

Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred & Other Contemporary Sources Study Guide

Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred & Other Contemporary Sources by Anonymity

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Plot Summary

Alfred the Great (849 - 899) was the King of Wessex from 871 through 899. He is most famous for being the king who, while hiding with a herdsman, let some cakes burn while he was deep in despondency. However, throughout British history he has been famous for other important accomplishments.

During his reign, Alfred tried to follow kings in the past who were both effective defenders of their kingdoms and who ruled with wisdom. He led a variety of kingdoms, including the English kingdoms of Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia, against Viking invasions of England that persisted throughout his life and thereafter. He also fought to revive the practice of the Christian religion in his kingdom and fought to translate and disseminate Christian writings in order to revive learning in England that he regarded as having been lost since the fall of Roman Britain.

Alfred is the only English king to be known as "the Great." Alfred is also widely renowned for having harmonized his kingdom's legal structure and improving its military defenses such that it could repel Viking invaders. He also set the stage for the unification of England by uniting other small kingdoms with his in Wessex which laid the groundwork and institutional framework for future unification. He is also responsible for the restoration of London and its return to English rule after a period of Viking control. Alfred is often regarded as the founder of the British Navy and is also known for his attempts to design a naval fleet that could repel the Vikings.

King Alfred was a deeply religious man who attended divine services and masses regularly and prayed each day. He learned to read and translated a variety of Latin documents himself, including the psalter, or the book of Old Testament psalms. He also financed the building of several monasteries and summoned a number of monks and priests to teach him and his children. One of these monks was a Welsh priest named Asser. Asser is most famous for his *The Life of King Alfred*, written in 893, which is one of the first biographies of a ruler in English history. It is also the source of most of contemporary historians' knowledge of Alfred's life and rule.

The book, *Alfred the Great*, contains an introduction that explains the details of Alfred's life. It also includes the entirety of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. Along with this work, the editors print and translate a number of other documents that inform historians about Alfred's life and person. For instance, they include the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a list of historical events from 888 to 900 that concern Alfred. They also include extracts from his writings and a variety of miscellaneous sources. The book is full of extensive notes and includes two appendices, the first of which analyzes the famous "burning of the cakes" story about Alfred and the second which analyzes the "Alfred Jewel," a piece of fine jewelry that Alfred likely commissioned.



Introduction, Section I, King Alfred the Great

Introduction, Section I, King Alfred the Great Summary and Analysis

King Alfred the Great ruled England from 871 to 899 A.D. During his reign, the kingdom of Wessex was protected against Viking conquest, and this battle ultimately led to English unification. King Alfred emerges as one who met many challenges to help his kingdom survive. Not much is known about the period but we do know that a Viking army invaded England in 865 and quickly crushed a variety of smaller kingdoms. Alfred was the king of Wessex and had come to rule the West Saxons in 871, when they were already under siege.

It was not clear whether Wessex would remain free until Alfred defeated the Vikings at Edington in 878, which discouraged another Viking Army. Alfred then focused on reform, created a defense system for the kingdom, changing procedures of government and started institutions of learning. The Viking Army returned in 892, but Alfred's new defenses were successful, repelling the Vikings by 896. He then spent the rest of his years on reform, allowing his successors to extend their power over areas that were once in danger from the Vikings which led to English unification. These achievements led Alfred to be known as King Alfred the Great.

Much of what we know about Alfred comes from the biography written about him by Asser, a monk from St. David's in Wales who was latter bishop of Sherborne. There is also the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, annals put together during and following Alfred's reign, which contains a narrative of the king's military activities. Third, there is a wealth of extra documentary material and finally there are King Alfred's own literary works.

The author next places King Alfred in historical context, tracing three themes that characterize the political history of Anglo-Saxon England in the first half of the ninth century. First, balance of power changes started to favor Wessex over Mercia, second, an alliance developed between the two kingdoms, and third, the impact of the Viking invasions.

Alfred was born in 849 at Wantage in Berkshire, the youngest son of King Aethelwulf from his first wife Osburh and the grandson of King Egbert; he had four older brothers and a sister. Asser claimed that Alfred was a favorite child and that Alfred regretted not having formal education in his youth. In 853, he was sent to Rome to receive spiritual advantages and two year later he went to Rome again with his widowed father. They also passed through Carolingian France, visiting with Charles the Bald, which may have influenced Alfred. Other events appear to have impacted him as well, such as Wessex's expansion into Sussex, Surry, Essex and Kent, and changes his older brothers brought while in power themselves.



Alfred came to power at a difficult time; many men had been lost and the rest were exhausted. Alfred was ill with an unknown disease as well. But he survived and his reign can be usefully divided into three periods: the first for survival against the Vikings (871-8), the years of reconstruction and reform (878-92) which include Alfred's education with various popular texts of the day, and the capture of London, and the kingdom defended period (892-9) where Alfred defended his growing and maturing kingdom against a new Viking onslaught. While the war ended in 896, little is known about the last three years of Alfred's life.

King Alfred is one of the few medieval rulers known as "the Great," a group which includes Charles the Great, Charlemagne, Otto the Great, King of the Germans, among others. Alfred's epithet developed later. It is not clear whether he was perceived as great during his day or whether this perspective on him came afterward. Asser clearly admired him and his views were obviously shared by some. However, it is unclear how his subjects thought of him.

However, even if his reputation was great, it certainly developed more and intensified after his death. It was probably promoted by eleventh and twelfth century historians. Eventually Alfred's fame surpassed that of all other Anglo-Saxon kings. After the sixteenth century, the epithet, "the Great" was permanently attached to his name. Later centuries attributed to him their own ideas. The eighteenth century saw his reforms as precursors to democratic government, and in the 19th century he was seen as the founder of the British navy and the British Empire.



Introduction, Section II, Asser and his Life of King Alfred

Introduction, Section II, Asser and his Life of King Alfred Summary and Analysis

Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is the first biography of an Anglo-Saxon king that historians know of, but we know little about Asser. He was Welsh from St. David's in the kingdom of Dyfed. His name is actually Hebrew, following the eighth son of Jacob. Some contemporary sources have a few references to Asser's activities in Wessex. Alfred describes him as his bishop who helped him translate Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*. Historians know that he was the bishop of Sherborne and he appears to have been a witness to several charters. He became bishop somewhere between 892 and 900 and died in 909.

Asser gives some biographical details about himself in his *Life of King Alfred*, although one historian theorized that the biography was written by a late-ninth-century forger because he saw it as containing various anachronisms. However, many historians have analyzed his claims and concluded that they collapse.

Asser's own notes about himself confirm that he was not only a priest but a bishop. He claims he was summoned by King Alfred from an obscure part of Wales and first met the king in 885. Asser may have met him through aiding negotiations between Welsh kings and Alfred. He probably stayed with Alfred around eight months and read aloud to the King whatever books were at hand. He then probably divided his time between Alfred's Kingdom and St. David's.

Asser wrote *The Life of King Alfred* in 893 but only a few manuscripts of unknown origin confirm this. It is also unclear how he learned of the various texts mentioned in his work. That said, he aided in the creation of Alfred's curriculum for many in his kingdom. His list of works does not suggest any exceptional learning and seems to have no mastery of prose style. His sentences are long and sprawling with unclear syntax. He also used archaic phraseology and the author discusses many of the unusual words he used.

Asser probably modeled the style of the book off of his knowledge of Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, but he does not imitate it slavishly. He also based the book principally on a piece of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The book is unfinished, and not recording Alfred's achievements in the 890s or his death. Historians do not know why.

Asser's *Life of King Alfred* may simply express his respect for the subject and not an attempt to write a systematic biography, although Asser claims it was written for the benefit of readers in Wales and he had a Welsh audience in mind when he wrote. However, it is not clear it was ever read widely in Wales, though it was read in England.

This may be because Asser never completed the book and so never implemented plans to circulate it. It also leaves out important events mentioned in other sources.



Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 1 - 32

Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 1 - 32 Summary and Analysis

Asser's Life of King Alfred begins with Asser's dedication of the work to Alfred "ruler of all the Christians of the island of Britain, King of the Angles and Saxons." It is divided into paragraphs. In the first paragraph, Asser notes that Alfred was born in 849 at the royal estate named Wantage within the Berkshire district. He then gives Alfred's lineage all the way back to Adam, reproduced as follows.

Alfred was the son of King Aethewulf, the son of Egbest, who was in turn the son of Ealhmund, son of Eafa, son of Eoppa, son of Inglid. Inglid and Ine, the king of the West Saxons, were brothers. Both men were sons of Cenred, the son of Ceolwold, the son of Cutha, son of Cuthwine, son of Ceawlin, son of Cynric, son of Creoda, son of Cerdic, son of Elesa, son of Gewis. Gewis was, in turn, the son of Bran, son of Baeldaeg, son of Woden, son of Frithuwald, son of Frealaf, son of Frithuwulf, son of Finn, son of Godwulf, son of Geat, who was the son of Taetwa, son of Beaw, son of Sceldwa, son of Heremod, son of Itermon, son of Hathra, son of Hwala, son of Bedwig, son of Seth, son of Noach, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, the son of Adam.

Paragraph two then lists Alfred's mother's family, which were descended from the Goths and Jutes. In paragraph three, Asser notes that in 851 Ceorl fought with the men of Devon against the Vikings and Christians were victorious. The Vikings then spent the winter on the Thames between Essex and Kent, so the Vikings were already in Britain in Alfred's early youth. That same year, the Vikings brought 350 ships to England through the Thames and nearly destroyed Canterbury, which is in the heart of Kent. The King of the Mercians, Berhtwulf, fought against them.

The Vikings moved to Surrey from there and the king of the Saxons, Aethelwulf and his son Aethelbald, fought them for a long time. Much of the Viking army was destroyed and the Christians were again victorious. Aethelstan slaughtered the Viking army at Sandwich in Kent and captured nine of their ships.

In 853, Burgred, the new king of the Mercians asked Aethewulf for help against the Vikings; Aethewulf obliged and went to Wales and devastated Vikings. He then sent Alfred to Rome for spiritual reasons. Pope Leo was pope at the time and anointed Alfred as king, ordaining him. The men of Kent and Surrey fought against the Vikings that same year. The Christians were winning but the battle exhausted both sides.

In 855, the Vikings stayed at Sheppey and Aethewulf freed a tenth of his Kingdom for his redemption from his sins. He then went to Rome with his son Alfred, who was his



favorite. He stayed for a year, bringing home a new wife (his first had died) named Judith, who was the daughter of Charles the Bald, king of the Franks. But during this time, King Aethelbald and the bishop of Sherborne, Ealhstan, plotted that he could not be allowed back in the kingdom. God prevented the expulsion, however, because the nobles would not allow it. The kingdom was then split between father and son, east to the father, west to the son. Upon King Aethewulf's return, the nation was happy but he did not expel his son, but ordered his wife to sit with him on the throne until he died. This was regarded as wicked, however, and started a "perverse and detestable custom." Alfred told Asser about it.

In that same time, Offa, the king of Mercia, frightened neighboring kings and his daughter, Eadburh, married the king of the West Saxons and acted like a tyrant. When the West Saxon king died, Eadburh went overseas to Charlemagne and wanted his son for marriage. However, Charlemagne then denied him to her; he then assigned her a large number of nuns and she became an abbess but only for a few years. She was caught in debauchery and expelled from the nunnery. She lived out her days in poverty and died in Pavia.

Aethewulf was in Rome for two years and drafted a document to keep his sons from fighting after his death; the document divided his kingdom and inheritance. When he died, Aethelbald, his son married his father's wife Judith and embarrassed the kingdom. In 860, Aethelbald died and Aethelberht his brother came to power and brought his brother's lands under his control. But then a Viking army laid waste to his city of Winchester. The Vikings were eventually defeated. After five more years, Aetheberht died. In 864, the Vikings formed a treaty with the men of Kent but the Vikings broke the truce and laid waste to Kent's east. In 866, Aethelred, Aethelberht's brother, took over as king but the Vikings came again to fight but the realm was defended.

Alfred was much beloved by everyone and was raised in the royal court. He was more handsome and well-behaved than his brothers. He was also wiser and began to teach himself to read. He was also a pious man but wanted to master the liberal arts desperately. He regretted not having teachers. When Alfred was nineteen in 867, the Vikings almost annihilated the entire Northumbrian army and Ealhstan, the bishop of Sherborne, died. In 868 married a wife from Mercia. The Vikings then went to Nottingham. Aethelred, then king, tried to conquer the Vikings but failed to conquer them.



Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 33 - 90

Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 33 - 90 Summary and Analysis

In 871, the Viking army left East Anglia and attacked the West Saxons. The Christians were victorious there and four days afterward King Aethelred and his brother Alfred combined forces. They then went to Reading and fought the Vikings, but were turned back. The Christians were in grief and ashamed and Asser then recounts the events of the battle. In a later battle, five Viking earls and one of two Viking Kings were killed in battle. The battle continued on and off for several weeks; the Vikings ultimately won and were reinforced by another Viking army.

The same year, after Easter, King Aethelred died after being a just king; Alfred, the heir apparent, took over. He was initially concerned that he could not repel the Vikings but he fought vigorously and won many battles against them with fewer men. The Saxons made peace with the Vikings that year on the conditions that the Vikings would leave them. In 872, The Vikings went to London and made peace with the Mercians. In 873, the Vikings left London and went to the Northumbrians. Asser then tracks various other movements of the Vikings and skirmishes between Alfred and the Vikings. The Vikings continued to harass the English countryside but with mixed results.

At the time, by 878, Alfred, with his small band of nobles, were in great distress over potential Viking attacks. On Easter of that year, Alfred began to fortify his kingdom by building a fortress at Athelney and struck out against the Vikings. He ultimately gained victory. After capturing, Cuthrum, the king of the Vikings, King Alfred baptized him, receiving him as his adoptive son.

By 880, Asser is again recording the movements of the Viking armies and Alfred's attempts to attack and repel them. The descriptions pass through 885. Alfred won great victories against them. This year Pope Marinus died and was friends with Alfred, releasing his kingdom from tribute and tax.

Asser then turns to describe the more intimate details of Alfred's life. In the early parts of his reign, Alfred suffered from a mysterious illness and it lasted between his twentieth and fortieth year. Many tried to cure him but could not. Alfred also prayed often for his infirmity to be removed and God ultimately removed it entirely. But he was particularly plagued at his wedding feast.

Alfred also had many children, such as Aethelflaed, the first-born, a daughter, and then Edward, then Aethelgifu, Aelfthryth, and Aetheward. Aethelflaed married Aethelred of the Mercians. Aethelgifu stayed a virgin and became a nun. Aetheward took to learning and learned to write, as did Edward and Aelfthryth.



Even during the wars, Alfred still directed his government, instructing his subjects. He also learned to read aloud in English and memorized poems. He also often participated in the mass and in psalms and prayers. Many came to submit themselves to his lordship and he was widely loved. However, he was often sad that God did not create him with divine learning and knowledge of the liberal arts. He greatly admired Solomon for his learning. To aid him, God sent Werferth, the bishop of Worcester, a learned man, to help him translate Pope Gregory's Dialogues. Then Plegmund, the Archbishop of Canterbury, also helped to teach him. His knowledge increased steadily. He also sought instructors from Gaul, such as a priest and monk named Grimbald. Asser was summoned during this time.

Asser stayed with the king and taught him during this time, but he came down with a fever at a monastery and had little hope to recover. When the illness passed, Asser devoted himself to the king. Many rulers gained Alfred's friendship during this time, and often benefited greatly from it, through wealth and protection. Asser came during this time and stayed with Alfred for eight months.

In 886, the Viking Army started up again. That year, Alfred restored London, which the Vikings had decimated. Then all the Angles and Saxons submitted themselves to him. In 887, the Vikings left Paris and the king of the Franks died. Alfred also started to read and translate Latin at this time. Asser then describes witnessing his learning to read while they were having a discussion about a passage of Scripture.



Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 91 - 106

Chapter I, Asser's Life of King Alfred, Paragraphs 91 - 106 Summary and Analysis

Asser then repeated Alfred's tribulations under his savage, unknown disease and was also constantly attacked by foreign peoples but he continued to grow in prominence. He was an excellent king and weathered many challenges. Those who disobeyed Alfred were often humiliated in shame. Asser then passes to discuss Alfred's accomplishments. First, he built two monasteries and then Asser discusses his appointees and some monastic intrigue and conspiracy. Alfred believed, based on a Scripture passage, that God would reward his tithing. When he received revenues, he apportioned much of it to secular affairs, to pay his army and servants, to reward his household, and government administration. Asser then discusses various other areas he contributed to.

The second part of the money went straight to God and was split into four parts. The first would go to the poor, the second on his monasteries, the third to the school and the fourth to neighboring monasteries. He also promised one half of his mental and bodily effort to God's service. Accordingly, he had six candles made that were burned constantly in front of holy relics from God's saints. He also served as a great judge and focused on the care of the poor.



Chapter II, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 888-900

Chapter II, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 888-900 Summary and Analysis

The story of King Alfred's rule comes from the records in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Asser, writing in 893, employed a translation of the annals from 851 to 887 to compose his Life of King Alfred. This chapter translates the annals that cover Alfred's life that pick up where Asser's Life of King Alfred left off.

In 888, King Alfred's sister, Aethelswith, died, as did Archbishop Aethelred. In 889, Alfred sent two couriers to Rome. In 890, the northern king, Guthrum died, King Alfred's godson who lived in East Anglia. The Vikings fought the Franks this year. In 891, the Franks, Saxons and Bavarians joined forces to repel the Vikings. A comet appeared that Easter. In 892, the great Viking army continued to travel across England and stopped near eastern Kent.

893 contains many more events. The Northumbrians and East Angles swore oaths to King Alfred and Alfred went out to fight two Viking armies. The Vikings split up into roving bands and so Alfred had to split his forces into offensive and defense. The rest of the annals that year describe the various battle movements across England, which make necessary an alliance of various English peoples under the command of King Alfred. In 894, the Viking army traveled to Wales but could not remain there due to too few resources. They traveled to siege Exeter and ravaged Sussex. Battles continue into 895, particularly near London.

In 896, the Vikings dispersed across East Anglia and Northumbria and across the sea to the Seine. Most of the English people were not afflicted but the mortality of cattle and men in those three years had caused great damage. The Vikings continued to attack, however and King Alfred had to continually repel them. In 897, Aethelhelm, ealdorman of Wiltshire, died, as did Heahstan, the bishop of London.

In 900, Alfred died six days before All Saints' Day. He ruled the whole English people, save that part that the Danes ruled. He ruled for twenty-eight and a half years and his son Edward succeeded him to the throne. Viking skirmishes continued that year, and four weeks before Alfred died, Aethelred, the ealdorman of Devon, died.



Chapter III, Extracts from the Writings of King Alfred

Chapter III, Extracts from the Writings of King Alfred Summary and Analysis

In 893, Asser informs the reader that the Bishop Werferth of Worcester translated Pope Gregory's Dialogues into English for King Alfred. The surviving translation of the Dialogues into Old English does not have his name on it, but is probably his. The Dialogues are one of the first works that Alfred had translated. Werforth's work would eventually be distributed to church centers in the kingdom. Alfred wrote a prose introduction. In the preface, Alfred claims that God told him to have heavenly works recorded and translated in order to give him spiritual consolation during earthly tribulations.

Alfred translated works for himself as well, the first of which was Pope Gregory's Pastoral Care. It probably dates to 890. The work focuses on the spiritual and intellectual traits that men in government needed. It was aimed primarily to religious offices but was sometimes phrased such that they would apply to secular offices. In the prose preface Alfred wrote, he explains why he wanted to translate the work and how he intends to circulate it. The preface helps understand King Alfred and the literary culture of his day. Alfred was concerned that England had once contained many books prior to it being ransacked and he wanted to restore it.

Also contained are some of Alfred's translations of the chapters of Pastoral Care, but the editor includes only excerpts. Chapter III concerns how the ruler must despise hardships and avoid a sense of security. In the text, Gregory argues from examples of the actions of the apostles and Jesus. He warns against the complacency caused by great riches. In Chapter IV, Gregory discusses how authority and government can distract the ruler's mind. Gregory also illustrates this point with Biblical exemplars.

The next work translated was Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy, which was among the most widely read books of the early Middle Ages; it is a conversation between Boethius and Lady Philosophy. The work is not explicitly Christian and Alfred wanted to generate an explicitly Christian message from it, so he often alters the passages. These alterations are important to historians because they indicate Alfred's spiritual and intellectual interests.

Alfred also translated St. Augustine's Soliloquies; it is a very free translation. The editor notes that, in reality, Augustine's work is a mere "departure point" for Alfred to reflect on the nature of the human soul, the immortality of the soul and how the soul knows God. The earlier parts of the translation follow Augustine more directly than the later parts. The details of the text largely reflected King Alfred's attempts to develop a Christian worldview of his own but rooted in the Church Fathers.



Alfred's final prose translation is of the Psalter. For a layman, Alfred was exceptionally religious. Asser reports that Alfred regularly listened to divine services and Mass and prayed each morning and evening. Alfred was very likely thoroughly familiar with the psalms, of which the psalter is composed. Many of the psalms express David's outrages with his enemies and his pleas to God for victory, which likely resonated with Alfred, and so we might see Alfred's translation as an act of his own personal devotion. He only translated the first fifty psalms and was probably barred from completion by his death. The translations are largely literal.



Chapter IV, Miscellaneous Sources for the Reign of King Alfred

Chapter IV, Miscellaneous Sources for the Reign of King Alfred Summary and Analysis

The first part of Chapter IV contains extracts from King Alfred's laws. His law-code was probably put together near the end of the 880s or early in the 890s and represents how Alfred tried to produce social order along with representing his political and ideological goals. The code has 120 sub-chapters, the first 43 of which are Alfred's laws and the rest of which are the laws of Ine, the West Saxon king. What follows is a variety of quotes from the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Alfred considers how Old Testament law can be applied to Christian nations. Alfred begins the legal code by claiming that he gathered the laws together that he himself did not create and divides them into those he likes and those he does not like.

The next document is a treaty between Alfred and Guthrum, king of the Vikings of East Anglia. Alfred had had victory over Guthrum in 878 and in the Viking invasion of 892. The treaty was produced in 886 when Alfred reconquered London. It draws the boundary between the "English" part of England and the southern land ruled by the Danes. The treaty is important because it illustrates part of Alfred's political activity.

King Alfred's will follows. It is the first of two surviving wills of Anglo-Saxon kings. It concerns to dispose of Alfred's private property that would not automatically be handed over to the next king. It starts by accounting for King Aethelwulf's arrangements to dispose of his private property and how his sons changed the will in 860 and 871. It also justified Alfred's claim to the property and represents his will for what will happen to it.

Alfred's son Edward will receive many of his important estates from Cornwall to Kent. His younger son Aethelweard will also get several estates, though south of Edward's. His wife and daughters will receive land in the heart of the kingdom and his nephews Aethelhelm and Aethelwold, along with his kinsman Osferth will receive less important estates in the east. Aethelwold is likely to have felt offense by his small share. This probably explains his rebellion against Edward just after Alfred died. The will was probably produced between 872 and 888.

The next document is King Alfred's charter for Ealdorman Aethelhelm. A charter in Anglo-Saxon England is often a document through which the king permitted land use to a particular individual or religious group. Only one thousand charters survive from the entire Anglo-Saxon period, and only a third of those are before the tenth century. None of King Alfred's charters survive in the original, but thirteen were copied and ten are probably authentic. The included translation is widely regarded as real. In the character, Alfred gives an estate to Aethehelm, Wiltshire's ealdorman, in 892. It also circumstances



the estate. The list of witnesses is of interest because it includes some of the priests Alfred hired in the 880s and confirms some of Asser's remarks.

The Archbishop of Rheims, Fulco, sent Alfred a letter around 886. It displayed how Alfred got the services of one of the scholars that helped him renew English learning. The letter responds to Alfred's request for help and tells him that Grimbald, a monk from St. Bertin's will be sent to him; the letter recommends Grimbald's abilities and asks that he be treated well.

Bishop Wulfsgie's preface to the translation of Gregory's Dialogues comes next. It is an Old English poem and accounts for the life and miracles of St. Benedict. The author is Wulfsgie, a friend of King Alfred and the Bishop of Sherborne prior to Asser, probably between 879 and 900. The poem was likely composed on the occasion of Wulfsgie's copying an exemplar translation of the Werferth translation. Wulfsgie, in the poem, asks the reader to pray for him and for Alfred.

The chapter also includes Aethelweard's account of Alfred's last years as king. Aethelweard was ealdorman of western shires in the last part of the tenth century. This piece translates a Latin manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the original manuscript has been lost. He describes the years 893 to 899 apart from the other annals and so is a separate and central source for that time. Aethelweard's meaning is partly hidden by his style.

The penultimate document is a set of two poems about King Alfred; they are short and written in double acrostics, i.e., the first and last letters of each line created a word of multiple words, sometimes of the names of the person to whom the poem is dedicated. The final document is The Burghal Hidage, which describes a network of fortified sites that Alfred created to defend Wessex. He started to produce them in the 880s. The document lists the burhs which formed the network.

Appendices

Appendices Summary and Analysis

The final chapter contains two appendices. The first concerns Alfred and the Cakes. The best-known story about King Alfred is about how, while hiding at a herdsman's house during one of his worst misfortunes, was so preoccupied that he didn't notice bread burning in the herdsman's oven. The herdsman's wife scolded him. We do not know the authenticity of the story, but it contributed to Alfred's fame. The earliest surviving version of the story was written in the late tenth century and was found in Cornwall. It had not been translated until the present book.

The second appendix concerns the Alfred Jewel, which was found in 1693 at North Petherton in Somerset. Oxford received it in 1718 and is kept today in the Ashmolean Museum. It is shaped like a pear within a gold frame. The frame surrounds a transparent piece of crystal which is placed on a design in cloisonné enamel. Gold plating is found in the back and it has a tree-like design on it. The gold extension upon it has the form of an animal head.

The inscription reads, "Alfred ordered me to be made." The jewel represents a seated man with a green sleeveless tunic. The jewel is 2.5 inches long, 1.5 inches wide, and 0.5 inches thick. The jewel is mostly like representative of Alfred the Great. Its workmanship is of high enough quality to be genuine. It is not clear who is depicted, be it Christ, one of the saints, or even Alfred himself. It is not clear what the jewel is supposed to be for, but the editor speculates.

Characters

King Alfred the Great

King Alfred the Great (849 - 899) was the King of Wessex from 871 - 899, and is the subject of the book that bears his name. He is its main character. The introduction is a summary of what historians know about his life, character, beliefs and achievements. The chapters also all concern him; Chapter 2 is Asser's Life of King Alfred which exclusively deals with events about King Alfred or that were of important that occurred under his reign. Chapter 3 contains a series of translations of documents that Alfred was involved with or did himself and Chapter 4 contains various extracts from contracts, treaties, etc. that Alfred was party to in one respect or another.

By all accounts, King Alfred was a man of extraordinary character for his day. Most kingdoms in the medieval periods was more or less ruled by glorified chieftains. Kings generally ruled over very small areas and were largely petty landlords who fought constant skirmishes with one another. But Alfred endeavored to be different. While he sought to defend his kingdom against the attacks of the Vikings, he never, again by all accounts, engaged in arbitrary conquest himself. Instead, he offered protection to surrounding English kingdoms, such as East Anglia, Northumbria and the like, in exchange for their submission to him with respect to military actions.

Alfred also had a remarkable and admirable domestic agenda. He built several fortifications of his kingdom that allowed him to more effectively repel the Vikings. Additionally, he harmonized the Wessex legal code and had a number of important philosophical and theological texts translated and dispersed so that his children and the children of noblemen might learn to read.

Asser

Asser (?? - 908/9) was summoned by King Alfred as one of the holy men that was to teach him how to read. He was a monk from Wales and St. David's, Dyfed, specifically. Asser rose to become Bishop of Sherborne in the 890s. Alfred summoned him in 885 to be one of those educated clergy that he was assembling and after a year of illness in Caerwent, Asser agreed.

Asser spent many years at King Alfred's side, so much so that, perhaps out of admiration, decided to write King Alfred's biography, Life of King Alfred. Only one original manuscript of Life of King Alfred survived to the modern period, but it was destroyed in 1731 in a fire. However, many transcriptions were created and was further improved on with additional information about Alfred. Asser helped Alfred to translated a number of important documents, including Pope Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care. In Life of King Alfred, Asser describes himself as one of Alfred's tutors and tells a detailed story about witnessing Alfred learning to read. Some have argued that Asser did not



actually write Life of King Alfred, but historians currently reject these views and accept the document as real.

There is further evidence that Asser was in King Alfred's court for some time because his name appears on charters that King Alfred commissioned as a witness. He also composed the Life of King Alfred in a style that indicates his writing style is appropriate to his time and place.

King Aethewulf

The king of Wessex before Alfred, Alfred was the youngest son with his first wife, Osburga.

Alfred's Brothers

Aethelwulf had five sons, Aethelstan, Aethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred and Alfred the Great, along with a daughter, Aethelwith. Alfred's older brothers were all kings, Aethelstan was the king of Kent and the other three were subsequent kings of Wessex.

The Vikings

Danish invaders of England throughout King Alfred's life and reign.

Pope Gregory the Great

Pope Gregory the Great was Pope of the Roman Catholic Church between 590 and 604; he also is the famous writer of Pastoral Care, which Alfred greatly admired and took part in translating into Old English.

Boethius

The author of the Consolation of Philosophy, which Alfred greatly admired and had translated.

St. Augustine

The author of the Soliloquies, which Alfred greatly admired and had translated.

Edward

King Alfred's son who ruled after him.



Bishops, Priests, Monks

Alfred was a deeply religious man who surrounded himself with bishops, priests and monks who helped him learn to read.

Local Kings

Alfred made alliances with many local kings in order to repel the Vikings. He ended up leading them in battle.

Nobles

Alfred got along well with local noblemen, who, by all accounts, widely admired him.



Objects/Places

Wessex

The area of southwestern England where Alfred was King.

Charles the Bald

The king of the Franks during most of Alfred's reign.

East Anglia

Northeast of Wessex, East Anglia was a kingdom that allied himself with Alfred.

Northumbria

An area of northern England whose king allied himself with Alfred.

Mercia

An area of central England whose king allied himself with Alfred.

Kent

An area of southeastern England whose king allied himself with Alfred.

London

One of the major cities near Alfred that was captured by the Vikings, later liberated by Alfred.

Viking Invasions

Viking invasions of England were a constant threat in the late 9th century.

Education

Alfred was a great lover of learning and had a variety of works translated so that learning could be restored in his kingdom and England broadly speaking.



The Burghal Hidage

An Anglo-Saxon document that lists the fortified "burhs" in Wessex and in other parts of southern England. Alfred the Great is said to have designed the system depicted to protect Wessex and surrounding territories from the Vikings.

The Psalter

A book containing the Old Testament psalms that Alfred was translating by himself when he died.

Translations

Alfred commissioned a number of important translations of Latin documents into Old English, many of which he did himself and which illuminate some of his preoccupations and interests.

Asser's Life of King Alfred

Written by Asser in 893, it is one of the earliest biographies of an English king.

Battles

A number of important battles were fought by Alfred during his reign that safeguarded England against Viking rule.

Laws, Treaties, Wills, Charters

Alfred was responsible for a number of laws, treaties, charters and his will, all of which have something to say about his life and times.

The Cakes

A famous story about Alfred is that he allowed a local herdsman's cakes to burn while they were cooking.

The Alfred Jewel

A jewel that Alfred likely had created and which bears the inscription, "Alfred ordered me to be made."



Themes

Good and Wise Rule

In the 9th century, England was by and large a series of medieval fiefdoms. Most rulers were kings of relatively small areas and fought skirmishes with one another, occasionally uniting to repel a greater foe. Many were petty tyrants or vicious landlords, often oppressing their subjects. King Alfred the Great aspired to be different. He was raised with the ideal of kings of old that had ruled well and wisely and wanted his reign to be modeled after theirs.

For Alfred, his two tasks were to defend his realm and promote the common good of his kingdom. Towards completing his tasks, Alfred fortified Wessex and surrounding areas by building a series of burhs, towns that functioned as forts and defensive bases for English forces as well as centers for launching offensives against local Viking holdings. He also made an attempt to build something of a naval fleet in order to repel Viking invaders before they made landfall. Alfred was also able to bring together a number of local kings to fight together to repel the Vikings.

In many ways, Alfred's domestic achievements are more impressive. He was essential to the harmonization of Wessex's legal codes and was also responsible for significant educational reform. For instance, he had a number of philosophical and theological texts translated by a coterie of monks, priests and bishops he had hired that were intended to be distributed among aristocratic children and also donated heavily to charity.

Arguably Alfred's life goal of ruling wisely and well was accomplished.

Battle

The historical context of Alfred's reign reveals another important theme of the book. Much of the book's documents describe the details of battles between King Alfred and other English kings against a number of Viking invasions. The invasions occurred during the height of the Viking Age which ranged from the eighth to the eleventh century where Vikings expanded across Europe and even across the Atlantic in exploration, trade and warfare. In England, the Viking Age started in 793 when a group of Norwegian Vikings decimated an abbey, a famous center of learning. Monks were killed, drowned or enslaved. They next destroyed Northumbria's "Holy Island" which appalled many across Europe.

Raids continued into the 800s, with Viking raids peppering the English, Scottish and Irish countryside for centuries. However, the particular set of battles which plagued Wessex and surrounding areas began in 865, when a "Great Heathen Army" led by the Viking Brothers, Ivar, Halfdan and Ubbe Ragnarsson and by another Viking king



named Guthrum the Old, landed in East Anglia, adjacent to Wessex. They then conquered York in Northumbria and some settled there.

In 870 the "Great Summer Army" landed in England, which was led by a Viking King known as Bagsecg and his earls; they then planned to invade Wessex in 871; it was here that Alfred's reign began and here where Alfred had to begin combating the Viking armies. During this time, Alfred was able to retake London, which had been conquered by Viking armies, and his successors continued the fight. Alfred led many English peoples against the invaders and scored numerous victories against them; when the invasion ended, Alfred fortified his realm, as reported in the Burghal Hidage, which allowed the Vikings to be more easily repelled in the 890s.

Reform

King Alfred the Great, of Wessex, is well-known not only for military achievements however, but his significant and admirable attempts at domestic reform. Somewhere between 887 and 893, Alfred produced a long legal code that included some of his own laws and those of his seventh-century predecessor King Ine of Wessex, as reported in the book. These laws are contained in 120 chapters, which represent Moses's age when he died, and so 120 stood for law. The laws are convoluted in many places, but his code may be the first in Anglo-Saxon law.

Asser reports that despite the difficulties of the law, Alfred attempted to be a wise and judicious judge. Alfred always reviewed contested judgments, and there are reports of such hearings. Asser claims that Alfred demanded that his judges be able to read.

Alfred also attempted to revive learning and so brought a number of cleric scholars from Mercia, Wales and elsewhere to increase the ability of his kingdom to teach. He also created a court school that would educate his children, the sons of nobility and the intelligent children from lower houses. Alfred wanted to require that all those in offices of authority be literate and he demanded that those men know a variety of works that had been translated. Due to the Viking invasions, learning in England had dramatically declined, and Alfred is clearly saddened by this in his preface to the translation of Pope Gregory's Pastoral Care.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of Alfred the Great is multifaceted, containing primarily the perspectives of the editors, Asser, and King Alfred. The editors are clearly scholars of the highest order. Simon Keynes was a University Lecturer in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Trinity College in Cambridge, whereas Michael Lapidge is also a University Lecturer in the same department. They have composed the book with the greatest historical care, evidenced in particular by their attention to detail in the book's notes. Their perspective is dispassionate, as they are attempting to report, in clearest fashion, everything that historians know about King Alfred's life and personality, along with his times. They review several disputes concerning his history and then report the scholarly consensus. There is no discernible axe to grind.

The second perspective presented is that of Asser, the monk who wrote *Life of King Alfred*. Asser clearly is a deep admirer of Alfred's, and the admiration seems genuine, as it goes beyond what would ordinarily be required of a monk writing about a king in his day. Asser reports that the king was wise, pious and attempted to rule well, along with being courageous and skillful in battle. He also reports King Alfred's ambitious agenda for domestic and military reform and the delight he received while witnessing Alfred learning to read.

King Alfred's writings are brief but they reveal a man deeply interested in learning and regretful that he did not have the upbringing or time to have a more scholarly focus in his life. It is clear that Alfred had the aim of being a great, wise and fair king.

Tone

The tone of Alfred the Great has three general parts, following the perspective. The tone of the authors, Keynes and Lapidge, is that of scholars attempting to be as dispassionate as possible. While not boring, the authors simply report, to the best of their ability, the facts about King Alfred and related matters as historians understand them. They not only report dispassionately on events but on the historical methods used to learn about King Alfred, the sources of historical documents, areas of King Alfred's life and related matters about which historians are unsure and, best of all, concerning disputes within their profession about the reliability of many historical sources.

The tone of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is strikingly different. Asser's work is not an attempt to be neutral, but to write glowingly about a man he greatly admired and that was also his benefactor. Asser's dedication to Alfred is flowery and full of praise and the details of Alfred's life are completely positive. Almost nothing negative about Alfred is ever reported, although there is no indication of deliberate deception on Asser's part. Asser writes with circuitous prose, however, and seems intent on embellishing his

writing style to match the styles of writing with which he was likely most familiar. This makes his story-telling seem more grandiose and archaic than it might have otherwise appeared.

The final tone of the book is set by King Alfred himself. Alfred was responsible for commissioning a number of translations of important philosophical and theological works and even engaged in some translations himself. These actions left historians with some of Alfred's own writing, which are mostly in prefaces to translated works or reflected in the idiosyncrasies of his own translations. The tone of these documents is one of humility but a strong advocacy of learning.

Structure

Alfred the Great is one of the Penguin Classics books that concern important historical figures and periods. The authors, Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge published the work on King Alfred in 1983 and structured the book so as to report the most up-to-date information on King Alfred's life and surrounding events that historians were in possession of. The book also contains a number of primary and secondary sources concerning Alfred's life. The book is structured with an introduction, four chapters, two appendices and an extensive series of notes.

The Introduction is extensive and is replete with detailed analysis. It contains exhaustive details on Alfred's life, the sources of knowledge that historians have about his life, his youth, his reign and the cult of King Alfred that followed. It also contains a number of details about Asser, the monk who wrote *Life of King Alfred* and details concerning the document's construction and its passage down to the present day. The introduction also contains several maps and genealogical tables.

Chapter I is Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, printed in its full detail, whereas Chapter II is a reprint of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from 888 to 900 which provides a number of details about Alfred's life after the period covered by Asser, which ends in 893. Chapter III is a compilation of King Alfred's writings, mostly introductions to and translations of important works, and Chapter IV is a compilation of miscellaneous sources concerning his reign. The two appendices discuss the story of Alfred and the Cakes and the nature of the Alfred Jewel respectively, while the notes back up all the historical details in the previous part of the book.



Quotes

"The reign of King Alfred the Great is among the most stirring periods of English history." (Introduction, 10)

"As the stories multiplied and improved, Alfred's fame came easily to surpass that of all other Anglo-Saxon kings: perhaps a king whose personal qualities had made such a strong impression on his contemporaries would be expected to rise in popular estimation above kings known only from the bare record of their achievements, once those achievements had themselves been overtaken by subsequent events." (Introduction, 47)

"Asser's Life of King Alfred is the earliest known biography of an Anglo-Saxon king, and as such is an invaluable source for the study of early England." (Introduction, 48)

"But whereas Asser's biography throws precious light on his subject's life, the life of the royal biographer is unfortunately obscure." (Introduction, 48)

"To my esteemed and most holy lord, Alfred, ruler of all the Christians of the island of Britain, king of all the Angles and Saxons, Asser, lowest of all the servants of God, wishes thousandfold prosperity in this life and in the next, according to the desires of his prayers." (Chapter I, 67)

"Now, he was greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother - indeed, by everybody - with a universal and profound love, and he was always brought up in the royal court and nowhere else." (Chapter I, 74)

"In the same year Alfred, who until that time (while his brothers were alive) had been 'heir apparent', took over the government of the whole kingdom as soon as his brother had died, with the approval of divine will and according to the unanimous wish of all the inhabitants of the kingdom." (Chapter I, 80)

"He had promised to render to God, of his own accord and with all his strength, in so far as his health and resources and abilities would allow, one half of his mental and bodily effort both by day and night." (Chapter I, 107-8)

"In this year [900] Alfred son of Aethelwulf died six days before All Saints' Day." (Chapter II, 120)

"And therefore I sought and petitioned my true friends that they should write down for me from God's books the following teaching concerning the virtues and miracles of holy men, so that, strengthened through the exhortations and love they contain, I might occasionally reflect in my mind on heavenly things amidst these earthly tribulations." (Chapter III, 124)

"I, Alfred, king of the West Saxons, by the grace of God and with this witness, declare what I desire concerning my inheritance after my lifetime." (Chapter IV, 175)



"Without any doubt the best-known story concerning King Alfred is the account of how the king, while snatching a few days' anonymous refuge at the house of a herdsman during the period of his greatest misfortunes, was so preoccupied with his troubles that he failed to notice some loaves of bread burning in the oven: for this he was duly berated by the herdsman's wife." (Appendices, 197)

"Alfred ordered me to be made." (Appendices, 203)



Topics for Discussion

Why is King Alfred's reign significant for English history? Name three of his most important accomplishments.

What are the circumstances surrounding Asser's writing of *The Life of King Alfred*? Why do you think he wrote it?

Why did Alfred commission the translation of a number of philosophical and theological texts? Why did he translate many of them himself?

To what extent is King Alfred's religiosity significant for his rule and the impact of his rule?

In what way did Alfred lay the groundwork for future English unification?

What does Alfred's prose and the documents concerning him in Chapter III reveal about his character and interests?

Is the story of the cakes an accurate account of a real event in Alfred's life?

What is the evidence that the Alfred Jewel was made for King Alfred?