

## MILITARY INNOVATION

### PERFORMING ALFREDIAN IDEOLOGY

THROUGHOUT THE 870s and much of the 880s Wessex came perilously close to being overrun by Viking forces. By the mid-890s, against the odds, Wessex had repelled Viking attempts at conquest. This remarkable achievement was substantially due to a highly innovative defence system. Alfred's defence system required an extraordinary investment of labour and materials over an extended period of time. The resources required were well beyond the capacity of the royal fisc; they had to be supplied by the kingdom's magnates. Alfred's defensive system turned conventional West Saxon wisdom about warfare on its head. The effectiveness of the system is obvious in hindsight; it was not obvious in advance to Alfred's elites.

Decentralized political power gave Alfred's elites the capacity to resist, to undermine, or to comply half-heartedly with their king's wishes. In a society of diffused political power, what motivated these men to commit vast resources to such a radical and untested system? Scholars have long suggested that there was an ideological component to Alfred's military reforms, without identifying *how* that might have played out. Conceptualizing the burhs as assemblages which performed relations of power and instantiated ideology in the landscape helps to explain the subtle link between Alfredian ideology and military reform. Through the social practices of garrisoning and supplying the forts, Alfred's people self-identified and advertised a specific identity to others, thereby performing the Alfredian community into being.

Ideology can certainly shape beliefs and desires, and prompt action.<sup>1</sup> I analyze Alfredian ideology in depth in the next chapter. By way of (pre-emptive) summary, Alfredian ideology held that the Vikings were an instrument of divine vengeance inflicted on a people who had turned their faces away from God. The only way to avert further punishment was for the West Saxons to reorient themselves back to God. If his community realigned

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\* A more detailed analysis of the archaeological evidence and the dating of Alfredian military reform is contained in my article "Alfredian Military Reform," *Early Medieval Europe*, 2022.

1 Lukes, *Power*, 134.

themselves with Christian values and behaviour, then peace and prosperity, wealth and military success would follow. Military action or innovation on its own would not defeat the Vikings, because they were the scourge of God. Alfredian ideology thus held that imminent Viking conquest could *only* be averted by re-earning God's favour. Without that reorientation, God would continue to use the Vikings to punish Wessex. How did an ideology that mandated the practice of Christian wisdom as the only way to save the kingdom cause Alfred's elites to implement extensive (and expensive) military innovations?

A community that was demonstrably Christian would please God. A Christian community obeyed their divinely appointed king. A Christian king led and protected his people. I argue that this is where Alfredian ideology connected with military innovation and facilitated it. Implementing Alfred's military reforms was a way of demonstrating that Wessex was a Christian community. Military reforms and ideology formed a positive feedback loop. Ideology persuaded Alfred's elites to keep acceding to directives from their king as the military system developed, as it consumed increasing amounts of labour and materials, and despite its novelty. As things were done, a common understanding was established and a common identity forged. Over time, the success of that system in stymying Viking attacks confirmed the validity, the "truth," of the ideology that had prompted continuing participation in the evolving system.

The military successes which bookended Alfred's reforms—his remarkable victory at Edington in 878, and the rebuffing of the Vikings in the mid-890s—cannot alone explain why Alfred's elites implemented his reforms. No doubt Alfred's victory at Edington, months after the ignominious rout at Chippenham, greatly enhanced his military reputation.<sup>2</sup> The resounding victory against the odds would have made Alfred a hero to those who followed him into battle, and to those who had stubbornly supported him in the dark period after Chippenham.<sup>3</sup> As a battle, Edington was "a good old-fashioned shield-wall clash."<sup>4</sup> It was not an example of Alfred's innovations in action, not proof of the pudding. In 878, Alfred's reforms were untested and without contemporary precedent. We cannot use the ultimate success of those reforms to defend Wessex as an explanation for Alfred's ability to persuade his people to implement them in the first place. We can use assemblage theory and social practice theory to see

<sup>2</sup> Abels, "Reflections," 62; Williams, "Military and Non-Military," 135.

<sup>3</sup> Konshuh, "Fighting with a *lytle werode*."

<sup>4</sup> Hill, *Viking Wars*, 136.

how Alfredian ideology persuaded Alfred's elites and his people generally to participate in implementing his novel system. We can illuminate structures of social action and ways in which political power was created and transmitted.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: the first section briefly summarizes the concepts of Alfredian ideology relevant to Alfred's military reforms. I then examine the nature of Alfredian military innovation and argue that these reforms required greater investment as they progressed over time. Alfredian ideology was disseminated and absorbed during the period in which the heaviest demands were made for labour and materials. I analyze the burghal network as an assemblage through which a specific communal identity emerged, and a new balance of power was affirmed. This was a materialization of ideology. Garrisoning, which was a social practice, reinforced Alfredian ideology of identity and relations of power. The final section explores how the outstanding success of these reforms might have validated the "truth" of Alfredian ideology, completing a feedback loop between ideology and military reform.

### **Alfredian Ideology: Relevant Elements**

Alfredian ideology provided an explanation of the current crisis, a solution to it, and therefore good reasons to do as their king asked. Crucially, Alfredian ideology necessarily implied that military action or innovation on its own would not defeat the Vikings, because they were sent by God, as a divine scourge. The only way to avert further punishment was to please God.

Implementing Alfred's military innovations was a way of reorienting the community back to God, a way of demonstrating that Wessex was a Christian community. Alfred could exemplify the Christian king's obligation to guide and protect his people by devising effective military defences against an imminent threat. His subjects could demonstrate Christian obedience to their divinely appointed king by constructing and manning those defences. In implementing Alfred's defence system, Alfred's people put into practice important concepts of Alfredian ideology, particularly the proper exercise of royal power for the benefit of the community, rather than personal aggrandizement, and the appropriate response of obedience and loyalty by the community. In so acting, Alfred's community could demonstrate that Christian values and behaviours permeated its actions as well as its beliefs.

In doing as Alfred directed, his people enacted the discourse articulated in Alfredian texts, the *ASC* and the *domboc* about Christian wisdom, the Vikings as divine retribution, and the special destiny of the *Angelcynn*.

In doing as Alfred directed, his people adopted an identity and signalled that identity to others. Identity is constructed in a “conversation” with others.<sup>5</sup> Through the lived practice of contribution to Alfred’s military reforms, people could self-identify and identify themselves to others as members of the Alfredian community, sharing a common ideology.

## Viking Strategies of War in Britain

The Vikings were not a homogeneous group, and different Viking forces operating in Britain may have had different objectives from time to time.<sup>6</sup> As a generalization, Viking objectives in Britain segued from plunder and tribute to the control of lands and peoples. These objectives were familiar to early medieval kings and their elites, who periodically waged war on each other for similar purposes.<sup>7</sup> While their objectives were familiar, Viking tactics were foreign and doubtless unnerving to the West Saxons and their neighbours. The Vikings would seize a defensible site, improve the defences, and use it as a base to launch raiding parties. Anglo-Saxon kings would raise ad hoc levies to provide fighting forces to repel the marauders. These forces were intended to campaign only for short periods, which meant that they typically lacked the logistical support to conduct siege warfare successfully against a Viking force barricaded in a fortified site.<sup>8</sup> Viking bands were consistently difficult to dislodge from such sites, and usually had to be bribed to leave.<sup>9</sup>

The centres which the Vikings seized were often associated with royal power. The royal estate centres providing food and supply renders known as the “farm of one night” were important targets. Seizing them was logistically imperative for the Vikings, particularly as they overwintered.<sup>10</sup> After their successful assault on Alfred at Chippenham in early January 878, Guthrum’s forces stayed there for the remainder of the winter, because it was a well-provisioned royal estate.<sup>11</sup> The seizure of royal estate centres also damaged the king’s reputation and his relationship with his principal followers. Being able to feed your men well was an exercise of good lordship

**5** Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 15; Thomas, “Taking Power Seriously,” 35–50.

**6** Abels, “Paying the Danegeld,” 175.

**7** Halsall, “Anthropology.”

**8** Abels, “Reflections,” 56.

**9** Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, 17.

**10** Abels, “English Logistics,” 259; McLeod, “Feeding the *micel here*,” 144.

**11** Gore, “Review of Viking Attacks,” 62.

and cemented the personal bond between lord and follower.<sup>12</sup> Alfred was alert to a king's need to provide materially for his followers.<sup>13</sup> Successful seizure of royal estate centres demonstrated military impotence and weakened cohesion in the targeted community.<sup>14</sup> Weakening the king's authority made it easier for a Viking force to wrest political control of a kingdom. The early years of Alfred's kingship were marked by a lack of military success against the Vikings, because he used traditional Anglo-Saxon strategies of warfare against an enemy which did not play by the same rules.<sup>15</sup>

### Alfred's Military Innovations

It is logical to think that military reform began post-Edington, when Alfred's military reputation shone brightly.<sup>15</sup> This would have given him enhanced authority to insist upon immediate defensive works of the kind familiar to his elites, the repair and refurbishment of existing burhs.<sup>16</sup> Such work would have made pragmatic sense to the West Saxons, particularly with two Viking forces lurking over the border.<sup>17</sup> Over time, a web of burhs spread across the landscape.

The burhs were deliberately located to control access routes across the landscape: roads, rivers, and ports.<sup>18</sup> Dawn Hadley and Julian Richards have demonstrated the importance of riverine routes and crossings as well as roads to the movement of the *micel here* and its offshoots.<sup>19</sup> The burhs were supported by a complex web of observation posts and signalling systems, *herepaths* and bridges, incorporating existing infrastructure where appropriate.<sup>20</sup> The spatial distribution of the burhs suggests careful planning, which confirms the idea of a network.<sup>21</sup> The role of the burhs as supply dumps was critical.<sup>22</sup> The burhs simultaneously denied the Vikings access

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12 Lavelle, "Geographies of Power"; Althoff, *Family, Friends*, 154.

13 Asser, chap. 100; *Boethius*, Prose 9, 99.

14 Lavelle, "Geographies of Power," 202; Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars*, 178.

15 Abels, "Reflections," 48; Halsall, "Playing by Whose Rules," 7.

16 Lavelle, *Fortifications in Wessex*, 16; Williams, "Military and Non-Military," 135.

17 Baker and Brookes, "Fulham 878–79."

18 Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 70–73; Williams, "Military and Non-Military," 151.

19 Hadley and Richards, "Changing Places,"; Hadley and Richards, "In Search."

20 Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars*, 217; Abels, "Costs and Consequences," 205.

21 Baker and Brookes, "From Frontier," 109.

22 McLeod, "Feeding the *micel here*."

to food and provided a reliable chain of food supplies for Alfred's army on the move.<sup>23</sup> Foraging inflicted damage on the local community whether conducted by the enemy or home troops. Richard Abels describes "living off the land" as "a polite phrase for extremely rude activities."<sup>24</sup> Alfred also created a standing army, battle-ready and mobile. The standing army benefited logistically from the network of burhs and from the reinforcements provided by the garrisons, as the army moved through the landscape.

We have no insight into how Alfred's thinking on military reform evolved. We do not know whether he conceived of a master plan before commencement, or whether he developed the system incrementally over time, adding elements as the possibilities and benefits occurred to him. He had no contemporary precedent for his system. Neither the Carolingians nor any other insular kingdom threatened by the Vikings had implemented such a complex, mutually reinforcing system. Charles the Bald's bridge fortifications, often seen as a model for some of Alfred's burhs on important waterways, were not part of an extensive interlocking system.<sup>25</sup> Alfred's predecessors had undoubtedly implemented defensive measures.<sup>26</sup> However, the scale and depth of Alfred's interlocking system was much more than a natural extension of earlier works.<sup>27</sup> Alfred's system was *sui generis*.

It is logical to assume that Alfred required the individual burhs to be garrisoned soon after work was completed, although we lack the evidence to confirm this. A refurbished but ungarrisoned burh would be vulnerable to seizure by a Viking force in any renewed campaign. To provide the Vikings with better fortifications for their use would have been an egregious tactical error. For each burh, signalling systems and food supply dumps must also have followed refurbishment. Ancillary infrastructure linking the burhs, such as improved *herepaths* and bridges, may have proceeded as burhs became operational or were close to being completed. Finishing such infrastructure while the site was vulnerable to seizure would simply further advantage an invading Viking force. This is very much a broad-brush approach to the evolution of the system, but it makes sense. It follows from this tentative schedule of work that the demand for resources became greater over time, and that the novelty of the system emerged as more elements were added. This has implications for the royal endeavour required to obtain the neces-

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**23** Williams, "Military and Non-Military," 131–32; Lavelle, *Fortifications in Wessex*, 16.

**24** Abels, "English Logistics," 259.

**25** Coupland, "Fortified Bridges," 1–12.

**26** Downham, "Earliest Viking Activity," 1–12; Brooks, "Alfredian Government," 173.

**27** Abels, "Reflections," 58.

sary labour and materials, to persuade his elites to invest those resources. The novelty of a mutually reinforcing system would have made that task of persuasion more difficult.

Asser tells us that Alfred invested considerable energy in persuading his elites to do as he directed.<sup>28</sup> Alfred was an astute leader, careful to build consensus in contexts where conflict might breed. We do not know whether Alfred started by insisting on the renovations of individual fortifications as stand-alone defensive measures, or whether he took time to articulate his objectives to his inner circle and get them onside first. If he did so, it is highly probable that he pointed to unsatisfactory past encounters—such as the lengthy and futile siege of the Vikings at Exeter—as good reasons for change.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the uncertainties, there is enough evidence to demonstrate that Alfred substantially overhauled the existing infrastructure, added his own innovations, and melded the disparate parts into a comprehensive system.<sup>30</sup> Although the material record does not permit precise dating of the refurbishment of individual burhs, their common morphology is cogent evidence of innovation in the degree of centralized control (planning and supervision) exercised over the refurbishment process.<sup>31</sup> The material record does not permit us to pinpoint when reform began, or indeed to date specific site-works with precision, but we can identify reform in progress.

The system may have taken a decade or more to develop.<sup>32</sup> If so, then the novel elements of the system, which increased the necessary investment of resources, would have emerged later in the period. This would have been roughly contemporary with the dissemination and absorption of Alfredian ideology, which was clustered around the late 880s and early 890s. Alfredian ideology was agential in persuading Alfred's elites to shoulder the increasingly heavy burden of his reforms as the system developed, and to implement the novel and untested components of the system; in effect, to do as their king directed. The proper relationship between king and subjects was instantiated in the landscape.

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**28** Asser, chap. 91; K & L, 101–2.

**29** ASC, s.a. 876.

**30** Hill, "Origin," 230.

**31** Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, 124.

**32** Yorke, "West Saxon Fortifications," 104.

## Alfredian Military Reform as an Assemblage

In the burghal network, the objects were the forts, their supplies, the *here-paths* and other infrastructure. Technologies (or knowledge) included communications between the forts (such as signalling), and the training necessary to run the garrisons efficiently for surveillance and warfare: I develop this further in the section on the social practice of garrisoning. The people in the assemblage included the king, the magnates who provided the labourers, those who laboured (directly and indirectly—see below), and those who were protected by the forts. Alfredian ideology was an actant in the assemblage—a set of beliefs which explained the Viking threat, offered a solution, and provided cogent reasons to obey the king.

As the burhs were constructed, refurbished, and used they could bring about a changed perception of landscape, a different way of being-in-the-landscape. Different experiences of landscape were possible from within and outside the forts. Given that the local community provided ongoing labour and supplies for the burhs, a significant proportion of the local community probably experienced both perspectives on the landscape.

Social and political relations would have been bound up in these experiences of landscape. There was an interplay between the control of resources and the affirmation of political authority, the deliberate incorporation of specific sites of past and present political power, and the coalescing of community in the changed experience of landscape. Such relations underpinned the provision of labour, materials and supplies for the forts. They were also embedded in the promise of protection and in the sense of being under surveillance. Political power, hierarchy, and communal endeavour were incorporeal actants in the burghal network.

It is very difficult to isolate the individual operation of these actants, because we lack detailed accounts for each fort and for how the network coalesced. However, we can tentatively identify the ways in which relational actants of power, hierarchy, and community were likely to interact with the physical actants of the fortifications and the landscape. These connections between ideology, landscape, objects, people's labour, and the diversion of resources were neither linear nor static. The feedback loops between Alfredian ideology and military reform are discernible in this field of activity.

The burhs created a physical space in which the social relations between participants were affirmed, for participants and observers alike. The connection between the built environment and social order has been explored by Michael Bintley (in relation to halls as well as fortifications) and by Ben

Jervis (in relation to medieval town formation).<sup>33</sup> Jervis describes towns as “more-than-spatial phenomena.” They are “assemblages of social relationships between people, materials, and their environment.”<sup>34</sup> The burhs were just such an assemblage.

These burhs were also monuments. There is an element of spectacle, of public gaze, to monument building.<sup>35</sup> Monuments can be expressive, can actively promote ideas about politics and identity.<sup>36</sup> In repairing and provisioning these burhs, the participants affirmed hierarchical control of labour and materials, and the king’s overall right to direct both. The efficient and extensive co-option of resources signals political power. Early medieval kings had limited means of displaying authoritative power, by which I mean obtaining the conscious obedience of others to explicit directions.<sup>37</sup> Defensive earthworks were a recognized means of demonstrating the ability to appropriate labour and materials belonging to others and at the same time build support and consensus. It doubtless helped that such projects were usually defensive in character, directed against a common enemy.<sup>38</sup>

For example, Paul Belford interprets Offa’s Dyke as an exercise in unifying the Mercians through communal labour to construct a defence that was also a symbol of royal power. Landscape was used to help stabilize communal identity constructed against an “Other,” the emerging powerhouse of Powys.<sup>39</sup> Brooks sees a causal link between work done in conformity with royal commands and the expansion of royal authority. He argues that in Francia, the failure of Charles the Bald’s successors to use military works as a mechanism to both demonstrate and accrue power partly explains why the balance of political power continued to shift from the king to his elites.<sup>40</sup>

Construction of the burghal network required both a direct and an indirect reallocation of resources. Abels estimates that to construct or refurbish the defensive structures for all the burhs listed in the *Burghal Hidage* would have consumed 1.4 million working days. Early medieval kingdoms were largely subsistence agrarian societies. In Alfred’s extended kingdom, it took

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**33** Bintley, *Settlements and Strongholds*.

**34** Jervis “Town Formation,” 384.

**35** Inomata and Coben, “Overture,” 11–24.

**36** Reynolds and Langlands, “Travel as Communication,” 413; Lavelle, “Places I’ll Remember,” 316.

**37** Luke, *Power*, 109, 32; Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 8.

**38** Squatriti, “Digging Ditches.”

**39** Belford, “Offa’s Dyke,” 60–81.

**40** Brooks, “Development of Military Obligations,” 84.

three agricultural labourers working nineteen hectares of arable land to produce enough food to provide for a single person not engaged in agriculture.<sup>41</sup> Construction of the network was a heavy burden, and it must have fallen on whole communities. These reforms required an extraordinary investment of resources and the cooperation of most of the landowners of the kingdom to create and sustain the burghal network.<sup>42</sup> The social and political relations, power, and authority which underpinned the diversion of resources to the construction of the burhs would have been obvious right across the community.

The relational actants of authority and power implicit in the control of labour and resources may have received further amplification from two other actants in the assemblage of the burghal network: the reuse of Iron Age and Roman sites and the geographical correlation between some refurbished forts and centres of royal and ecclesiastical importance. The reuse of Iron Age and Roman fortifications or defensive features amplified the royal power manifested by these burhs. The Iron Age and Roman fortifications had been symbols of power for their original communities. Their reuse was an appropriation of past manifestations of authority, an implied claim of inheritance, extending royal authority.<sup>43</sup> This was not a new strategy.<sup>44</sup> Existing towns with fortifications such as Exeter, Chichester, and Bath were reorganized in ways that emphasized their Roman origins.<sup>45</sup> Many of the refurbished Roman and Iron Age sites were incorporated into, or were close to, existing West Saxon ecclesiastical and royal institutions and centres of activity. Authority was manifested in the choice of activities and sites which deserved the close protection of the refurbished burhs. Authority was also extended by the surveillance capacities of the burhs as a network.

The location of the burhs in the landscape meant that the garrisons could control movement through the landscape and keep the population under a degree of surveillance. The number of burhs, and their spatial distribution, meant that as the network developed, most of Wessex came within this protective net, and under observation. The burhs were positioned with care so as to be inter-visible.<sup>46</sup> As the West Saxons moved around their landscape, they could not help but be aware of the looming presence of the forti-

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**41** Abels, "Costs and Consequences," 202, 207.

**42** Lavelle, *Fortifications in Wessex*, 17.

**43** Williams, "Place of Slaughter," 39.

**44** Pitt, "Sutton Hoo," 19.

**45** Baker and Brookes, *Burghal Hidage*, 69–70.

**46** Baker and Brookes, *Burghal Hidage*, 69–70.

fications they had helped to build, whether reluctantly or not, for their king. Royal power was writ large on the landscape. The burhs thus increased the reach and exposure of Alfredian ideology and gave it permanence, “stability through time.”<sup>47</sup> The modified landscape communicated an easily understood message about social relations and hierarchy.

Ideology and action went hand in hand. Power relations must be performed, reiterated through action, to maintain and affirm the ideology underlying the asymmetrical distribution of power.<sup>48</sup> Implementing Alfred’s defence system put the reciprocal Christian obligations of leadership and obedience into practice, demonstrating Christian values and behaviour. Over time, the success of the new defences confirmed God’s renewed approval: Wessex was spared Viking conquest. The construction and refurbishment of the burhs instantiated Alfredian ideology, gave it a physical form.

Elizabeth DeMarrais, Jamie Castillo, and Timothy Earle refer to this kind of instantiation as the materialization of ideology: the transformation of ideas, values, stories and myths into a physical reality, such as ceremonies, symbolic objects and monuments.<sup>49</sup> In implementing Alfred’s military reforms, his people enacted Alfredian ideology. By this I mean that the community made sense of that ideology and applied it. Belief need not precede action but can develop in tandem with it. Social action can inculcate, as well as confirm, belief—as Hargreaves’s study of environmentally friendly work practices showed (Introduction). When faced with the threat of large-scale violence, people can subordinate their individual agency, favouring a cooperative form of decision-making which acts to align individuals to a common set of objectives and values.<sup>50</sup> I do not suggest a sequential chronology of disseminate–persuade–act. Not everyone need have been convinced of Alfred’s reasoning before taking action. Asser suggests a level of compulsion. Keynes says “there can be no doubt that Alfred trod heavily on his people.”<sup>51</sup> However, as the burhs and the standing army demonstrated their value in rebuffing Viking incursions, belief by the sceptical and the put-upon doubtless blossomed.

There are close connections between the materialization of ideology and the creation and affirmation of community. In a case study of the intellectual communities of early Northumbria, Martin Carver argues that early

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**47** Earle, “Institutionalization of Chiefdoms,” 107–08.

**48** Inomata and Coben, “Overture,” 25.

**49** DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle, “Ideology, Materialization.”

**50** Giddens, *The Nation-State*, 214–15.

**51** Keynes, “Tale of Two Kings,” 205.

medieval communities dextrously used material culture to signal adherence to particular worldviews or ideologies, thereby advertising a particular identity.<sup>52</sup> Identity requires iteration and affirmation—actions, as well as words.<sup>53</sup> Behaviours can perform and reinforce group identity. Remembering that doing is always “doing with things,” I want to consider the ways in which routinized ways of doing things might have consolidated the feedback loop between Alfredian ideology and military reform.

The fact that there was a network of such burhs, and that there appears to have been a relatively high degree of central planning and oversight, suggests that performances of social relations played out in similar form across multiple locations. Baker and Brookes argue that, unlike the conduct of battles, civil defence extends beyond the elites who conduct warfare, that it involves “a common experience anchoring people together.”<sup>54</sup> Common experience on sites across the kingdom would have amplified the “givenness” of these relations, leading to community cohesion. The creation of monuments interweaves people, things and place and can be “a critical connector in the formation of communities.”<sup>55</sup>

The modern theory of community owes much to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens.<sup>56</sup> The emphasis is on the dynamic relationship between action, identity, and power. The relationships between people, spaces, and ideas are the “glue” of communities: interaction is critical. Interactions occur within or around a given space, on the basis of common perceptions or rules. A sense of shared identity emerges from those interactions.<sup>57</sup> This identity is not static or monolithic. Communities usually incorporate a series of changeable identities, sometimes nested and sometimes conflictual.<sup>58</sup>

Deliberate effort is required to inculcate a sense of collective identity through interactions. There must be a “conscious acknowledgement and deliberate celebration” of commonalities, through which a community expresses its cohesion.<sup>59</sup> As Timothy Pauketat puts it, “community is what

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**52** Carver, “What Were They Thinking,” 918.

**53** Varien and Potter, “Social Production,” 16; Stodnick, “Emergent Englishness,” 36; Harris, *Race and Ethnicity*, 32.

**54** Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, 11.

**55** Harris, “More than Representation,” 96.

**56** Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*; Giddens, *Constitution of Society*.

**57** Yaeger and Canuto, “Archaeology of Communities.”

**58** Harris, “(Re)assembling Communities,” 80.

**59** Mac Sweeney, *Community Identity*, 37.

community does.”<sup>60</sup> Oliver Harris emphasizes the roles of values and emotions in the creation of community identity. He also highlights the agency of objects and landscape in the practices by which people affirm their membership of a community.<sup>61</sup> Carver likewise emphasizes the agency of material culture—such as burials, sculpture, manuscripts, and churches—in promoting early medieval communal identity.<sup>62</sup>

Asser describes Alfred engaging many levels of his community to achieve his reforms: “bishops, ealdormen, nobles, thegns dear to his heart and reeves.”<sup>63</sup> While the landowners probably marshalled their own labourers, the reeves presumably oversaw the work and acted as a conduit between the king and the landowners. The king’s right to mobilize the labour of his people in an enterprise to protect and guide them was thus manifested in this interaction: as the king demanded, his elites obeyed by organizing the work, and the peasants obeyed by labouring.

### The Lively Hum of Actants in the Assemblage of the Burhs

In the lived experience of Alfred’s military reform, actants in the assemblage were not compartmentalized. Their agency was not segregated and discrete. These actants “pinged off” one another, interacting, reinforcing, and magnifying each other. For example, there was an interplay between the kind of sites chosen for the building program, the scale of effort involved, the twinned sense of surveillance and promise of protection emanating from the burhs, and the emphasis on the reciprocal obligations of kingship and obedience in Alfredian ideology. Fortification work on existing centres of royal and ecclesiastical power, and the co-option of ancient sites of authority, reiterated the centrality of royal power—this was an important theme in Alfredian ideology. New sites across the landscape extended royal authority. The scale of the resources Alfred harnessed not only demonstrated the king’s prerogative to direct his people—it demonstrated his right to channel those resources *in furtherance* of royal power. The capacity of the burhs to watch and protect were new ways of manifesting the core responsibility of kingship—to guide and protect the people given into a king’s charge. Landscape, objects, people, and ideas interacted. Assemblage theory illuminates the dynamic nature of these connections.

<sup>60</sup> Pauketat, “Grounds for Agency,” 240.

<sup>61</sup> Harris, “(Re)assembling Communities,” 88–89.

<sup>62</sup> Carver, “Intellectual Communities,” 186–87.

<sup>63</sup> Asser, chap. 91; K & L, 101–2.

The sense of shared identity, of community, is another example of the dynamic relationships between components in the assemblage: sustained labour involving a significant proportion of the population, directly and indirectly; labour which produced objects (the forts) with immediate practical communal value; labour which altered the way that most people experienced their landscape; a landscape which instantiated royal power and the promise of protection. The completed burhs dominated the landscape and instantiated Alfredian ideology as all levels of the community went about their day-to-day lives.<sup>64</sup> Part of those day-to-day lives now revolved around the completed burhs, which required garrisons and the provision of foodstuffs and other goods. The roles of the permanent garrisons, both in observation and control of movements and their part in warfare, were new to their participants. These activities were new social practices. They too forged important connections between ideology and military reform, but in a different way to assemblages.

### The Social Practice of Garrisoning the Burhs

The *Burghal Hidage* specifies the military service required for each individual burh.<sup>65</sup> The burden of providing that labour fell on those living in the countryside surrounding a specific burh, under the supervision of the local ealdorman, probably supported by the king's reeves.<sup>66</sup> We do not know the detail of how this labour was organized. In particular, we do not know whether individuals were permanently assigned to manning the garrisons, or whether the lords allocated a certain number of their followers on rotation. According to the *ASC* (s.a. 893), the garrisons were separate from the rotation policy that provided the standing army, but that does not exclude a separate rotation policy, operating for each burh and organized locally.

If the garrisons were drawn from local men, it would follow that within each garrison there was probably a degree of familiarity between the men who served, as well as existing vertical relationships of power between those men and the lords who organized the garrisons (under the reeve's watchful eye?). We know virtually nothing about how the garrisons went about their role of observation and control of movements. These were new roles. I think that we can safely assume that a degree of training was required, because

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**64** DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle, "Ideology, Materialization."

**65** Hill, "Shiring of Mercia," 158.

**66** Abels, "Costs and Consequences," 204.

there would have to be conformity in messaging and observation for the system to function properly. There were missteps along the way. The *ASC* (s.a. 893) records a failure of coordination, when the army pursuing a Viking force broke off their pursuit because they had finished their allotted rotation and run out of supplies. They met their replacements on the way back. The Vikings obtained a valuable respite.

There must also have been a degree of training, of the leaders as well as the men, in relation to the specific role the garrisons played in combat. This role was different from the army's general role. The *ASC* (s.a. 893) provides valuable detail about how the garrisons were deployed when Viking forces appeared. The garrison only came out "in full" to challenge the enemy before the standing army arrived, and when the enemy attempted to leave. The garrison was thus deployed to prevent a newly arrived Viking force from acquiring a bolthole and from raiding for supplies and booty, and to prevent a counter-offensive by a departing Viking force. Otherwise, the garrison was used to supplement the army in harassing the enemy as it attempted to break through the containment line constituted by the web of garrisoned forts. The entry shows that Alfred's system could prevent the Vikings from penetrating deeply into West Saxon territory, deny them safe refuge and the ability to plunder freely, and impede their ability to depart with whatever booty they had managed to acquire.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to flesh out the detail of the garrisons as a new social practice (remembering that social practices comprise meanings, materials, and competencies). Alfredian ideology comprised the meaning, the social and symbolic significance of participation in the practice. The burhs themselves, the foodstuffs and other supplies, the wood for the beacons, and military equipment would have been the materials. The competencies would have included the skills of using fires as beacons and any system for the relay of messages, the organizational skills involved in keeping a large area under observation in shifts, and different fighting tactics from the standing army. The evidence does not currently permit us to drill down further than that.

However, manning the garrisons was clearly an ongoing activity. Further, the activity was carried out publicly and communally. Training was required. Food and other goods must have been supplied to the garrisons for their consumption, as well as food stores for the *fyrd*. Presumably the sur-

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**67** It appears that Edward followed his father's system. The *Chronicle of Æthelweard* records English victory at Wednesfield using Alfred's strategies.

rounding communities supplied these, just as they provided labour.<sup>68</sup> There was therefore participation in the social practice by a large section of the community beyond the individuals who served in the garrisons, and that participation was witnessed by others in the community. This social practice was localized. It was carried out amongst familiar faces, in designated sites situated in close proximity to settlements.

In repeatedly carrying out the practice of garrisoning, participants were likely to become increasingly attuned to the sense of oughtness underlying the practice. We do not have specific evidence in relation to garrisoning, but Asser describes Alfred judiciously employing praise and censure in respect of the construction of the burhs. Asser also records the response of the elites who suffered at the hands of the Vikings because they did not construct forts in time.<sup>69</sup> Those elites “made sense” of that calamity by interpreting the events as a failure to do what they ought to have done. The contrast between the familiar impotence to withstand a marauding Viking band and the successful rebuffing of a comparable attack must have been profound, and shows how a sense of oughtness can be inculcated.

The success of completed burhs in repulsing Viking attack and avoiding the terrible consequences of being overrun is an example of the kind of “eventness” or happening that generates performative power. I talked about Reed’s three-phase typology of power in the Introduction. Relational power stems from the societal structure of ties between people, which allows some individuals greater capacity to control others or to direct social life. Discursive power is subtler, written in to signification and perception, shaping peoples’ often unstated assumptions and norms, channelling their choices. Performative power, in contrast to discursive power, generates its energy precisely from its public spectacle. Performative power emerges from actions which “work” or a performance that “comes off.” Performative power is an “eventful” representation of power, producing a “coherent interpretation of a chaotic, fragile, ambiguous or uncertain situation.”<sup>70</sup> Asser and the *ASC* record mirror “events”: successful defence against Viking attack, and Viking destruction. The carrying out of that successful defence and the opposite experience of being overrun and plundered were actions and experiences which had the power to transform the understandings, expectations, and emotions of those involved and those who observed, and therefore, the potential to cause them to modify their future behaviour.

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**68** Baker and Brookes, “From Frontier,” 110.

**69** Asser, chap. 91; K & L, 101–2.

**70** Reed, “Performative State-Formation,” 24; Kreiss, “Seizing the Moment,” 5.

It is reasonable to assume that Alfred imparted the same normative flavour to garrisoning, and that his elites adopted this viewpoint as the success of the garrisons became clear. Over time, there would have been opportunities to expound Alfredian ideology to a larger proportion of the population than the elites. It is logical to assume that somehow, perhaps through sermons, perhaps through the reeves and the local lords, those further down the hierarchy were made aware, in some measure, of Alfredian ideology. This is not an issue of informed consent to participate. No doubt those at the bottom of the hierarchy did as they were bid. That does not mean that they laboured in a vacuum or were without agency. In particular, it was open to them to negotiate and adopt an identity in conformity with the work being required of them, with what they understood to be the purpose of that work, and what they perceived to be the benefits for them. Identifying as part of the Alfredian community was as open to a labourer as it was to a bishop.

The act of manning garrisons was not an unconscious, routine daily practice of the kind identified by Bourdieu and Butler. It was a new social practice explicitly developed in response to an extreme threat. Despite the imminent threat, it took time to implement Alfred's military reforms. It is clear that there was resistance from some quarters to providing the men and materials needed. That resistance crumbled, according to Asser, when the merits of the system were forcefully demonstrated during a Viking attack.

### **The Feedback Loop between Alfredian Ideology and Military Innovation**

Alfred's military reforms worked. In the 870s, the Vikings repeatedly penetrated deeply into West Saxon heartlands, military action was exhausting and inconclusive, and the intruders could not be dislodged without the payment of tribute.<sup>71</sup> In the 890s, the Vikings barely infiltrated Wessex.<sup>72</sup> They frequently had to abandon any booty in order to escape, if they escaped at all.<sup>73</sup> Alfred's reforms succeeded despite additional advantages available to the Vikings in the 890s. Unlike the Viking forces of the 870s, they could draw upon alliances with Vikings settled in Northumbria and East Anglia. In the 890s, Alfred's army had to fight over longer distances against an enemy with

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**71** Gore, "Review of Viking Attacks," 59; Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, 137.

**72** Wormald, "Ninth Century," 150; Abels, "Reflections," 62.

**73** *ASC*, s.a. 893 and 894.

multiple entry points.<sup>74</sup> Alfred's innovations protected his community generally as well as providing strategic advantages to the military elite who conducted warfare.<sup>75</sup>

The extent of community engagement meant that these reforms could be highly influential in cohering the general community. The wider community participated in the construction and maintenance of Alfred's burhs and in the provision of manpower, equipment, and supplies for his standing army. The wider community benefited from the absence of loss of life and destruction consequent upon the containment of the Viking threat. Alfred's ability to protect his people as a result of his military reforms could be demonstrated in pragmatic ways that touched an entire local community. According to the *ASC* (s.a. 895), Alfred used his standing army to shield a community harvesting its corn from a Viking force in need of supplies. This is another "event" that could have generated performative power, causing Alfred's people to modify their understandings and their future behaviour. This event would have been a fruitful opportunity to hammer home to the elites and the wider community the role of the king in directing and facilitating the system which benefited them all.

In doing as Alfred asked, in constructing, repairing, provisioning, and garrisoning the burhs, Alfred's people performed relations of power. Iterative performances of social relations are powerful reproducers of normative behaviour and attitudes.<sup>76</sup> These relations of power confirmed Alfred's divine right to protect and guide his people, and their reciprocal obligation to obey. In doing as Alfred asked, his people were able to construct an identity and demonstrate that identity to others. The construction and garrisoning of the burhs signalled community acceptance of Alfredian ideology, just as the construction and use of graves, monuments, and other sites signalled acceptance of other worldviews across early medieval Europe.<sup>77</sup>

## The Political Dimension of Military Reform

There was a manifestly political dimension to military reform. Alfred's military innovations were agential in transferring political power to Alfred, on both a theoretical and practical level. Alfredian ideology expanded the power of the king at the expense of his elites. The construction of the burghal net-

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**74** Pratt, *Political Thought*, 94; Abels, "Reflections," 62.

**75** Abels, *Lordship*.

**76** Jervis, "Town Formation," 385.

**77** Carver, "What Were They Thinking."

work also allowed the king to exercise power through a multitude of nuts-and-bolts decisions. The division of the *fyrð* into two parts, serving on rotation, required greater central administration.<sup>78</sup> Fundamentally, implementing Alfred's military reforms required the task of governing. It required the identification and ranking of priorities, negotiations with community members, the marshalling of resources, the organization of technical expertise, and administrative oversight of the work. Implementing Alfred's military reforms was a triumph of government.<sup>79</sup>

Military action was not a straightforward proxy for political control, but it was a useful mechanism for asserting and substantiating royal power. Military action also held significant risks for kings with fractious nobles. In Francia, Charles the Bald's military efforts against Viking forces were sabotaged by his own magnates, who defected to his brother, Louis the German.<sup>80</sup> Paying attention to things and to behaviours gives us fresh insights into the structures of social action and the accrual and exercise of power.

Military reform provides unique insights into how Alfredian ideology may have spread and taken hold. Analyzing military reform as an assemblage allows us to identify how the individual components interacted and magnified each other. The assemblage had a powerful impact on community beliefs and cohesion because an assemblage is greater than an aggregation of its components. Exploring social practices alongside assemblages illuminates how military reform was woven into the fabric of the community. Using these two theories in tandem permits a closer-grained understanding of the link between ideology and military reform. The point of looking at military reform first was to illuminate this essential interconnectedness, the "messiness" of lived experience. I turn next to a detailed examination of the content of Alfredian ideology ("the message"), and the way Alfred himself learned. Alfred's personal path to wisdom showed him how to disseminate that message. I then segregate objects and behaviours, to delve deeper into how their persuasive agency was constructed.

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**78** Baker and Brookes, "Explaining Anglo-Saxon Military Efficiency," 226–27.

**79** Abels, "Reflections," 62–63; Keynes, "Age of Alfred," 255.

**80** Coupland, "Blinkers of Militarisation," 168–70.

