble in character and noble by birth. She was the daughter of Oslac, King Æthelwulf's famous butler.⁷ Oslac was a Goth by race,⁸ for he was descended from the Goths and Jutes, and in particular, from the line of Stuf and Wihtgar, two brothers – indeed, chieftains – who, having received authority over the Isle of Wight from their uncle King Cerdic and from Cynric his son (their cousin), killed the few British inhabitants of the island whom they could find on it, at the place called *Wihtgarabyrig*;⁹ for the other inhabitants of the island had either been killed before or had fled as exiles.¹⁰

3. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 851 (the third of King Alfred's life),¹¹ Ceorl, ealdorman of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the Vikings¹² at the place called *Wicganbeorg*,¹³ and the Christians had the victory. And in the very same year, for the first time, the Vikings spent the winter on the Isle of Sheppey (which means 'island of sheep'),¹⁴ situated in the river Thames between Essex and Kent, but nearer to Kent than to Essex; an excellent monastery is established on the island.¹⁵

4. In the same year a great Viking army, with 350 ships, came into the mouth of the river Thames, and ravaged Canterbury (the city of the men of Kent) [and London]¹⁶ (situated on the northern bank of the river Thames, on the boundary of Essex and Middlesex, though the city properly belongs to Essex); they put to flight Berhtwulf, king of the Mercians, who with all his army had come to do battle against them.

5. After these things had happened there, the Viking army moved on to Surrey (a district situated on the southern bank of the river Thames, to the west of Kent). Æthelwulf, king of the Saxons, and his son Æthelbald, with the whole army, fought for a very long time at the place called *Aclea* (that is, 'oak field');¹⁷ and there, when battle had been waged fiercely and vigorously on both sides for a long time, a great part of the Viking horde was utterly destroyed and killed, so much so that we have never heard of a greater slaughter of them, in any region, on any one day, before or since; the Christians honourably gained the victory and were masters of the battlefield.

6. In the same year Æthelstan¹⁸ and Ealdorman Ealhhere slaughtered a great Viking army at Sandwich in Kent, and captured nine ships from their fleet; the others escaped by flight.

7. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 853 (the fifth of King Alfred's life), Burgred, king of the Mercians, sent messengers to Æthelwulf, king of the West Saxons, asking him for help, so that he could subject to his authority the inland Welsh, who live between Mercia and the western sea and who were struggling against him with unusual effort. As soon as King Æthelwulf had received his embassy, he assembled an army and went with King Burgred to Wales, where immediately on entry he devastated that race and reduced it to Burgred's authority. When he had done this, he returned home.

8. In the same year King Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome in state, accompanied by a great number of both nobles and commoners. At this time the lord Pope Leo was ruling the apostolic see; he anointed the child Alfred as king, ordaining him properly, received him as an adoptive son and confirmed him.¹⁹

9. Also in the same year Ealdorman Ealhhere, with the men of Kent, and Huda, with the men of Surrey, fought vigorously and fiercely against the Viking army on the island called Thanet in English and *Ruim* in Welsh;²⁰ the Christians initially had the upper hand, but the battle there lasted for a long time and many men on both sides fell or were drowned in the water. Both those ealdormen died there. After Easter in this year, Æthelwulf, king of the West Saxons, gave his daughter to Burgred, king of the Mercians, as queen, at the royal estate called Chippenham,²¹ and the marriage was conducted in royal style.

10. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 855 (the seventh of the king's life), a great Viking army stayed for the entire winter on the Isle of Sheppey.²²

11. In the same year Æthelwulf, the esteemed king, freed the tenth part of his whole kingdom from every royal service and tribute, and as an everlasting inheritance he made it over on the cross of Christ to the Triune God, for the redemption of his soul and those of

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But as if he derived no consolation from all these things, and suffered no greater distress of any kind inwardly and outwardly (and he did, to the extent that he would cry out in anguish by day and night to the Lord and to all those who were known to him on terms of intimacy), he used to moan and sigh continually because Almighty God had created him lacking in divine learning and knowledge of the liberal arts. In this respect he resembled the holy, highly esteemed and exceedingly wealthy Solomon, king of the Hebrews, who, once upon a time, having come to despise all renown and wealth of this world, sought wisdom from God, and thereby achieved both (namely, wisdom and renown in this world), as it is written, 'Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and his justice, and all these things shall be given to you' [Matthew vi, 33].¹⁵⁹ But God, who is ever the observer of our internal desires and the instigator of all our thoughts and good intentions, and also – so that these good intentions may be fulfilled – a most generous overseer (for He never initiates any good intention, nor does He bountifully bring it to fulfilment, unless the person appropriately and rightly desires it to be so), stimulated King Alfred's intelligence from within, not from without, as it is written, 'I will hear what the Lord God speaks in me' [Psalm lxxxiv, 9], so¹⁶⁰ that he could acquire helpers in this good intention of his, who would be able to help him attain to the desired wisdom and enable him to fulfil his wishes whenever possible. Accordingly, just like the clever bee¹⁶¹ which at first light in summertime departs from its beloved honeycomb, finds its way with swift flight on its unpredictable journey through the air, lights upon the many and various flowers of grasses, plants and shrubs, discovers what pleases it most and then carries it back home, King Alfred directed the eyes of his mind far afield and sought without what he did not possess within,¹⁶² that is to say, within his own kingdom.

77. At that point God (being unable to tolerate so well-intentioned and justifiable a complaint any longer) sent some comforts for this royal intention – certain luminaries, as it were: Werferth,¹⁶³ the bishop of Worcester, a man thoroughly learned in holy writings who at the king's command translated for the first time the *Dialogues* between Pope Gregory and his disciple Peter from Latin into the English language, sometimes rendering sense for sense, translating intelligently and in a very polished style;¹⁶⁴ then Plegmund,¹⁶⁵ arch-

bishop of Canterbury, a Mercian by birth and an estimable man richly endowed with learning; and also Æthelstan and Werwulf, both priests and chaplains, Mercians by birth and learned men.¹⁶⁶ King Alfred summoned these four men to him from Mercia,¹⁶⁷ and showered them with many honours and entitlements in the kingdom of the West Saxons (not counting those which Archbishop Plegmund and Bishop Werferth already possessed in Mercia). The king's desire for knowledge increased steadily and was satisfied by the learning and wisdom of all four men. By day or night, whenever he had any opportunity, he used to tell them to read aloud from books in his presence – indeed he could never tolerate being without one or other of them – and accordingly, he acquired some acquaintance with almost all books, even though he could not at this point understand anything in the books by himself. For he had not yet begun to read anything.

78. However, since the royal 'greed' (which was entirely praiseworthy!) in this respect was not yet satisfied, he sent messengers across the sea to Gaul to seek instructors. From there, he summoned Grimbold,¹⁶⁸ a priest and monk and a very venerable man, an excellent chanter, extremely learned in every kind of ecclesiastical doctrine and in the Holy Scriptures, as well as being distinguished by his virtuous behaviour. Similarly, he summoned John,¹⁶⁹ also a priest and monk, a man of most acute intelligence, immensely learned in all fields of literary endeavour, and extremely ingenious in many other skills. Through their teaching the king's outlook was very considerably broadened, and he enriched and honoured them with great authority.

79. At about this time I too was summoned by the king from the remote, westernmost parts of Wales, and I came to the Saxon land. When I had taken the decision to travel across great expanses of land to meet him, I arrived in the territory of the right-hand [southern]¹⁷⁰ Saxons, which in English is called Sussex, accompanied by some English guides. There I saw him for the first time¹⁷¹ at the royal estate which is called Dean.¹⁷² When I had been warmly welcomed by him, and we were engaged in discussion, he asked me earnestly to commit myself to his service and to become a member of his household,¹⁷³ and to relinquish for his sake all that I had on the left-hand [northern] and western side of the Severn. He promised to pay me greater compensation for it (which indeed he was to do). I replied