Chapter 6

SOCIAL PRACTICES

ROUTINIZED WAYS OF DOING THINGS

IN THE PREVIOUS chapter, I moved the focus from the formation of Alfredian ideology to the reception of that ideology. I analyzed the Alfredian text-bodies, employing assemblage theory to illuminate their thingly agency, their capacity to do and to bring about. I continue to focus on reception in this chapter, turning to elite behaviour.

New and modified social practices were agential in persuading people to adopt Alfredian ideology. I argue that Alfred astutely modified existing social practices where these would serve his purpose and invented new practices where necessary. I use social practice theory to examine discourse and behaviour, the "doings and sayings" of the West Saxon elites. I focus on particular social practices (education, justice) to identify their constituent parts, and to see how practices "bundled" (exercised recursive patterns of influence and reinforcement on one another).

Materials, competencies, and meanings are the elements of a social practice. Alfredian social practices shared an overarching meaning: the urgent need to reorient the community back to God. Alfredian overarching meaning encompassed much more than religious belief and practice. Becoming a Christian kingdom (again) required that Christian wisdom infuse the governance of the kingdom in pragmatic ways, which had consequences for secular administration and social relationships.

The Alfredian texts constituted new materials for Alfredian social practices (such as the *domboc* in the administration of justice). The vernacular was a new competency for the social practice of education. I do not suggest that Alfred "invented" the use of the vernacular; there is abundant evidence of the use of the vernacular in Mercian manuscript production—the OE *Martyrology* is a good example. The novelty lies in the consistency with which the vernacular was used across a range of texts (including new media, such as the *ASC*) associated with Alfredian reform. The use of the vernacular consistently across important social practices fostered the new identity of the *Angelcynn*. In this way, Alfredian texts, as objects, became sites of "materialised understanding."[1] Materialized understanding is not restricted to

1 Reckwitz, "Status of the 'Material,'" 214.

issues of practicality and use—it may encompass hierarchies, ideologies, or religious beliefs, which are aspects of meaning.[2]

"Alfred" tapped in to long-held foundation myths to represent the Anglo-Saxons as a Chosen People. By virtue of that privileged status, their fall from grace was greater. The Alfredian position differed from Carolingian concepts of divine punishment and the path back to God's favour. In Alfredian ideology, regaining divine approval and protection required much more than private piety or the communal expression of religious beliefs. It required the community to do as well as to say—to put Christian principles into operation.

A social practice is a routinized or habitual way of doing things, but it is not static. Small adjustments may be made without disturbing this taken-for-granted flavour. A major disruption or challenge to a social practice brings the practice from the background into the spotlight. At such times, the practice becomes subject to reflection, discussion, challenge, and assessment. As a result, it either continues unmodified, changes, or dies out.[3] The Alfredian reform agenda constituted just such a challenge—a major shock to the practice of education, a lesser challenge to the administration of justice. During the process of working through a challenge and its repercussions, practices become self-aware behaviours.

Outline of the Argument Applying Social Practice Theory

Alfredian social practices had an overarching meaning which applied to both modified and new social practices. This was the need to reorient back to God, in order to avert threatened annihilation at the hands of the Vikings. Each existing practice had its own more pragmatic or established meaning, but this overarching meaning formed the lens through which social practices were viewed and the framework against which the conduct of social practices was assessed and modified. Alfredian meaning, the impetus to action, was intended to percolate through all aspects of the community, including the pragmatic and the secular. Social practices would be modified so that they aligned with this fundamental goal. This is *how* Alfred's people would reorient themselves back to God: through personal piety and religious observance, no doubt, but also, critically, by adjusting their behaviour and values through routinized ways of doing things.

2 Rinkinen, Jalas, and Shove, "Object Relations," 871.

3 Schatzki, "Practice Theory as Flat Ontology," 39–40; Spaargaren, Lamers, and Weenink, "Introduction," 10.

It is notable that this remedy was not narrowly focused on greater expression of private individual piety or the public demonstration of religious observance through processions of repentance and atonement, or by "continua bonorum operum exhibitione" (the continuous display of good works).[4] In the Alfredian model, the conscious and mindful adoption of Christian values and behaviour would guide and inform practical decisions about day-to-day life, from individual choices to royal policy affecting the entire community. It is worth briefly comparing the Alfredian response with those of the Carolingians, and with Æthelred during the Second Viking Age.

The Carolingians invoked divine aid against external threats—military, famine, or pestilence—with royally mandated programs of additional religious observance.[5] Such observance was conceived as the propitiation of an angry God. The Frankish clergy traditionally characterized natural disasters and military setbacks as punishment for the sinfulness of the Frankish people. God's retribution did not fall any more heavily on the Frankish people than other communities, and the remedy was universal. For example, the capitulary of Pitres, 862, blamed the sins of the Franks for current "tumults" and "terrible calamities" and called for the people to return to God and believe.[6] Simon Coupland argues that such piety—"repentance and renewed devotion"—did not rule out more practical measures, such as defensive works.[7] However, it is clear that Alfred's call for action was qualitatively different from the remedy prescribed by the Frankish clergy. Although both solutions had the relationship between the people and their God at their core, Alfred's solution extended far beyond the expression of religious conviction to the secular world of administration of the kingdom, to the good governance of social relationships within the political hierarchy.

Alfred's own piety and asceticism, which Asser records in some detail, and Alfred's close reliance on the advice of his coterie of clerical advisors, would have made it easy for him to follow the Carolingian example. Alfred's insistence on a more radical solution may have been grounded in his conception of the English as a Chosen People. Coupland argues that the Franks did not regard themselves as singled out for divine retribution.[8]

The response of English kings in the Second Viking Age, notably Edgar and Æthelred, had more in common with the Carolingian response than

4 S 911.

5 Keynes, "An Abbot," 185–86; McCormick, "Liturgy of War," 7.

6 Foot, "Making of *Angelcynn*," 38n57.

7 Coupland, "Rod of God's Wrath," 539.

8 Coupland, "Rod of God's Wrath," 539.

Alfred's.[9] During Æthelred's reign, renewed Viking attacks were first interpreted as divine anger at the king's treatment of the church, but later reinterpreted to encompass the sins of the general population.[10] Godden argues that successive drafts of Wulfstan's famous *Sermo ad Anglos* demonstrate a shift from an apocalyptic millennial explanation for the Viking attacks to an emphasis on divine punishment for the particular sins of the English, as a recalcitrant Chosen People.[11] English diagnosis continued to focus on their special relationship with God, but the prescribed response became more closely aligned with the Carolingian remedy.

Alfred's prescribed remedy was thus quite different from other responses to the Viking menace, although that threat was consistently interpreted by the Anglo-Saxons as a sign of divine wrath. To acquire and practise Christian wisdom required a realignment of certain social practices. This realignment meant that in carrying out those practices, *through their behaviour*, Alfred's people were turning their faces back to God. The changes wrought by Alfredian ideology are perhaps clearest and most profound in relation to education and justice.

I will deal with each of these practices in turn, looking at materials and competencies. These may not have been the only social practices modified during Alfred's reform program, but they are the most easily identified on the available evidence. It is logical to allow for the possibility that other social practices were utilized, without significant modification. One example is the existing social practice of fosterage, which was apt for Alfred's aims, and was probably therefore harnessed without adjustment. Alfredian reform may have been inculcated in ways which we cannot now discern.

Having considered the social practices in turn, I will consider the way in which these practices were bundled together—how they interacted with and reinforced each other. Bundling practices together helped to bring the Alfredian community into being. As people imbibed Alfredian ideology and acted in accordance with it, they self-identified and identified themselves to others as members of the Alfredian community. Communal identity was performed by participating in the various practices and observing others participate. These practices interlinked to amplify their shared meaning.

---

9 IV Edgar, 962–63; VII Æthelred, probably 1009: *EHD*, no. 41, 434–37; no. 45, 447–48, respectively.

10 Roach, "Apocalypse and Atonement"; Roach, "Penitential Discourse," 268–69.

11 Godden, "Millennium, Time."

Alfredian Reform of Education: An Overview

Alfredian reform of education was complex and multi-layered. The first complication is that Alfred did not confine his reforms to formal education. Educating the young was not his sole or indeed his immediate objective, as the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* makes clear. In the Prose Preface, "Alfred" makes the following plea:

> Ond forðon ic ðe bebiode ðæt ðu do swa ic geliefe ðæt ðu wille, ðæt ðu ðe ðissa woruldðinga to ðæm geæmetige swæ ðu oftost mæge, ðæt ðu ðone wisdom ðe ðe God sealde ðær ðær ðu hiene befæsten mæge, befæste. Geðenc hwelc witu us ða becomon for ðisse worulde, ða ða we hit nohwæðer ne selfe ne lufodon ne eac oðrum monnum ne lefdon: ðone naman ænne we lufodon ðatte we Cristne wæren, ond swiðe feawe ða ðeawas.
>
> (And therefore I direct you to do as I believe you would like, to disengage yourself from these worldly concerns as often as you can, with the aim of applying the understanding which God bestowed on you wherever you can apply it. Think what punishments plagued us before all the world when we neither loved it ourselves nor passed it down to other people: we loved the name alone of being Christians, and very few loved the practices.)[12]

The Preface called for the (re)acquisition and application of Christian wisdom through a process of lifelong learning and reflection—by the bishops to whom this text was sent, but also by the secular elites. It appears in the Preface well before the proposal to translate "sum bec ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne" (certain books—those most essential for all people to know) into the vernacular for formal study by the young as part of their education. Alfred targeted first the men he needed to be wise right now, the day-to-day leaders of his community, and then the youth who would be the next generation of councillors.

What is commonly called (perhaps infelicitously) "Alfredian education reform" thus had a dual focus, targeting two very different groups. Alfred's call for the acquisition and application of Christian wisdom, *sapientia*, applied to both his existing councillors and the youths still being fostered and educated. Describing the task at hand for his adult advisors as "education" is inapposite; this was a group of people who had left behind the formal structures of learning and were active participants in the administration of the kingdom. Insofar as his councillors were concerned, Alfred instituted a new social practice which I call "lifelong learning." It was a new social practice because it involved a distinct set of people, less formal or institutional

12 *Pastoral Care*, 4–7.

methodology, and different settings from education. However, there were overlaps. The same new competency, literacy in the vernacular, was used in the new practice of lifelong learning and substantially supplanted Latin in the existing practice of education. New materials, the Alfredian texts, were used in both practices. My analysis starts with the new practice of lifelong learning, before turning to the existing social practice of education. I then examine the areas of overlap between the two: competency (literacy in the vernacular) and materials (the Alfredian texts).

The New Social Practice of Lifelong Learning

The Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* makes it clear that the aim of lifelong learning is Christian wisdom applicable to daily life—practical, not esoteric, knowledge. The Preface also makes it clear that lifelong learning is not a discrete task, to be set aside once completed. Lifelong learning is much more like a compass, to be used constantly to reassess direction and adjust values and behaviours. The idea of lifelong learning as a compass resonates with the Alfredian concept of the *modes eagan* explicated in the OE *Soliloquies*. Lifelong learning was conceived as an instrument—not an end in itself, but a mechanism.

Asser tells us that Alfred explicitly linked the capacity to read to continued *secular* office-holding. The king's rebuke to incompetent judges focuses on the acquisition and application of wisdom:

> Nimium admiror vestram hanc insolentiam, eo quod, Dei dono et meo, sapientium ministerium et gradus usurpastis, sapientiae autem studium et operam neglexistis. Quapropter aut terrenarum potestatum ministeria, quae habetis, illico dimittatis, aut sapientiae studiis multo devotius docere ut studeatis impero.[13]
>
> (I am astonished at this arrogance of yours [he said], since through God's authority and my own you have enjoyed the office and status of wise men, yet you have neglected the study and application of wisdom. For that reason, I command you either to relinquish immediately the offices of worldly power that you possess, or else to apply yourselves much more attentively to the pursuit of wisdom.)[14]

It is clear from Asser's depiction that for Alfred good decision-making stemmed from *sapientia*, which Wormald describes as "sensitivity to the

13 Asser, chap. 106.

14 K & L, 110. The words in square brackets are my interpolation.

mind of God."[15] The insistence that wisdom was essential to good administration is of course a central tenet of Alfredian ideology—it is both the way in which to turn yourself to God and the consequence of doing so. Alfred's demand that his secular officials meet this standard provides strong support for the argument that the *Pastoral Care*, particularly its Prefaces, was intended to have a far wider circulation than his bishops.

Asser's vignette also suggests how others may have utilized Alfredian learning, using texts as anchor points. In the process, they both self-identified and identified themselves to others as members of the Alfredian community. Alfred's rebuke was for a failure to make judicial decisions guided by Christian wisdom. It is a reasonable assumption that this rebuke, and others like it, were publicly given—a salutary warning to other officials. Those holding lucrative offices would no doubt strive to avoid incurring the king's displeasure. It is therefore logical to suppose that when legal disputes were aired, or appropriate outcomes discussed between those administering justice, the Alfredian texts might be brought out. Particular passages might be read out, to illuminate the guiding principles of lordship, of loyalty, of oath-giving. This was how one pleased the king, how one demonstrated the skill set he required.

Alfred's emphasis on reading as a means to an end is consistent with his own path to wisdom, which I discussed in chapter 4. If reading was simply beyond an ealdorman, Alfred commanded that someone be found in his household who could read aloud to him, and would do so assiduously:

> Sed si aliquis litteralibus studiis aut pro senio vel etiam pro nimia inusitati ingenii tarditate proficere non valeret, suum, si haberet, filium, aut etiam aliquem propinquum suum, vel etiam, si aliter non habeat, suum proprium hominem, liberum vel servum, quem ad lectionem longe ante promoverat, libros ante se die nocteque, quandocunque unquam ullam haberet licentiam, Saxonicos imperabat recitare.[16]
>
> (But if one of them—either because of his age or the unresponsive nature of his unpractised intelligence—was unable to make progress in learning to read, the king commanded the man's son (if he had one) or some relative of his, or even (if he had no one else) a man of his own—whether freeman or slave—whom he had caused to be taught to read long before, to read out books in English to him by day and night, or whenever he had the opportunity.)[17]

15 Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 122; Hudson, *Laws of England*, 17.

16 Asser, chap. 106.

17 K & L, 110.

Being read aloud to was not necessarily a stop-gap measure. Reading aloud, and listening to texts being read aloud, were conventional Anglo-Saxon ways of accessing text-based knowledge. Bede's prefatory address to King Ceolwulf, at the start of his *Ecclesiastical History*, refers to those "who listen to or read this history."[18] The Verse Preface to the *OE Boethius* records that Alfred had a great desire to "leoð spellode" (proclaim verse) and bids the audience "Hliste se þe wille" (Let him listen who will).[19] Æthelweard expressly refers to the *OE Boethius* as a text with two distinct audiences, readers and listeners.[20] Asser is clear that even when Alfred had learned to read, his preference was to read aloud and be read to aloud; Alfred assimilated wisdom orally/aurally.[21] O'Brien O'Keeffe describes this as a "corporate process" of using books: reception comprised both listening and reading.[22]

The way in which texts were accessed, their contents comprehended and absorbed, is significant. The interaction of reading with listening by an audience likely magnified the persuasive reach of the Alfredian texts in both extent and effect. This is because reading aloud to an audience is an interactive experience.[23] For example, heroic poetry "socialized" its audience through "the interaction between the work itself, the oral performance, and the neurological processes of its audiences."[24] As Peter Richardson puts it, "Anglo-Saxon poems script, and do not merely reflect, far-reaching social processes."[25] The social context of shared experience, the gathering together to read and to listen, might well have amplified engagements with the Alfredian texts.[26] Mutually focused attention can generate solidarity and alignment to a common goal.[27] In the early medieval period, collective aristocratic behaviour was a social norm.[28]

Modern researchers suggest that an individual's reactions can be influenced by psychological identification with a group; a sense of collective

18 *HE*, bk. 3.

19 *Boethius*, 4–5.

20 Campbell, *Chronicle of Aethelweard*, s.a. 899, p. 51; O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Listening to the Scenes," 36.

21 O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 84.

22 O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Listening to the Scenes," 21–22.

23 Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 3–4; Amsler, *Affective Literacies*, 102.

24 Fay, *Materializing Englishness*, 147–48; Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons*, 6.

25 Richardson, "Making Thanes," 216.

26 Raine, "Emotional Communities," 65–66.

27 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 7.

28 Reuter, "Nobles and Others," 115; Barton, "Emotions and Power," 48.

identity can result in responses by an individual which privilege the well-being of the group.[29] They label this phenomenon "ingroup identification"—the self-association of an individual with a group based upon shared traits or values. Ben Raffield explores the significance of ingroup identification on the cohesion and behaviour of Viking forces in Britain.[30] Raffield identifies material markers of group identity, oath-taking, and shared ideologies as cohering elements in Viking war-bands. Ellora Bennett uses ingroup identification to analyze the construction of different kinds of enemies in early medieval England, focusing on the construction of group identity and the delineation of Otherness in the written record.[31]

The theories of ingroup identification, discourse communities, and social practices share an interest in the mechanisms of group cohesion—the ways in which members demonstrate that they belong, and delineate those who are excluded from the group. Social practice theory offers an explanation for how this process of orientation occurs. In chapter 1, I discussed the ongoing calibration which brings about alignment between practitioners. Mentoring, praise, the earning of respect and influence all act to channel an individual into accepted patterns of conduct and to normalize the meaning of the practice—why things are done the way they are done.

The practice of reading in early medieval religious houses provides a good example of calibration in social practices. Listening to texts being read aloud and learning to read by reading aloud was an integral part of learning in monastic environments. Micol Long argues that "shared reading" was a social process which gradually inculcated newcomers into the monastic community through social interaction: "imitation, reciprocal correction and exhortation, and participation in shared activities."[32] There are social dynamics at play in the way that texts, read aloud in a group, are accessed, discussed, and absorbed. In a textual community, a group of people associate voluntarily in a social activity which revolves around the dissemination and comprehension of a text; in this case, the Alfredian texts. The textual community is constructed from the process of comprehending the script, by the common understanding of the text, and by the changes in behaviour and values which are driven by that communal interpretation of the text and its voluntary adoption. Interpretation of selected texts thus gives rise to a

29 Mackie, Silver, and Smith, "Intergroup Emotions," 228–30.

30 Raffield, "Bands of Brothers"; Raffield et al., "Ingroup Identification."

31 Bennett, "Construction of the Enemy."

32 Long, "Monastic Practices," 504.

social entity, whose members self-identify and act in accordance with commonly held beliefs and rules.

Reading aloud, and listening to texts being read aloud, was a cultural norm which endured beyond the *schola*. Reading aloud and listening to texts being read aloud remained a communal activity, even at the highest echelons. Passages from Augustine's *City of God* were read aloud each night to Charlemagne and his companions, according to Einhard.[33] Group reading was customary within Alfred's court circle.[34] These portrayals of Charlemagne and Alfred were doubtless intended to emphasize their piety. We have no means of knowing the degree to which the practices ascribed to these two exceptional kings by their biographers extended down the social hierarchy after formal education concluded. However, there is evidence that elite families, including fostered youths, listened to the head of the household read aloud from the *Lives* of saints, or from sermons.[35] As a child, Alfred listened to poems recited by others, and memorized them.[36] The *Dialogues*, the *OE Bede*, and the *ASC* would have been suitable choices as reading material—easy to read out loud in discrete sections, and easy to follow. Waite notes that there are features of the *OE Bede* which suggest that the text was adapted so that it could be read aloud to a non-literate audience.[37] As Godden points out, it is hard to see why Alfred would choose to translate texts unless he intended to make them available to those who were not already sufficiently educated to access them in Latin.[38]

MS Hatton 20 provides some evidence for Alfredian texts being read aloud. Hatton 20 contains emendations to the Preface, attributed to the homilist Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester (1002–1023). The rhetorical nature of the emendations ramped up the commentary, providing greater theatrical flair. Wulfstan also made amendments to the punctuation of the text which facilitated reading the text aloud.[39] Together, these changes suggest that the Preface was read aloud to an audience even long after Alfred's reign.

I have argued that Alfred was not in a position to coerce his ealdormen; that he had to persuade them. Persuasion can encompass deterrents, the consequences of bad choices, as well as incentives and rewards

---

33 Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, chap. 24, in Noble, *Charlemagne*, 42.

34 Asser, chap. 77; O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Orality and Literacy," 131.

35 Treharne, "Textual Communities," 347.

36 Asser, chaps. 22, 23.

37 Waite, "OE *Bede*: Some Reflections," 152.

38 Godden, "Alfredian Prose," 146.

39 Graham, "Opening of King Alfred's Preface," 46.

for good choices. Pleasing the king was important to those who sought worldly honour, wealth, and influence—and the king's displeasure could be a spur to action. Asser's description of Alfred's technique (albeit in the context of fortification work) is instructive. Alfred first "gently instructed," then "cajoled, urged, commanded," and finally "sharply chastised those who were disobedient."[40] Alfred's ultimate threat was to remove the recalcitrant individual from office, a sanction with severe practical consequences.[41] Asser records recalcitrant noblemen being both "terrified and chastened," and struggling to learn to read to avoid that penalty. Sally Crawford puts it neatly: Alfred obliged "mature noblemen and experienced soldiers to join their children at the school bench, much to their discomfort."[42]

Asser's comments suggest that probably the majority of Alfred's elites did voluntarily comply with the king's wishes and did meet his expectations—at least to a minimum acceptable standard. There are two aspects to this—carrot and stick. The carrot was the potential for reward—for the king's approval and favour. Early medieval nobility, insular or Continental, were intensely competitive.[43] The stick—the threat of removal from office—was doubtless used sparingly. Had the threat of removal from lucrative office hung over the heads of too many prominent men, unrest would have been likely. If some ealdormen complied, the rest probably followed. This has implications for the evolving relationship between Alfred and his principal men. Power can be located and reinforced in the interplay of social discourse.[44]

Compliance with Alfred's wishes, even if not to the fullest extent desired by the king, demonstrated royal power and consolidated an asymmetrical relationship between Alfred and his elites. Alfredian ideology mandated just such an asymmetry. In complying with Alfred's wishes, Alfred's ealdormen shifted the balance of political power in Alfred's favour. The person who controls ideology wields ideological power—the capacity to mould behaviour and actions to his own benefit. Again, there are parallels across the Channel, as the Frankish nobility publicly performed relations of power with their ruling dynasty and assessed each other's performances. Collective aristocratic behaviour in the Carolingian context cemented horizontal bonds of

40 Asser, chap. 91.

41 Asser, chap. 106; Abels, "Devolution of Bookland," 222.

42 Crawford, *Childhood*, 145.

43 Airlie, "Aristocracy," 431; Roach, *Kingship and Consent*, 102.

44 Barton, "Emotions and Power," 43, 56; Diggelmann, "Slime of Vice," 109.

collective aristocratic identity as well as the vertical bonds reaching up the hierarchy.[45]

Alfred also needed to ensure that the next generation of councillors became attuned to Christian wisdom, as well as his existing councillors. Moulding youths, those still being formally taught, was a matter of manipulating the existing social practice of education.

Modifying the Existing Social Practice of Education

Formal learning, the learning of one's letters and the curriculum of antiquity, had tended to be regarded with suspicion by the aristocracy in the early medieval period. Such learning was associated with clerical values, which did not align with the values of the warrior class. Too much learning was seen as inimical to the proper business of an aristocrat, which was fighting and the pursuit of treasure and status.[46] Although Augustine started a school at Canterbury, it was principally for the purpose of providing education for recruits for the cathedral at Christ Church and the monastery of Saints Peter and Paul.[47]

Aidan, at the monastery cathedral of Lindisfarne, was training boys in the mid-sixth century. There were schools whose reputations shone very brightly: the school established in the late seventh century by Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, and his colleague Hadrian, for example, and York in the later eighth century under the aegis of Ælberht and then Alcuin.[48] The great schools were normally attached to cathedrals, such as York and Christ Church, or monasteries such as Whitby, Melrose, and Malmesbury.[49] Gradually, the church institutions began to train boys for roles outside the church, for secular as well as clerical careers. Wilfrid of York was a notable example of a bishop content to train youths for secular as well as clerical careers.[50] Equally, boys intended for a career in the church might receive their early education fostered in the households of lay magnates.[51] It seems that the heads of fostering households had a wide discretion in encouraging their charges into secular or clerical pathways. The absence of clearly demarcated

45 Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*, 123–25.

46 Airlie, "Aristocracy," 431; Wormald, "Uses of Literacy," 105.

47 Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 18.

48 Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 22.

49 Godden, "Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," 584; Barrow, *Clergy*, 181–83.

50 Farmer, "Eddius Stephanus," 130; Crawford, *Childhood*, 132.

51 Barrow, *Clergy*, 161.

spheres of influence reflects the extent to which the aristocracy monopolized the higher echelons of the church, and the church's increasing involvement in secular politics. It also suggests a communal approach to the education of the aristocratic young.

Alfred was not the first Anglo-Saxon king to value formal learning. Bede admired Aldfrith of Northumbria, and sent Ceolwulf both a draft and final version of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Alcuin commended Offa of Mercia for his commitment to teaching the young, a compliment perhaps elicited by Offa's request to Alcuin to provide him with one of his scholars as a suitable tutor.[52] While we have evidence for some schools, and for some level of education, Susan Kelly makes the point that we have insufficient evidence to assess either the quality of the education or the degree of access to it.[53]

Asser refers to Alfred instituting a *schola*, which Donald Bullough argues was probably modelled on the *scholae* of the Merovingian kings or those of early medieval bishops.[54] This appears to have been novel for the West Saxon court. Asser's description of Alfred as "illiteratus," which may have signified either an inability to read Latin, or an inability to read altogether, suggests that Alfred's father and grandfather did not set much store by formal learning.[55] According to Asser, Alfred bemoaned his lack of education, and encouraged particularly his younger children in their scholarship.[56] Presumably the boys who were being fostered in Alfred's *familia* also attended that school. Asser likewise tells us that the ealdormen forced to learn to read as mature adults lamented that they had had no opportunity to do so as youths, when the task would have been easier.[57]

Asser tells us that the king took a keen interest in the education of the young at the court school, providing tutelage in both literacy and virtuous conduct.[58] There is a parallel with Charlemagne here, too. The value Charlemagne placed on the political training of the young was matched by the interest he took in their formal learning. While he praised endeavour, Charlemagne also punished, using righteous anger and public humiliation of the slothful.[59] Charlemagne explicitly tied compliance with his commands and

52 *EHD*, no. 195, 846–47; Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 26.

53 Kelly, "Lay Society," 59.

54 Bullough, "Educational Tradition," 298.

55 Asser, chap. 22; Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 34.

56 Asser, chaps. 75, 76, 102.

57 Asser, chap. 106.

58 Asser, chap. 76.

59 Notker, *Deeds of Emperor Charles*, bk. 1, chap. 3; Noble, *Charlemagne*, 61.

diligent study with both emotional and material rewards. It is significant that Charlemagne used the public expression of his own response to excoriate and to laud: it sent the message that pleasing the king was paramount. Education at the king's court had a pragmatic political purpose. Those favoured with an education, who responded well, could expect to become the king's councillors, leading men in the kingdom.

The existing Anglo-Saxon practice of education had aspects which were apt for Alfred's purpose. The youths lucky enough to receive an education were a small cohort already being trained to consider themselves a cohesive group, and equally being trained that pleasing their king brought honour, prestige, and material rewards. Education was provided in a communal context of learning which would tend to amplify individual engagement with Alfredian understanding and attunement. In order to harness the potential of the existing social practice of education, Alfred introduced a new competency, literacy in the vernacular, and new materials, the Alfredian texts. These competencies were shared with the social practice of lifelong learning.

A New Competency: Literacy in the Vernacular

In the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*, "Alfred" justified his choice of the vernacular on the grounds that the standard of Latinity had sunk pitifully low. Latinity had languished in England—just how far it had deteriorated is still the subject of academic debate.[60] Alfred did not discard Latin; it remained the language of higher ecclesiastical study.[61] Rather, he rejected the bifurcation which relegated the vernacular languages to a secondary status within the Christian kingdoms on the Continent. Alfred's decision to make the vernacular the language of his "education reform" was without precedent. Other European communities would not use their vernacular languages in this way for another two centuries.[62]

In relation to both adults and youths, Alfred's use of the vernacular was, on one level, utterly pragmatic. In a community with low standards of literacy, using the vernacular meant that efforts could be focused on teaching practical literacy in order to acquire and apply wisdom, rather than adding

60 Insley, "Archives," 340–41; Morrish, "King Alfred's Letter."

61 Schreiber, *Alfred's OE Translation*, 195; Treharne, "Textual Comunities," 341–42. Gallagher suggests that Latin may have been seen as a skill relevant to secular leadership by ambitious individuals: Gallagher, "Writing Latin," 93–94.

62 Richardson, "Making Thanes," 215; Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture*, 405.

the burden of acquiring competency in Latin first. It may also be that Alfred chose the vernacular because he could not find enough teachers competent in Latin. In the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*, Alfred's comment, "Gode ælmihtegum sie ðonc ðætte we nu ænigne onstal habbað lareowa" (Thanks be to almighty God that we now have any fund of teachers), certainly suggests a dearth of Latinate teachers.[63] This may partially explain his decision not to follow the Carolingian example of educational renewal through the promotion of Latinity.[64]

While pragmatism was doubtless a consideration, there were powerful political reasons to choose the vernacular. The choice of the vernacular, rather than Latin, gave greater scope to select and manipulate the texts which would comprise the core of both education and lifelong learning. Literacy is a culturally contingent process, in which "socially constructed technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes."[65] Alfred's aim was to fuse the different peoples he ruled into a cohesive community focused on a specific goal, and the use of the vernacular as the vehicle for lifelong learning and education was a potent tool to achieve that. While the use of the vernacular was certainly expedient, its significance extended far beyond mere utility. The vernacular was more than a useful mechanism, because language is not simply a mechanism.

Language is intrinsically embedded in social relations; language, culture, and society are mutually constitutive.[66] Language is a form of social action; people do things with words.[67] Language is not a mere conduit; language can be used to construct relationships and identity.[68] Language can create, as well as reflect, a community, because a shared language can create a bond of similarity sufficiently strong to mask other differences within a social group.[69] Language is both malleable and ubiquitous, and therefore often manipulated in the production of social identity.[70]

In using the vernacular as the language of both lifelong learning and education, the language which would assist the kingdom to return to God's

63 *Pastoral Care*, 4–5.

64 Ullmann, *Carolingian Renaissance*, 8–12; Contreni, "Pursuit of Knowledge," 106–41.

65 Amsler, *Affective Literacies*, 101.

66 Ahearn, "Language and Agency," 110.

67 Morgan, "Speech Community," 5; Duranti, "Agency in Language," 459.

68 Ahearn, "Language and Agency," 110; Morgan, "Speech Community," 4.

69 Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity," 371; Ahearn, "Language and Agency," 111.

70 Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity," 369.

favour, the vernacular became imbued with power.[71] The use of the vernacular in all of the Alfredian texts meant that the power of the texts remained associated with the sole language in which they were disseminated; there was no fragmentation of authority. Ethnographic evidence demonstrates that authoritative speech, speech in a style or language that reflects power, has the capacity to create as well as to reflect reality, because it is more convincing and better heeded.[72] The *ASC*, a new genre recounting the history of the Anglo-Saxons as a Chosen People, was in the vernacular. This made the *ASC* more accessible to a wider audience. However, the use of the vernacular had a deeper impact, in the relationship between what was said, the language in which it was said, and other important texts being produced in the same language.

The increased authority and status of the vernacular can be seen in its increased use as the language of record. I do not suggest that before Alfred, Anglo-Saxon documents were only recorded in Latin.[73] Æthelberht of Kent's law code was issued in the vernacular.[74] The vernacular was sporadically used in some documents, occasionally in important legal documents like wills and leases, from the seventh century onwards.[75] However, even allowing for the vagaries of the preservation of evidence, the breadth and extent of the surviving corpus of documents written in the vernacular by the end of the Alfredian period demonstrates that, over the period, the vernacular became a language of legitimation.[76]

I suggested earlier that there may be a place for the *OE Orosius* and the *OE Bede* in the Alfredian canon, if authorship is conceived as corporate, rather than individual. These two translations may have been produced as part of a highly decentralized drive to produce texts consistent with Alfredian ideology, with considerable latitude allowed to those actually producing texts. If so, they attest to a shared understanding of the importance of using the vernacular. If, on the other hand, these texts were produced entirely independently of the king, then they speak to an embedding of the use of the vernacular beyond the king's ability to impose such use. That in turn implies a fundamental acceptance of the authority of the vernacular as an appropri-

71 Discenza, "Writing the Mother Tongue," 52.

72 Philips, "Language and Social Inequality," 475–76.

73 Godden, "Why Did the English."

74 *HE*, bk. 2, chap. 5.

75 Kelly, "Lay Society," 54; Godden, "Literacy," 586; Keynes, "Alfred and the Kingdom," 31–32.

76 Treharne, "Textual Comunities," 344.

ate language for the study of history and historiography.[77] The rise of the use of the vernacular in a context of scholarship reflects the vernacular's increased status and value within the Alfredian community. As with many cultural phenomena, the link between use and status is recursive.

The use, or the availability, of the vernacular throughout and across all levels of Alfred's kingdom (notwithstanding the continued use of Latin by the higher ecclesiastical echelons) provided a mechanism for people to perceive themselves as alike, and as part of a social group. Social groups do not form on the basis of a pre-existing, objectively identifiable uniformity, but rather coalesce as a function of emphasizing the importance of similarity.[78] Étienne Wenger and Jean Lave coined the phrase "communities of practice" to describe the interaction between learning, knowledge, and meaning; active participation in communities of practice gives rise to a communal identity.[79]

The idea of a community of practice is useful in the Alfredian context because its salient identifying feature is shared practice, not physical proximity (co-presence) or abstract characteristics like gender and class. A community of practice shares features of social practices generally—in particular, the affirmation of the practice's meaning, values, and worldviews based upon shared experiences over time. Community of practice is a conceptual tool most frequently used by sociolinguists, who study the links between language and identity.[80] Those responsible for the production of the *ASC* would likewise have constituted a community of practice—performing a common identity through the actions of compiling and circulating the chronicle.[81]

The scale of the communities involved in the extended use of the vernacular in Alfred's community is obviously far greater, and the bonds between them far more attenuated, than the close circle of collaborators involved in the production of the Alfredian texts. What I want to highlight here is the acknowledged link between a change in the use of language and the construction of identity. The consistent use of the vernacular helped to forge a sense of common identity. Group identity is constructed, not found; it emerges from interaction, from "motivated social achievement."[82] Identity

77 Magennis, *Cambridge Introduction*, 110; Godden, "The *OE Orosius*," 9–10.

78 Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity," 371.

79 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*.

80 Eckert, "Communities of Practice," 683; Jucker and Kopaczyk, "Communities of Practice."

81 Fay, *Materializing Englishness*, 76.

82 Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity," 383.

can be reiterated and confirmed with the use—the performance—of language across multiple settings.[83] This is a concept Timofeeva has explored in relation to the Alfredian reform program: the use of language as a marker of group identity, facilitating self-identification with a group of like-minded individuals (a discourse community) and subtly excluding those who do not use language the same way.[84] Rutger Kramer uses the concept of discourse communities in his study of Louis the Pious's reign.[85] Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Elizabeth Tyler have drawn attention to the investment and institutional support required to develop the vernacular as a written language in this period. The rise of the vernacular in a community was not accidental; there was a close connection between language and the agendas of leaders.[86]

The kingdom which Alfred inherited had been extended by his grandfather, uncles, and father beyond the West Saxon core, to include areas over which Mercia had previously hegemony, in East Anglia and Kent. The West Saxon kings were alert to the sensibilities of the different *gentes* they ruled. Alfredian ideology required old regional identities to be subsumed (but not extinguished) in the new identity of the *Angelcynn*. The use of the Anglo-Saxon vernacular as the language of authority across Alfred's extended community was thus apt to help that extended community to cohere over time. The use of a single, common language downplayed the differences between different subgroups, and assisted in the construction of a group identity. The Alfredian texts, written in the vernacular, assisted that process.

New Materials: The Books "most essential for all people to know"

"Alfred" never claimed to have exclusive control over access to Christian wisdom. Indeed, in the Preface to the *Soliloquies* traditionally attributed to Alfred, he encouraged others to seek out wisdom for themselves, beyond his efforts to supply it. The Preface contains an extended metaphor of gaining wisdom as the process of cutting wood from the forest to build a house:

> Forþam ic lære ælcne ðara þe maga si and manigne wæn hæbbe, þæt he menige to þam ilcan wuda þar ic ðas stuðansceaftas cearf. Fetige hym þar ma and gefeðrige hys wænas mid fegrum gerdum…

83 Bucholtz and Hall, "Language and Identity," 381.

84 Timofeeva, "Sociolinguistic Concepts"; Timofeeva, "*Ledenum bocum*."

85 Kramer, *Rethinking Authority*, 45.

86 Mhaonaigh and Tyler, "Language of History-Writing," 7–8.

> (Therefore I urge everyone who is strong and has many wagons to turn his intentions toward that same forest where I cut the support beams. There, let him fetch more for himself and load up his wagons with handsome branches...)[87]

While Christian wisdom could be accessed independently, easy access—and perhaps less wriggle-room for the lazy and the reluctant—was provided through the Alfredian translations.

Alfred did not need to provide a large corpus of materials, given the way that he had learned, and expected others to learn. Texts were to be used to spark discussion and debate, rather than for deep and detailed solitary reading. Within the context of formal education, the Alfredian texts (and particularly the various prefaces) were useful tools to teach practical skills, such as reading, reading aloud, and writing. Used that way, as tools to teach skills, the Alfredian ideology which was embedded in the texts could be transmitted, discussed, and absorbed.

Reading aloud and memorization were fundamental components of the process of education in antiquity and into the early medieval period.[88] Reading aloud constituted a "double reception" by those who read and those who heard.[89] According to Asser, Alfred's first venture into the world of literacy was his memorization of a book of "Saxon" poetry, rote learned with the help of his tutor, in order to claim the book for his own.[90] Asser's description of how Alfred came to literacy certainly fits with what we know of early education practices in this period.

It may be that parts of the Alfredian texts, especially the prefaces and epilogues, were read aloud to pupils, as an incentive to learning. Parts of the texts, again, perhaps the prefaces, may have been read aloud by pupils as part of the process of learning to read, and learning the skill of reading aloud. The prefaces are discursive in tone, informative and persuasive without being intellectually heavy. The introduction to the *OE Boethius*, with its stirring historical narrative of the just consul resisting royal tyranny, would have made good reading material for a classroom. Johnson suggests that the OE translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* would have been suitable for school exercises in reading, copying, and memorizing, as the text was a series of entertaining and lively narratives, albeit with a suitably Christian flavour.[91]

---

87 *Soliloquies*, 182–83.

88 Kelly, "Lay Society," 61; Parkes, "*Ræden, Areccan*," 8.

89 Chinca and Young, "Orality and Literacy," 7; Schaefer, "Hearing from Books," 117.

90 Asser, chap. 23.

91 Johnson, "Gregory's Dialogues," 173.

It is reasonable to assume that there would have been discussion within the classroom, had the Alfredian texts been used in this way. Long argues for an interactive, rather than passive, process of learning, citing Bede and Gregory the Great.[92] The latter, in his letter to Leander, Bishop of Seville, characterizes his exposition of biblical text to his fellow monks as a dialogue in which his students are actively engaged in the discussion.[93]

A *schola* was also a textual community. Texts read aloud by the teacher to the class, or by a pupil to his cohort, would be likely to evoke a communal response in such a small, close-knit group. There is ample evidence for learning as a communal activity in which the pupils themselves assisted each other in the learning process, through practice and peer correction.[94] Long points to Alcuin's *Dialogue of the Frank and the Saxon*, and Ælfric Bata's *Colloquies*, as Anglo-Saxon examples.[95]

The Alfredian prefaces and epilogues could be accessed independently of the works they framed, as discrete texts. There is no evidence that they circulated independently of the translations—but they were of a length and style which made them a useful resource in contexts of learning to read. In Hatton 20 and Tiberius B XI, Alfred's prefaces are written on separate bifolia, physically distinguishing them from the main text.[96] Reading aloud these attractively phrased short pieces might well have elicited an appropriate willingness and compliance from a group being taught the importance of pleasing their king and treasure-giver, and inculcated a specific identity at the same time.

Lifelong learning and formal education shared certain features—the vernacular, the use of texts as anchor points, and of course, an overarching meaning. These features were also a part of the social practice of the administration of justice.

The Social Practice of the Administration of Justice: An Overview

In Alfred's extended kingdom, there was no apparatus of state to monopolize the administration of justice. Centralized royal control of justice did not

92 Long, "Monastic Practices."

93 Kerns and DelCogliano, *Gregory the Great*, 49–50.

94 Dumitrescu, *Experience of Education*, 77–78, 83; Long, "High Medieval Monasteries," 45–46.

95 Long, "Monastic Practices," 515–17.

96 Irvine, "Alfredian Prefaces," 146, 153.

start to develop until the eleventh century.[97] The judicial system operated in a communal fashion. There were royal officials, reeves, whose job was to ensure that the king received his dues and that feud remained contained. Disputes or accusations were brought before local assemblies and judged by the leading men of the district.

It is clear from the evidence that decisions reached at an assembly were collective decisions. Wormald notes that the verbs used in recording assembly decisions were almost unanimously in the plural, indicating a "participatory and communal" process.[98] The collectivity expressed in these assembly decisions stands in contrast to contemporary practice elsewhere.[99] The deliberate emphasis on communality may have assisted local acceptance of assembly decisions. However, an appeal to the king by a disaffected litigant was possible, for those with wealth or connections.

Asser says explicitly that the king had a practice of scrutinizing decisions made in his absence, as well as reviewing cases referred to him.[100] The Fonthill Letter shows Alfred acting as the ultimate arbiter of disputes, and also, pertinently, that those who initially determined a dispute were required to explain and justify their decision.[101] This confirms Asser's account of *how* the king reviewed judicial decisions, not simply reaching his own conclusions, but asking the decision-makers to justify theirs. Alfred obviously regarded his role in the administration of justice as an integral part of good kingship. Both Asser and the Fonthill Letter place Alfred at the centre of this social practice, with his elites revolving around him. This placement of the king at the heart of justice emphasized both Alfred's right to lead his people and their obligation to obey him.

Alfred modified the social practice of justice by issuing a new law code, his *domboc*. I dealt with the ideology embedded in the *domboc* in chapter 3. The *domboc* constituted new material in the social practice of the administration of justice.

New Material: The *domboc*

The careful description of the consultative process of compiling the code in the Prologue to the *domboc* shows the Alfredian community in action. Here

97 Lambert, *Law and Order*, 163.

98 Wormald, "Charters, Law," 164.

99 Wickham, "Consensus and Assemblies," 416.

100 Asser, chap. 106.

101 *EHD*, no. 102, 544–46.

is the Christian king, motivated by his divinely sanctioned responsibility to guide his people, a role undertaken with due humility, in consultation with his councillors, carefully and advisedly sifting through historical law codes to produce a set of standards for daily living for a Christian community. The following passage is from the "Parker Chronicle" manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173):

> Ic, ða Ælfred cyning þas togædere gegaderode ond awriten het, monege þara þe ure foregengan heoldon, ða ðe me licodon; ond manege þara þe me ne licodon ic awearp mid minra witena geðeahte, ond on oðre wisan bebead to healdanne. Forðam ic ne dorste geðristlæcan þara minra awuht fela on gewrit settan, forðam me wæs uncuð, hwæt þæs ðam lician wolde ðe æfter us wæren. Ac ða ðe ic gemette awðer oðde on Ines dæge, mines mæges, oðde on Offan Mercna cyninges oðde on Æþelbryhtes, þe ærest fulluhte onfeng on Angelcynne, þa ðe me ryhtoste ðuhton, ic þa heron gegaderode, ond þa oðre forlet.[102]
>
> (Then I, King Alfred, gathered them together and ordered to be written many of the ones that our forefathers observed—those that pleased me; and many of the ones that did not please me I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and commanded them to be observed in a different way. For I dared not presume to set down in writing at all many of my own, since it was unknown to me what would please those who should come after us. But those which I found either in the days of Ine, my kinsman, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Æthelberht (who first among the English people received baptism), and which seemed to me most just, I collected herein and omitted the others.)[103]

In emphasizing the collaborative nature of lawmaking, Alfred was following in the footsteps of earlier Anglo-Saxon kings and Old Testament exemplars. Both Wihtræd and Ine were careful to record consultation and consensus in the laws they published.[104] Todd Preston puts it concisely: "Kings do not legislate from above their culture, but from within it."[105] Nevertheless, in the explicit description of the process—a description given for the benefit of Alfred's subjects—Alfred is placed firmly at the core of law-making and recording.

---

102 Preston, *Book of Laws*, 118.

103 K & L, 164.

104 *EHD*, nos. 30 and 31, 396–407; Adair, "Narratives of Authority," 11, 13.

105 Preston, *Book of Laws*, 19.

The *domboc* was "conceived as a written text."[106] The Prologue records that Alfred caused it to be written ("awritan het"), although he did not want to presume to set down many of his own laws, "on gewrit settan," in case those laws did not find favour with those who would come after him. There is debate about the date of the code's production, but modern scholars usually ascribe it to the last part of Alfred's reign.[107] It may be that by this time standards of functional literacy were improving, with Alfredian reform.

The *domboc* contained both black letter and red letter law, so that it operated on a number of different levels. The code articulated a comprehensive theory of justice (red letter law). It then set out concrete rules, and punishments for actions which transgressed those rules (black letter law). The primary concern of the substantive sections of the *domboc* is oath-keeping and loyalty to one's lord, and there are substantial penalties for transgressions.[108] Those substantive provisions correlate with the emphasis in the Prologue to the code on the necessity of loyalty and obedience, and have echoes in the *Pastoral Care* and the *OE Boethius* and *Soliloquies*.[109]

The *domboc* was written in the vernacular, but this was not novel. Bede records that Æthelberht of Kent was the first Anglo-Saxon king to commit his laws to writing, "after the Roman manner," but he did so in the vernacular.[110] There were sound reasons for Alfred to use the vernacular for legislation. According to the Prologue, the code was intended to be universally applied. The vernacular was important for effective dissemination down the political hierarchy. Its use suggests that Alfred intended a wider dissemination than his immediate court circle and principal men, who would have had a better chance of understanding Latin than the participants in the local assemblies where justice was administered to most of the population. Using the vernacular not only assisted the dissemination of the black letter law component, it also meant that the ideology embedded in the Prologue was broadcast in a language which was far more accessible to his people generally than Latin. The use of the vernacular also emphasized the common identity which Alfred was inculcating, even as the *domboc* acknowledged the legacies of different *gentes*. A common language pointed the way forward, to "Englishness."

---

106 Keynes, "Royal Government," 231.

107 Richards, "Laws of Alfred," 282; Pratt, *Political Thought*, 219; Frantzen, *King Alfred*, 11, contra.

108 Richards, "Laws of Alfred," 306.

109 Frantzen, *King Alfred*, 20.

110 *HE*, bk 2, chap. 5.

We can reasonably assume that even if some cases were quite clear-cut, and even if some assemblies were dominated by individuals held in high regard for their sagacity (or their wealth, or their connections), there would have been open discussion as to the appropriate judgment in many cases. This has significance for the dissemination of Alfred's *domboc*: not only for the specific provisions and their sanctions, but for the ideology articulated in the Prologue, which was intended to guide the application of the substantive provisions. The adjudication of disputes would probably have entailed discussion, consultation, and accord. This is particularly so, given the social norm of consensus which Wormald notes in Anglo-Saxon judgment-making. Assemblies and meetings of the witan thus had an important role in disseminating and inculcating the Alfredian ideology embedded in the *domboc*. For example, if the Preface to the *domboc* was read out, then the king addressed those present, in the first-person voice, evincing his care for them and, *sub silentio*, his right to lead them. Royal discourse therefore had a wide audience.

Levi Roach discusses royal discourse in relation to Æthelred's penitential diplomas, which made amends for his previous depredations on church lands and rights. Roach says: "We should not imagine [Æthelred's] voice speaking in a void. If Æthelred is speaking then what we are hearing is part of a dialogue between the king…and the houses that he has offended." Roach argues that since the diplomas were issued at assemblies and on other public occasions "many others got to listen in on the conversation."[111] It is reasonable to assume that the king's words in the *domboc* were only part of the discussion, and that others took an active role in that discourse, in the course of discussing, evaluating, and implementing the *domboc*'s provisions.

Much like the social practices of lifelong learning and formal education, Alfred's new material for the social practice of the administration of justice, the *domboc*, consolidated royal power by making it tangible. It is reasonable to assume that an early medieval king would not issue a law code which had little hope of being applied by the local assemblies. Such a step would be highly risky, because it would signal weak political control to his principal followers and potential rivals. At the same time, it is unlikely that a king would expect slavish adherence to his legislation, because he lacked the infrastructure to monitor and insist upon it. A degree of local variation in the application of legislation was probably therefore expected, and tolerated as long as there was a satisfactory level of general compliance.[112]

111 Roach, "Penitential Discourse," 273.

112 Lambert, *Law and Order*, 137.

Compliance could be monitored, at least to some extent, through royal review. Asser's comments on the king's habit of reviewing decisions show a royal focus on corruption and incompetency, rather than an inability to access the law code. This suggests that there was a mechanism to distribute legislation to the local administrators of justice. Those called upon to administer the law were expected to know what the law was. The communal nature of Anglo-Saxon justice makes it highly likely that new legislation was discussed at assemblies. It is inherently unlikely that an assembly provided with a copy of the *domboc* would not read or listen to it being read aloud; more probably the latter, given the public nature of an assembly. We have no direct evidence for this, but it makes intuitive common sense. It is consistent with the passage in the Fonthill Letter, in which the documents proving Helmstan's claim to the Fonthill land are produced at the hearing, *and read aloud*, not passed around.[113] It fits with the Anglo-Saxon cultural norm of listening to texts being read aloud. It is also consistent with the practice of law later in the pre-Norman period, where a greater corpus of extant evidence attests to a practice of discussion, debate, and local adaptation of law.[114]

I do not suggest that each assembly necessarily had its own copy of the *domboc*. It may be that a copy was in the possession of a prominent individual in the local community, one who would have attended court or royal assemblies where the legislation was expounded—an abbot, a bishop, or an ealdorman—and that after the code was read and its contents assimilated at a local assembly (perhaps on a number of occasions), then the text in the possession of the local worthy was consulted as required. This accords with the evidence that royal prerogatives to collect fines for offences were delegated down the political hierarchy, often as royal rewards. The individual or institution who held the right to collect punitive fines would have a material interest in ensuring compliance with Alfred's code and would be likely to keep a copy.[115] Networks of patronage and political reward embedded in the administration of justice thus facilitated dissemination of the *domboc*.[116]

In arguing for the use of the *domboc* as part of the communal practice of administering justice, I am aware of Wormald's position that the code was not actually applied in legal disputes, but was intended to assert the lawmaker's legitimacy and right to make laws.[117] He reached that conclu-

113 Brooks, "Fonthill Letter," 303, 309.

114 Roach, "Law Codes," 478.

115 Lambert, *Law and Order*, 135–36, 142.

116 Baxter, "Lordship and Justice."

117 Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 283–85; Preston, *Book of Laws*, 17.

sion based upon a complete lack of citation of the code in the records of judgments and arguments.[118] While John Hudson agrees with Wormald that there is no evidence of citation, and that the code was not set out in a way which would make it easy to use in judicial proceedings, he makes the cogent point that noting a citation of precedent in a record of an argument or judgment is a matter of judicial procedure or custom, not substance.[119] I want to take the argument a step further. There was no concept of judicial discretion being formally constrained by legal precedent, by case law, in this period. In Alfred's kingdom, where oral memory still played an important role in the administration of justice and written records were uncommon, where claims and accusations were debated in open fora and resolved by communal judgment, where precedent did not constrain judicial decision-making, why would a record of argument or judgment need to cite chapter and verse?

Wormald's strongly held views were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, and have been highly influential, although not everyone has agreed with his conclusions. Keynes has long argued that the *domboc* was widely disseminated and its contents known and applied, notwithstanding that we lack "the dog-eared copies…which the judges actually used."[120] Written records and written communications in Alfred's time and indeed in the following period supplemented rather than replaced traditional oral methods of administration.[121] Modern scholars frequently take issue with Wormald's reasoning. Tom Lambert notes that the sample of extant records of case law is worryingly small to draw firm conclusions about how the code was used.[122] Levi Roach and Catherine Cubitt criticize Wormald's argument as unnecessarily dichotomous: citation in argument and judgment would demonstrate that the code was used in determining cases; the absence of such citation is evidence that the code was not used *at all* in determining cases.[123] Wormald's stance is quite mechanistic, and does not allow for more flexible use of texts, particularly in a community of limited literacy.[124]

The manuscript tradition of the *domboc* arguably offers a different perspective on the dissemination and use of the code. The earliest extant

118 Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 264.

119 Hudson, *Laws of England*, 27.

120 Keynes, "Royal Government," 233; Jurasinski, "English Law."

121 Keynes, "Royal Government," 244.

122 Lambert, *Law and Order*, 113.

123 Roach, "Law Codes," 480; Cubitt, "As the Lawbook," 1046.

124 Pratt, "Written Law," 332–33; Roach, "Law Codes," 481

manuscripts of the *domboc* date from the mid-tenth century to the opening decades of the eleventh century, postdating Alfred's reign, but within living memory of it. Mary Richards argues from the number of surviving manuscripts and their transmission history that Alfred's *domboc* carried "significant cultural weight" relatively early in its history.[125] The manuscript tradition exhibits a stability of transmission far greater than for contemporary poetry and homilies. Roach suggests that this demonstrates the greater respect accorded written law.[126] Pratt goes further, arguing that the transmission history is consistent with the *domboc* being at least accessed from an early date by those dispensing justice.[127] Alfred's *domboc* is the only OE code to be cited as authority in later legislation.[128] The manuscript tradition thus suggests that the *domboc* had a significant role in the Alfredian practice of justice, even if the full scope of that role is elusive. The fact that the text survives as part of larger codices does not mean that it was not circulated originally on its own. Cubitt points out that Alfred's domboc, as a free-standing text, would have been a slim volume of only two quires, a booklet.[129] Its lack of heft may well have made it more portable, more handleable, thereby increasing the contexts in which it was used.

There is one other, intriguing, piece of evidence for the use of the *domboc*. It comes from the Old English translation of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, recorded in two very early eleventh-century manuscripts, BL, Cotton MS Julius E VII and BL, Cotton MS Otho B X.[130] The vocabulary of the OE version is "solidly West Saxon."[131] The OE translation contains the following passage, in which the portreeve loses patience with Malchus for what he perceives to be his public lies, and threatens him with a punishment that will loosen his tongue:

> Ic gedo pæt man sceal þe wel fæste gewriðan, ægðer ge hande ge fet, and þe, *eall swa seo domboc be swilcum mannum tæcð*, oft and gelome swingan and to ealre sorge tucigan.[132]

125 Richards, "Laws of Alfred," 284, 286. See also Jurasinski, "The *Domboc*," 524.

126 Roach, "Law Codes," 479.

127 Pratt, *Political Thought*, 238.

128 Adair, "Narratives of Authority," 6.

129 Cubitt, "As the Lawbook," 1047.

130 Reprinted in Magennis, *Seven Sleepers*.

131 Magennis, *Cambridge Introduction*, 16.

132 Magennis, *Seven Sleepers*, lines 655–57 (my emphasis).

> (I will give orders that that they shall bind you very fast, both hands and feet and scourge you often and repeatedly, *just as the lawbook teaches concerning such men*, and afflict you with every sorrow.)[133]

This reference to the *domboc* is not found in the two Latin versions of the legend; the Old English author has added it.[134] This evidence obviously postdates the Alfredian period. However, it provides a tantalizing glimpse of legal custom, of the everyday use of a written lawcode to guide judicial action.

The Bundling of Alfredian Social Practices: Ramping up the Impact

Bundling refers to the way social practices can influence and reinforce each other. I have argued that there was an overarching meaning applicable to both new and modified Alfredian social practices. This overarching meaning was the urgent need to reorient the community back to God in order to avoid annihilation at the hands of the Vikings, the scourge of God. Alfredian modifications to existing practices and new Alfredian practices were all apt to achieve the goal of God-focused wisdom. A strong and prosperous kingdom would result from God-focused wisdom. This is the first respect in which Alfredian social practices were bundled.

The second respect is the way in which Alfred placed himself at the heart of certain social practices by his oversight of them. This is easy to discern in respect of lifelong learning and the administration of justice, because we have Asser's commentary and the Alfredian texts. We should not assume that these were the only practices which Alfred adjusted so as to place himself at the centre. A more general shift, perhaps subtler and therefore less easy to discern, would make sense given the way Alfred conceived the relationship between king and subjects. In their day-to-day administration of the kingdom, Alfred's ealdormen played out, performed, Alfredian ideology through their acceptance of the pivotal role of the king in those activities.

Another respect in which practices were bundled was the consistent use of the vernacular. Such consistency was apt to foster a sense of communal identity, integral to Alfredian ideology. It made that ideology more accessible to a greater number of people, and meant that people's behaviour was more easily recognized by others as conforming to Alfredian ideology. Not all social practices had to be reconfigured. Fosterage is an example of a social practice which did not require adjustment in order to be an apt vehicle for disseminat-

133 Magennis, *Seven Sleepers*, 53–54 (my emphasis).

134 Cubitt, "As the Lawbook," 1031.

ing and inculcating Alfredian reform. It is therefore a reminder that we may not be able to see all the ways in which Alfredian ideology was inculcated.

A Comparison with the Existing Social Practice of Fosterage

The early medieval practice of fostering out aristocratic youths to the court or to the households of the great, to be brought up and educated together, provided political benefits for both ruler and elite families, and created a closely knit social class. Youths, in particular, were placed in households of equal or higher rank to their own, and it was expected that the children would benefit from both the education they received and the contacts they made during their time in fosterage.[135] The practice of fosterage provided the astute ruler with an opportunity to mould the young men of the ruling class, to shape their conduct and their worldviews, and to facilitate important social bonds.

Fosterage facilitated the military training and social cohesion of the aristocratic youths being fostered, who learned and practised their martial skills together, making them a more effective military force.[136] Aristocratic youths had a designated role in military households and took part in battles.[137] The practice of fosterage also provided opportunities for noble youths to learn proper conduct pleasing to their elders and betters, and thereby to gain opportunities for advancement under the patronage of the influential men surrounding the king.[138] Significantly, fosterage was called *nutritio*, the nourishing of the young.[139]

Practices of fosterage, particularly at court, are better attested in the historical records for the Frankish courts than the Anglo-Saxon courts.[140] Charlemagne, in particular, devoted considerable energy and resources to the creation of a court as a distinctive entity: spatially defined, with its own particular culture, which inculcated a self-aware social identity and sense of community amongst the elite who inhabited Charlemagne's court. Central to the education of youths in the ways of the court and the service of their king was the court's tone. Charlemagne evidently strove for an informal tone

135 Crawford, *Childhood*, 123, 132.

136 Nelson, "Alfred of Wessex," 702; Barrow, *Clergy*, 159.

137 Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars*, 15; Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, 32.

138 Barrow, *Clergy*, 159.

139 Dümmler, "De procinctu Romanae miliciae," 444; Innes, "Place of Discipline," 61.

140 Innes, "Place of Discipline," 62–63.

amongst the privileged young men at his court, without a corresponding loss of discipline.[141]

Hincmar records the custom of important officials at the court inviting young office bearers to dine with them in their private homes, a social occasion which fostered personal relations within the established hierarchy.[142] That informality, deliberate and purposive, is also evident in Einhard's depiction of Charlemagne in his *cubiculum* surrounded by invited members of the court, and giving judgment on litigation while getting dressed.[143] We can glimpse a similar informality and intimacy in Alfred's court, from Asser, and again in the Fonthill Letter, in which Alfred is described giving judgment while at his ablutions.[144]

The personal bonds which could be formed through fosterage were crucial to the aristocratic families which sought to advance their sons in the interests of familial wealth and influence, and to the royal family, which dispensed patronage as a form of social and political control of their elites. Competition for royal patronage and favour was intense.[145] An astute ruler knew both the value of providing largesse and the risks of putting their kinsmen and other noble followers offside.[146] Charlemagne was certainly adept at manipulating what Nelson calls the "centripetal pull of the court" to control and reward his elites.[147] Again, we can see similarities with Alfred's court, in the noted generosity alluded to in the Preface to Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* in Cotton MS Otho C I. The book says:

> ond eac swa his beah-gifan, þe him ðas bysene forgeaf,
> þæt is se selesða sinces brytta,
> Ælfryd mid Englum, ealre cyninga
> þara þe he sið oððe ær fore secgan hyrde,
> oððe he iorð-cyninga ær ænigne gefrugne.
>
> (and also to grant rest to his treasure-giver, who gave him
> the book's exemplar, that is Alfred of the English, the best
> distributor of treasure of all the kings

141 Nelson, "Charlemagne's Court."

142 Innes, "Place of Discipline," 74.

143 Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, chap. 24, in Noble, *Charlemagne*, 42.

144 Edited and translated in Brooks, "Fonthill Letter," 302–06.

145 Gautier, "Butlers and Dish-bearers."

146 Nelson, "Alfred of Wessex," 700; Innes, "Place of Discipline," 60.

147 Nelson, "Charlemagne's Court," 53.

that he has ever before heard of,
or of earthly rulers that he has known about.)[148]

Asser describes a king who is not only generous, but who understands the different contributions that various types of people (warriors, craftsmen, foreign visitors) make to his court. Alfred is careful to apportion his generosity so that all who are deserving receive an appropriate share.[149] There is, in such a measured approach, an acknowledgement of the social capital of treasure-giving.

While there was undoubtedly rivalry for place and patronage between the noble youths at court, the sources also demonstrate a degree of friendship and camaraderie within this self-aware group, bonds which could survive the separation of distance and the passage of time.[150] Mayke de Jong describes the close bonds which formed between adolescent aristocrats at the Carolingian court as a "formidable old-boys' network," formed from connections that could last lifetimes and span generations.[151]

We have little direct evidence for the practice of fosterage in Alfred's Wessex, although scholars accept that fosterage occurred.[152] Asser says that Alfred was brought up exclusively at the royal court: "in regio semper curto inseparabiliter nutriretur" (in the royal court and nowhere else).[153] Asser's story of Alfred competing with his brothers to learn and win his mother's book of "Saxon" poetry suggests that none of Æthelwulf's sons was fostered out.[154] Asser does however refer to Alfred giving instruction to the sons of his elites who were being brought up in the royal household, "in regali familia nutriebantur."[155] He makes no suggestion that fosterage was new to Alfred's court.

There are also glimpses of both royal and aristocratic fosterage slightly after Alfred's reign. King Athelstan, Alfred's grandson, was reared by his aunt Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, in Mercia.[156] Dunstan, who became archbishop of Canterbury and was later canonized, was introduced at Ath-

148 *Boethius*, 406–07.

149 Asser, chaps. 76, 78, 81.

150 Nelson, "Charlemagne's Court," 48.

151 De Jong, *Epitaph for an Era*, 154; Airlie, "Bonds of Power," 196–97.

152 Kelly, "Lay Society," 59.

153 Asser, chap. 22; K & L, 74.

154 Asser, chap. 23.

155 Asser, chap. 76.

156 Giles, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle*, bk. 2, chap. 6, 131.

elstan's court by his uncle Æthelhelm, and thereafter became part of the *familia* of his kinsman Ælfheah the Bald, who was bishop of Winchester. Ælfheah was obviously highly regarded by King Athelstan, who later arranged for Æthelwold (who became the bishop of Winchester) to enter the same household.[157] King Edgar (the "Peaceable") was reared by the East Anglian ealdorman Æthelstan Half-King.[158] Pauline Stafford has identified other, later, instances of fosterage.[159]

Alfred did not need to modify the social practice of fosterage. In its existing format, it facilitated Alfredian reform. First, it encouraged a communal identity and mentality in the aristocratic class. This was, by any account, a small group of people. That sense of common identity needed very little adjustment to align with Alfredian understanding and attunement. As this was the ruling class, it was also the class which stood to lose the most if the Viking threat could not be averted, and equally, stood to gain the most if peace and prosperity could be achieved. Second, the emphasis was on the king as the centre of the court circle—the source of largesse, which was evidence of value, of being esteemed, as well as a practical reward. And there was competition for the king's high regard. That doubtless encouraged individual adoption of an understanding and attunement heavily promoted by the king. As I discuss later, the Jewel had a special role to play in persuading aristocratic individuals to join the king's program.

In this chapter, I have identified several diverse social practices as agential in bringing about aristocratic acceptance of, and participation in, the Alfredian community. Acceptance and participation are not temporally delineated stages: perhaps the best way of describing the process is that, through routinized ways of doing things, Alfred's aristocracy *performed* his reforms, and his new community, into being.

The practice of education was substantially altered to achieve Alfred's aims. All the elements of the existing practice (materials, competencies, meaning) were modified. There were new materials to provide easy access to that wisdom: the Alfredian texts. There was a new competency: literacy in the vernacular. In addition, Alfred created a new social practice of lifelong learning, different from the formal practice of education because it was aimed at the mature men already prominent in his kingdom. These new and modified social practices mirrored Alfred's personal path to wisdom, reflecting what and how he had learned.

---

157 Yorke, "Æthelwold," 66, 68.

158 Macray, *Chronicon abbatiae Rameseiensis*, 11, 53.

159 Stafford, "King's Wife," 21.

Alfred also substantially modified the practice of the administration of justice. New material was provided—the *domboc*. The *domboc* conveyed Alfredian ideology in its recitation of Mosaic law and in the central importance given to oath-taking and loyalty in its substantive provisions. Alfred's thorough review of judicial decision-making placed the king firmly at the centre of this social practice. His oversight, and the communal nature of Anglo-Saxon justice, provided an opportunity for his ealdormen and other officials to demonstrate that they had opted in to Alfred's program. These may not have been the only practices used to achieve Alfred's aims.

The persuasive agency of objects and behaviours in Alfredian reform is more easily identified when objects and behaviours are artificially separated and closely examined in turn. That is not how Alfred's people experienced their persuasive agency. In the next chapter, I return to the "messiness" of lived experience, and re-examine the Jewel's multifaceted role in Alfredian reform.