

LOOKING FORWARD

ALFRED'S SUCCESSORS

IT IS POSSIBLE to discern continuations in each of the principal areas of Alfredian reform—military innovation, education and scholarship, and justice. It is also possible to identify a new use of Alfredian ideology, deployed in service of the creation of empire, a claim of legitimacy and the right to rule expanded areas of Britain well outside the traditional West Saxon sphere of influence. Alfred's notion of the *Angelcynn* found fuller expression in the concept of *translatio imperii*, contained in the Chronicles and other texts, supported by the use of the vernacular. And Alfred's reputation as reformer and saviour of his people was shaped and presented to advance the claims of his children and grandchildren to rule their heartland and an empire.

Military Innovation

Lavelle describes the trajectory of military innovation as a process of militarization rooted in Alfred's innovations.¹ Edward's reign witnessed a flurry of burh building, but with a new, wider purpose. Edwardian burhs were not primarily defensive, and not aimed squarely at inhibiting Viking incursions. Particularly through the period 912–920, burh building was “a prelude to conquest, rather than a defensive measure.”² These new burhs were intended to cow the nearby populations into submission—and they succeeded.³ The various Chronicle recensions record that under the direction of Edward and Æthelflæd, there was a pattern of burh building at the frontiers of Alfred's expanded kingdom which pushed into new territory on multiple fronts. In the annals, this burh building is repeatedly associated with the voluntary submission of surrounding communities.

Strategic placement remained crucial. Following Alfredian precedent, the new burhs were consistently sited where they could control movement in the landscape. The construction of Witham in 913, isolating Essex from

1 Lavelle, “‘Dark Matter’ Evidence,” 91.

2 Konshuh, “Chronicle Compilation,” 504.

3 Konshuh, “Edward the Elder,” 252.

Danish support, is an example.⁴ The *ASC* connects new burhs and the submission of leaders and peoples in the simplest terms—one immediately followed the other. Submission was doubtless public and performed relationships of power. No doubt the king had an eye to the political value of these public submissions.⁵ Paul Hill describes Edward’s and Æthelflæd’s policy as “a very serious game of domination and subjection made possible by the central fortified place.”⁶ The generation after Alfred took the principles of defence-in-depth and applied them to the conquest of peoples and territory never before ruled by the West Saxon royal house.

Translatio imperii

Such expanded hegemony required a nuanced language of legitimation. Edward’s circle (like his father before him, Edward did not “do” it all himself) borrowed from the Alfredian playbook. A range of texts was deployed to transmit a specific ideology of legitimacy within an eschatological framework. The *ASC* characterizes the submission of new territories as a liberation from Viking oppression, rather than West Saxon empire-building. Konshuh argues that MS A of the *ASC*, the *OE Bede* and the *OE Orosius* were all produced at Edward’s court, and constitute a coherent extension of Alfredian ideals of Christian kingship and the legitimacy of the West Saxon overlordship.⁷ Francis Leneghan has analyzed the theme of *translatio imperii* threaded through *ASC* MS C, the *OE Orosius* and the OE poem, *The Death of Edward*, all preserved within a single eleventh-century codex, Cotton MS Tiberius B I.⁸ *Translatio imperii* legitimated Edward’s right to rule over other kingdoms and other peoples, grounded in the ideals of Christian kingship and framed in the familiar terms of a salvation narrative. That legitimacy was articulated in the title Edward consistently used: “king of the Anglo-Saxons.” Æthelstan’s circle likewise seized the opportunity to articulate an expanded hegemony after the conquest of Northumbria and the submission of the surrounding British rulers, consistently describing Æthelstan as *rex Anglorum* in charters—a form of “ideological aggrandizement.”⁹ Such care-

4 Hill, *Fortress Kingdom*, 77, 91; Foot, *Æthelstan*, 13.

5 Lavelle, “Representing Authority,” 76.

6 Hill, *Fortress Kingdom*, 190.

7 Konshuh, “Edward the Elder,” 252–53; see also Konshuh, “Chronicle Compilation.”

8 Leneghan, “*Translatio imperii*”; “End of Empire.”

9 Foot, *Æthelstan*, 27.

ful propaganda was not limited to the charters. Imperial sovereignty is joyously celebrated in the *Battle of Brunanburh* (*ASC*, s.a. 937).

While Edward's chosen title, "king of the Anglo-Saxons," stems from the latter years of Alfred's reign, Keynes argues that during Edward's reign, a process of political development gave real substance to this claim of a new polity. Edward was "more than the bellicose bit between Alfred and Æthelstan."¹⁰ In the administration of his kingdom, Edward also built upon the legacy of Alfredian reform, although the process was not straightforward.¹¹ Edward's laws invoked the authority of Alfred's *domboc* as a political symbol and a foundation for new substantive laws on oath-breaking, for example.¹² As with Alfred's *domboc*, the manuscript tradition suggests that Edward's laws were frequently consulted.¹³ Æthelstan continued this trajectory of legal reform, with particular emphasis on the bonds of loyalty underpinning the proper regulation of the kingdom.¹⁴ The legislation of both Edward and Æthelstan demonstrate that royal directions were increasingly conveyed in writing.¹⁵

Text Production and Learning

The Alfredian educational legacy is visible in the production of other manuscripts and in scholarship under the patronage of Edward and then Æthelstan.¹⁶ Early copies of the *ASC*, the *OE Orosius*, the *OE Bede* and *Bald's Leechbook* were produced at the same scriptorium over a period of time.¹⁷ Waite argues that the Preface to the *OE Bede* was a retrospective attempt to link the text to Alfred and Alfredian ideology of royal responsibility.¹⁸ Alfred's name was invoked frequently and deliberately, burnishing his reputation for learning and kingship in a manner which promoted the authority and prestige of scholarship and book production under the patronage of his heirs. Both the *OE Orosius* and the *Leechbook* contain interpolations

¹⁰ Keynes, "Edward," 57.

¹¹ Jurasinski, "The *Domboc*."

¹² Konshuh, "Chronicle Compilation," 505.

¹³ Jurasinski, "English Law," 11.

¹⁴ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 127.

¹⁵ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 137.

¹⁶ Konshuh, "Chronicle Compilation," 501.

¹⁷ Kesling, "Winchester Scribes," 479.

¹⁸ Waite, "Preface to the *OE Bede*," 85.

expressly referring to Alfred, carefully placed as framing pieces.¹⁹ The value of invoking Alfred's name is demonstrated in a different textual context, in the Fonthill Letter's "strategic invocation of King Alfred's authority."²⁰ Like his grandfather, Æthelstan surrounded himself with a vibrant and cosmopolitan intellectual circle and appears to have had an abiding interest in learning.²¹

The tenth-century literary evidence for the circulation and high repute enjoyed by the Alfredian texts is crucial evidence for the continuation of Alfredian ideology. Ælfric's assured use of Alfredian arguments and language is highly suggestive of the diligent study of Alfredian texts by students in at least one institution post-Alfred, in the time of Æthelwold.²² Ælfric noted his approval of Alfred's translations in the preface to his *Catholic Homilies*.²³ Ælfric's apparent familiarity with, and approval of, Alfredian texts suggests that they were accepted and used.²⁴

Genwald, Bishop of Worcester, wrote a learned colophon responding to the Metrical Epilogue to the *Pastoral Care*, which is preserved in Bodleian, MS Hatton 20. Anlezark provisionally dates the colophon to the 950s.²⁵ Æthelweard's *Chronicon*, composed by an ealdorman and relative of Alfred's in the latter part of the tenth century, praised Alfred for his sense of justice and his skill in warfare, but above all, for his learning and his translations.²⁶ Æthelweard's description of an audience being moved to tears by a reading of *OE Boethius* suggests both continued circulation of Alfredian texts and an appreciation of their contents.²⁷ Anlezark has drawn attention to the debt owed by the *Solomon and Saturn II* poet to Metre 20 of the prose *OE Boethius*, arguing that the dates of composition are closer than has been realized. He concludes that from the early tenth century, either the prose or prosimetric version of the *OE Boethius* was a carefully studied classroom text.²⁸ Other

19 Kesling, "Winchester Scribes," 487.

20 Smith, "Kings and Cattle Thieves," 448; Marafioti, "Seeking Alfred's Body," 226.

21 Foot, *Æthelstan*, 91, 66.

22 Godden, "Alfredian Prose," 153.

23 Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*; Godden, "Ælfric and the Vernacular."

24 Godden explores the ambivalence of Ælfric's comments in Godden, "Ælfric and the Alfredian Precedents," and "Ælfric and the Vernacular."

25 Anlezark, "Drawing Alfredian Waters," 263–64.

26 Campbell, *Chronicle of Aethelweard*, s.a. 899; K & L, 191.

27 K & L, 191. I note that Campbell ascribes *lachrymosus* to the text rather than the audience in his translation: Campbell, *Chronicle of Aethelweard*, s.a. 899, p. 51.

28 Anlezark, "Drawing Alfredian Waters," 262–63.

pointers are the expanded use of the vernacular, such as in Ælfric's homilies and his *Lives of Saints*, and the increased prestige of OE prose.²⁹ This diverged from Continental practice, and may indicate that the Alfredian use of the vernacular for authoritative works was normalized in the decades after the king's death.³⁰ The fact that there are tenth- to twelfth-century copies of Alfredian texts is further confirmation of continued circulation.

The continued circulation of Alfredian texts in the tenth century does not only speak to the continuation of Alfredian reform after Alfred. It is also evidence that these texts served their purpose in the first place, that they were apt vehicles for the transmission of Alfredian ideology. Similarly, the continuation of the *ASC* after the common stock, the Edwardian annals and indeed the Mercian Register all display a close interest in questions of royal power and national identity—an ideological function. The strong inference is that the authors were close to royal power.

Alfredian reform thus had a trajectory beyond Alfred's lifespan. Elements of the assemblage of Alfredian reform that I have analyzed in this book continued after Alfred. However, even the abbreviated discussion above demonstrates that while there was continuity, there was also significant change. Some actants were different—such as the burhs (now used offensively, not defensively), the language of legitimation, and some texts. There was continuity in other actants—in core concepts of Christian kingship, embedded in texts, and the use of the *ASC* as a propagandist medium. This is, necessarily, the briefest of sketches. The question that then arises is—how do we theorize this change? Is it an evolution of the same assemblage (an example of the constant state of becoming and flux that is an essential characteristic of an assemblage), or a different assemblage altogether? I think that in order to organize the data and the analysis into manageable proportions, we make an *agential cut*.³¹ We artificially separate material phenomena for the purpose of analysis. In this instance, I propose that post-Alfredian reform constitutes a new assemblage, which emerged from Alfredian reform. “New assemblages emerge and proliferate because of the efficacy and fertility of past ones”; the past unfolds.³²

29 Godden, “Why Did the English.”

30 Godden, “Ælfric and the Vernacular,” 107.

31 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 348; Knutson, “Itinerant Assemblages,” 797.

32 Fowler, “Dynamic Assemblages,” 252.

Social Practice Theory and Assemblage Theory

Using assemblage theory and social practice theory in tandem has allowed a closer-grained analysis of the persuasive agencies of objects and behaviours—how they can differ and how they can reinforce each other. In the lived experience of the reform process, objects and routinized ways of doing things overlapped and segued into one another.

Fascinatingly, this interdisciplinary approach to Alfredian reform has revealed that ideology operated differently in Alfredian assemblages and social practices. The different theoretical models demonstrate that ideology could exert a subtly different agency in different contexts. In an assemblage, ideology is simply one of the actants, and does not occupy an a priori privileged position. This characterization probably stems from assemblage theory's flatter ontology, its decentring of the human. In social practice theory, ideology has a far more central role.

Ideology provides the meaning of a practice and therefore shapes the two other elements of practice (materials, competencies) in a way that is different from the interplay between actants in an assemblage. The interplay between actants is usually best described as fractal, but the relationship between meaning and materials/competencies seems to be more linear and unidirectional. This theoretical difference may derive from the difference between ideology and ideological power which I explored at the start of the "Alfredian Ideology" chapter, in which case it is a substantive difference. Equally, it may be a semantic or conceptual difference between the theoretical models. Further research, perhaps other detailed case studies, may provide greater clarity. Assemblage theory and social practice theory will not have universal application, but identifying the flaws and weaknesses of a theoretical model has its own value—either refining the model or potentially opening up space for fresh theories.³³

Using the frameworks of assemblage theory and social practice theory allows us to interrogate the extant written sources, to supplement them, and, on occasion, to confirm their accounts. This is not a case of the material record being a handmaiden to history, but an example of real interdisciplinarity. The material and written records can be used to complement, challenge, and contradict each other in ways that confront myths, identify false assumptions, and confirm hypotheses.³⁴ There is value in a diverse analytical toolkit. An object or a behaviour should not be taken at face value, any

33 Pétursdóttir and Olsen, "Theory Adrift," 113.

34 Little, "Historical Sources," 427–30.

more than an image or a piece of writing. We need to deal with materiality in ways that are analytical, not merely descriptive.

An interdisciplinary approach to the reception of Alfredian reform has revealed subtle relations of power in Alfred's kingdom. There was wriggle-room indeed, and Alfred astutely increased the prospects of successfully persuading his elites to follow him with a series of well-chosen strategies. Alfredian ideology was coherent and well-reasoned, resonated with existing cultural norms and worldviews, and offered a clear path to ward off threatened annihilation by Viking conquest. That was not enough to effect large-scale change. The persuasive agency of objects and behaviours was employed, to drive reform. We can see in Alfred's reform program how ideology can be disseminated and absorbed, how the choice of action can be made straightforward, and how a community can be forged which increases the likelihood of collective behaviour. Paying attention to objects and behaviours provides a fresh opportunity to see past the towering figure of Alfred the Great, to those who peopled his world.

