Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

ALFRED IS THE only English king to be styled "the Great"—but the accolade was not bestowed by his contemporaries, although they admired him. The legend of Alfred was a product of English imperialism, identifying the seeds of its greatness in early medieval England.[1] Seeing Alfred clearly is difficult, as Simon Keynes and Barbara Yorke have demonstrated.[2] In his book on Alfred, Daniel Anlezark says that he "would like to find the Alfred before he was "great," the Alfred who lived and died across the second half of the ninth century, in a material and cultural world very remote from ours, but facing many of the same issues."[3] His emphasis is on exploring Alfred as he lived. While seeing Alfred in his own world is difficult, seeing those who peopled his world is even more problematic.

Alfred looms so large over any inquiry into ninth-century Wessex that it can be difficult to see past him. But as Julia Crick points out, the king could not feast, fight, pray, or converse alone, and the members of the aristocracy with whom he interacted "were or must have been instrumental in extending his power beyond his presence."[4] The shifting, subtle relationship between Alfred and the men he relied upon to govern his kingdom is critical to our understanding of Alfredian reform and Alfred's kingdom. This book swivels the focus on Alfredian reform from Alfred to his elites, examining the process of reform from their perspective. It ranges beyond the sparse documentary record, using assemblage theory and social practice theory to investigate the persuasive agency of objects and behaviours and reveal their role in the reception of Alfredian reform.

There are lingering historiographical assumptions about "the structures of social action," about how political power was generated, wielded, and confirmed in the early medieval period.[5] A simple top-down model of political power is flawed. It fails to acknowledge that those lower down in the

1 Yorke, "Alfredism."

2 Keynes, "Cult of King Alfred"; Yorke, "Alfredism."

3 Anlezark, *Alfred*, 2–3.

4 Crick, "Nobility," 414–15.

5 Innes, *State and Society,* 9.

hierarchy might have been able to choose how far to obey, might have had wriggle-room to resist quietly or to comply only partially. If there is scope for gradations of compliance in a particular context of power, then we need to account for what might have made people choose to do more than they could be compelled to do. An early medieval king led because he was followed. His power was constrained by his need to carry his principal men with him.[6] The leading men of a kingdom were essential participants in the formulation and implementation of royal policy.[7] Alfred lacked the political authority to insist that his reforms be implemented. If he could not compel his elites to enact his reform program, how did he persuade them to adopt the values and identity embedded in Alfredian ideology, and to do as he asked?

This question goes to the heart of the distribution and exercise of political power during Alfred's reign. It has implications for the reigns of his immediate successors, as they consolidated royal and military power and took the fight up to the Vikings (I have chosen to use the term "Vikings," as it is the most consistently used compendious expression in the scholarship—a convenient form of shorthand). The question is also important because it allows us to look more closely at the lived experience of Alfredian reform, to "construct their lifeways."[8] As Julian Thomas notes: "We emphatically need a past that is more colourful and more peopled than those presently on offer."[9]

The Nature of Power

To effect societal change, in any context, requires power. The implementation of Alfredian reform required the exercise of power. Power is a highly contested concept.[10] John Turner writes that "we use the term in ordinary parlance confident that we know what it means, until we are asked to define it."[11] Turner's theory of power identifies psychological group formation—the development of a shared social identity (with shared beliefs, theories, and values)—as the wellspring of power. Ingroup identification leads to group processes of influence, cooperation, and cohesion. From this shared social identity, three dimensions of power emerge: persuasion, authority, and coercion. Persuasion influences the judgments and values of others,

6 Althoff, *Family, Friends*, 8, 103, 112.

7 Roach, *Kingship and Consent*, 105.

8 Deetz and Scott, "Documents, Historiography," 110.

9 Thomas, "Reconfiguring the Social," 155.

10 Reed, "Power," 195.

11 Turner, "Nature of Power," 5.

so that they act volitionally, as willing agents, making individual choices. Authority is the voluntary vesting of decision-making in a specific individual, person, or role by a group, whose members thereby relinquish the right to make individual decisions. Coercion is the control of others against their will.[12] This is not the only formulation of power which has value for the early medieval period. Isaac Reed parses power slightly differently. His typology consists of relational power, discursive power, and performative power.[13] His concept of relational power approximates to Turner's notion of authority, and discursive power is a form of persuasion.

Discursive power, according to Reed, is used to reconstitute the social and political world by "shaping the perceptions of interests" of participants.[14] Language is heavily implicated in this work—creating as well as reflecting changing beliefs and values. Reed's focus on shaping perceptions resonates with aspects of Steven Lukes's typology of power. Lukes suggests that power can operate to submerge and smooth over latent conflict, so that the competing self-interests of those seeking to exercising power and those who comply remain unidentified and unacknowledged by all concerned.[15]

The effective exercise of relational power or discursive power results in concrete actions; those actions provide the visible proof of the exercise of power. Performative power, according to Reed, means more than these consequential actions. Performative power refers to the "situated effectiveness of acts themselves as movers of the world."[16] This has particular resonance for my analysis of Alfredian military reform, specifically the feedback loop between military innovation and Alfredian ideology.

Stuart Airlie's monograph on the Carolingians is an example of the insights which can be gained by paying close attention to power and how it was successfully wielded. He analyzes the complex, mutually constitutive relationship between the Carolingian dynasty and the aristocracy. In particular, he focuses on "symbolic" rather than "coercive" power—shaping perceptions so that others align their self-interests with yours, and therefore want to do what you want them to do. Symbolic power is constructed and must be carefully maintained, even while it appears to be the natural order.[17] By its very nature, symbolic power is relational. It requires the active partic-

12 Turner, "Nature of Power," 8, 11.

13 Reed, "Power," 203.

14 Reed, "Power," 205.

15 Lukes, *Power*, 33.

16 Reed, "Power," 207.

17 Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*, 6.

ipation of those who are to obey; such participation may consist of express affirmations of authority and legitimacy as well as actions which perform relationships of power. Critically, the construction and maintenance of Carolingian dynastic power was a communal effort: "kings did not write their own charters, mint their own coins, build their own palaces, compose their own prayers for the safety of the royal family or paint the impressive manuscript pictures of rulers in majesty."[18] Paying close attention to the way that Alfredian ideology was articulated and disseminated, and the way that his elites responded to his reform program and participated in it will bring to the fore the way that power was exercised in Alfred's kingdom.

Alfred's relationship with his elites is thus an important factor in the *process* of Alfredian reform. Alfred's hold on the throne was not as secure as the contemporary sources depicted. This helps to explain the methods chosen to achieve reforms. There was substantial risk in allowing concerted resistance to foment; persuasion was the safest and surest way to achieve reform.

Problems with the Alfredian Sources

The contemporary sources on Alfred's reign were written and distributed under his patronage. Unsurprisingly, they provide a very selective account of how Alfred came to the throne, his dynasty's history, and his authority over his thegns. Both the *ASC* and Asser depict Alfred's accession as natural and assured, free from conflict or challenge. Janet Nelson encapsulates their characterization: Alfred was "papally-appointed, parentally-preferred, the nobility's choice even before his brother's [predecessor's] death."[19] This highly skewed depiction has significant implications for a consideration of Alfred's relationships with his magnates. The assumption that Alfred took and held the throne as a matter of inevitability and with the ongoing unanimous consent of his elites effectively masks their ability to contest and resist any aspect of his rule (as well as obscuring the unlikely sequence of events that led to the youngest of five brothers ascending the throne). As a result, the question of aristocratic response to Alfredian reform can sometimes slide from view.

18 Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*, 17.

19 Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 63.

Anglo-Saxon Kingship and Succession: An Overview

There were no clearly established rules governing succession in any of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Any brother, son or (arguably) grandson of a previous king was a prince, an "*ætheling*"—and in Anglo-Saxon custom, all *æthelings* were throne-worthy.[20] The term *ætheling* carried no connotation of a designated successor, but was rather a marker of eligibility for the throne.[21] An Anglo-Saxon king ruled with the active consent of his elites, lay and ecclesiastical. Their acceptance of, and submission to, a particular *ætheling* on the death of the king both marked and formed part of the act of succession.[22]

While a king might favour a particular candidate, and take steps to enhance his preferred successor's prospects of securing the crown, other factors were always in play. There was rarely only one eligible candidate for the throne. *Æthelings* close to the throne could span two generations—the reigning king's sons, and his brothers and their sons. Intermarriage between members of the *stirps regia* and prominent aristocratic families frequently complicated issues of aristocratic consent and gave rise to factions vying for the throne.[23] Who succeeded at any given point depended upon the ability of the existing king to secure the loyalty of his elites for his preferred successor against any other contenders for the throne, and the wealth and influence of their supporters.

Every dynasty trod a fine line between providing enough candidates to allow for contingencies and avoiding internecine quarrels over the throne.[24] The problem was not confined to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The descendants of Charlemagne fought each other bitterly over their inheritances.[25] The management of family expectations and rivalries was "an acid test of early medieval kingship."[26] Difficult or precarious times were more likely to foment or exacerbate succession rivalries; other grievances and insecurities within a kingdom could manifest themselves as disputes over succession.[27]

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20 Abels, "Royal Succession," 84; Dumville, "Ætheling," 12, 17.

21 Dumville, "Ætheling," 6.

22 Abels, "Royal Succession," 84.

23 Dumville, "Ætheling," 24–25.

24 Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 61; Foot, "Dynastic Strategies."

25 Innes, "Charlemagne's Will"; Nelson, "Kingship and Empire."

26 Nelson, "Reconstructing a Royal Family," 48.

27 Stafford, "King's Wife," 12.

Wessex was relatively small in size.[28] However, during the reign of Alfred's grandfather, Wessex replaced Mercia as overlord of Kent and the East and South Saxons, by the voluntary submission of those peoples.[29] The West Saxon royal house thereafter ruled an extended kingdom of considerably enlarged resources, albeit a kingdom of disparate peoples, who traditionally thought of themselves as separate *gentes*.[30] The nature of this overlordship was fragile and reversible, making the extended kingdom more liable to fissure under the pressure of rival claims for a share of it.

The unexpected marriage of Alfred's father, Æthelwulf, to a young Frankish princess (Judith) in 856 sparked a rebellion by his eldest son which resulted in just such a partition of the kingdom between father and son. It is distinctly possible that Æthelbald construed his father's marriage to a wife of childbearing age as an unacceptable threat to his own ambitions.[31] After Æthelwulf's death, an agreement was reached between his three remaining sons—Æthelberht, Æthelred, and Alfred—whereby the kingdom would be reunited, and ruled by each of the three brothers in turn.[32] This unusual arrangement for fraternal succession depended upon goodwill and trust between siblings, as the throne was passed from eldest to youngest.[33] Fraternal succession does not extinguish the prospect of contestation for the throne. Arguably, it simply postpones that contest to the next generation, because all the sons of the various brothers, the kings of the previous generation, are eligible for the throne and have an ostensibly equal claim.[34]

It is possible to discern the sensitivities surrounding this fragile arrangement in the contemporary documents. During their reigns, both Æthelberht and Æthelred needed to assert the legitimacy of their pre-eminence over their younger brothers, who were potential kings-in-waiting. Younger brothers are consistently identified in charter attestation clauses as *filius regis*; they are not described as designated heirs.[35] Alfred, when he finally gained the throne, needed to assert the legitimacy of his accession over the claims of the next generation, his nephews, sons of his older brother and predecessor.

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28 Nelson, "Alfred of Wessex," 699.

29 Yorke, *Wessex*, 94–95.

30 Abels, "Royal Succession," 92; Keynes, "Control of Kent," 115–16.

31 Yorke, *Wessex*, 98; Stafford, "King's Wife," 17.

32 *EHD*, no. 96, 534–37.

33 Sheppard, "King's Family," 416; Stafford, "King's Wife," 19.

34 Stafford, "King's Wife," 10–12.

35 S 327; S 329; S 331–33; S 340; S 1201; S 356.

Although the annalists of the *ASC* chose to portray Alfred's succession as inevitable and his reign as harmonious, the *ASC* also provides abundant evidence of self-interested opportunism, conflict, and betrayal. As Janet Thormann puts it: "West Saxon hegemony was from the start continuously challenged and reasserted in response to contingent events."[36] What emerges from the evidence is a clear sense of the contingency of Alfred's accession, and the fragility of his ongoing hold over his extended kingdom. Alfred was the obvious candidate for the throne when Æthelred unexpectedly died, given the Viking incursions. He had already proved himself to be a competent military leader against that enemy while his brother was alive, and given the young age of his nephews, Æthelred's children, they could not be considered for military command.

However, Alfred's continued hold on the entirety of the kingdom, staring down his nephews, and successfully managing the expectations of his own children as they became adults, was not assured. Alfred doubtless remembered his elder brother usurping their father's throne and was old enough to have understood at the time that an internecine civil war loomed as a consequence. As king, Alfred faced the potential for discontent from overlooked *æthelings* now adult.

Outright rebellion (by Alfred's nephew, Æthelwold) broke out only after Alfred's death. However, the wider context, in particular the existence of challenges and self-interested actions immediately before and after Alfred's reign, gives ample reason to infer that the balance of power between Alfred and his magnates was finely poised and perhaps readily altered, and that he could never take their loyalty and their wholehearted support for granted. That is why the approval of the witan was so carefully recorded—in Alfred's will, in the Alfred-Guthrum Treaty, and in the prologue to the *domboc*.[37] His resort to their approval on critical issues, and the careful recording of that approval on issues likely to be contentious into the future, suggest an awareness that power was mutable. The evidence also suggests that Alfred's elites were aware of the fluidity of power, of the potential for evasion, defiance, and even rebellion. This generalized latent awareness of the mutability of power shaped the relationship between Alfred and his principal men. It informed the implementation of Alfredian reform. And it is a factor to be considered in assessing how Alfred's aristocracy responded to his reforms, and why they chose to embrace them.

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36 Thormann, "Chronicle Poems," 78.

37 Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 171–72.

The documentary record provides only sparse evidence from the perspective of Alfred's elites. The difficulties with the extant texts in the early medieval period generally—the small quantity, the particular and confined worldviews of those who wrote in this period, and the vagaries of preservation of textual evidence—are well rehearsed. The only extant narrative on Alfredian reform written from the perspective of one of Alfred's elites is Asser's *Life* of Alfred. Asser is acknowledged to be a problematic source. Keynes describes Asser's *Life* (along with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) as "a mixture of panegyric and propaganda, as hype, not history."[38] While acknowledging that Asser must be treated circumspectly, I concur with Patrick Wormald's assessment of Asser's value: "His account may not be dispassionate, but losses in objectivity should be balanced if not outweighed by gains in empathy."[39]

Attributing it all to Alfred

Alongside the problem of scant and partisan sources, there is an enduring scholarly controversy about how much of Alfredian reform can be attributed to Alfred the man, and how much was done by others in his circle—men such as Asser and Plegmund, and others we cannot identify. It is a question that seems to engross literary scholars more than historians, perhaps because nobody expects that the king single-handedly put into practice changes to education and defence.

It is reasonably clear that in the face of the existential threat posed by the Vikings, King Alfred made a deliberate choice to try something different. He did not follow the path of the Mercian king Burgred, who conceded his kingdom to the Vikings and fled to Rome. Alfred the king "made the difference," in that he created the network of individuals, the Alfredian circle.[40] That does not mean that the king personally "did" everything or expressly authorized all aspects of Alfredian reform. I am going to use "Alfred" as a convenient shorthand for a collaboration between members of King Alfred's circle, without trying to delineate which individuals did what, or to calibrate the degree to which the king was personally involved in the minutiae of reform. Throughout this book, I will use "Alfred" when I am referring to this corporate entity, and Alfred/King Alfred when I am referring to the individual.

38 Keynes, "Age of Alfred," 254.

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

40 I am grateful to Daniel Anlezark for this pithy phrasing.

The king's role as fulcrum for Alfredian ideology and reform needs to be considered separately from his role in the production of the Alfredian texts (which I identify below). The issue of authorship of these texts remains unresolved. There is considerable scholarly debate about what constitutes medieval authorship; there is a body of scholarly literature about the identification of specific authors for specific Alfredian texts. Even within the broad group who argue that King Alfred was personally involved in the production of the Alfredian texts, opinions on the nature and extent of his involvement differ. Opinions range from an "ultra-positivist" position (Alfred was the "formative mind" behind the translations and personally laboured on the task of translating) to the "ultra-sceptical" position (Alfred simply provided a conducive environment for like-minded scholars and was pleased to lend his name to their efforts).[41]

Consistent with my approach to Alfredian reform as a collaborative project undertaken by a network of people revolving around King Alfred, I argue for a collegial and distributed form of authorship of the Alfredian texts. By "Alfredian texts," I mean the *Pastoral Care*, the Old English translation of Boethius's *De consolatione Philosophiae* (henceforth *OE Boethius*), *Soliloquies*, *Dialogues*, the *Prose Psalms*, the *ASC*, and the *domboc*. I argue that the OE *Dialogues* may have been a harbinger of the Alfredian reform program. A corporate form of authorship of these texts is not inconsistent with the express attribution of authorship to King Alfred in the framing pieces of some of them, and by later commentators. Early medieval listeners and readers had a different understanding of authorship to modern audiences. I do not suggest that Alfred's individual contribution was negligible—far from it. I think that we can get a sense of his influence by considering how he himself learned, and what he learned, on his personal quest for wisdom—a quest that was itself collegial, not undertaken as a solitary endeavour. The Alfredian texts were a product of Alfredian thinking as well as an agent of Alfredian persuasion. In that respect, Alfred did indeed "make the difference."

My conceptualization of Alfredian authorship as collegial and distributed can account for some of the objections scholars have raised to a sole author/translator of these texts—the disparate nature of the source texts and the linguistic and stylistic differences in their translations. My argument on devolved and collaborative production opens the way for the Old English translations of Orosius's *Historiae adversus paganos* (*OE Orosius*) and Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*OE Bede*) to be reconsidered as part of the Alfredian canon. My examination of the way that Alfred learned also

41 Lemke, *Translation of Bede*, 115–16.

leads me to propose a new way of conceptualizing the links between the texts in the Alfredian canon. I argue that a range of texts suitable for different audiences engaged in various social practices were produced. These texts are linked by their aptness to convey elements of Christian wisdom about good governance in variable circumstances of reception—built-in flexibility of usage.

It follows that if we are to investigate the reception of Alfredian reform, to illuminate the process by which his ideology was imbibed, accepted, and acted upon, then we cannot rely upon the extant texts alone. We need to widen the frame of our inquiry, to consider other available forms of evidence, such as objects and behaviours. Incorporating different forms of evidence productively requires us to let go of old historiographical preferences for the written word. Text has no innate merit as a form of evidence, and documents should not hold a privileged position, ontologically, to other forms of evidence.

Investigating non-textual evidence requires different analytical techniques to those used to interpret the written record. We can borrow those theoretical frameworks from other disciplines. This is an issue best addressed explicitly, notwithstanding Sarah Foot's acknowledgement of "the significant resistance to theory which characterizes this corner of our theory-resistant discipline."[42] Objects are not obvious, transparent, passive. The old adage that the spade does not speak but neither does it lie is misleading on both counts. An oversized crucifix in a teenage girl's grave dated to the 1980s is meaningful, but its meaning requires consideration, not assumptions. It may be an expression of the deceased's personal religious conviction, or a love for the music and fashion of the pop singer Madonna, or something else entirely. Thomas reminds us that "we cannot take the existence of objects for granted; we need to attend to the conditions of their materialisation."[43]

Adding new theories to the scholarly toolkit has real value. Assemblage theory's focus on the connections between things provides a way of exploring how objects, people, places, and ideas interact. These interactions often slide from our view unless we have eyewitness accounts or documents that record subjective, lived experience. Social practice theory can help us to understand the "collective development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life."[44] The models hail from different disciplines but share a

42 Foot, "Historiography," 126.

43 Thomas, "Reconfiguring the Social," 153.

44 Warde, "Consumption," 146.

common interest in the nature of agency. I use assemblage theory and social practice theory to explore the reception of Alfredian reform. I focus on "thing-power" and routinized ways of doing things to analyze why Alfred's elites chose to do as he asked. The central tenet of my argument is that there was much more to Alfredian reform than a carefully crafted ideology. Ideology was necessary but not sufficient to drive change.

Assemblage Theory: Conceptualizing the Agency of Things

Assemblage theory is a subset of "new materialism," the exploration of how humans and things interact. At the heart of assemblage theory is the concept of object agency—how things do and bring about. The phrase "to do and to bring about" is deliberately open-ended. The central premise of assemblage theory is that things are not inert, passive containers.[45] Things are "indispensable constituents of the social fabric."[46] This is not a form of animism. Acknowledging the agency of objects to do and to bring about does not require an implication of intentionality or an attribution of consciousness. Assemblage theory explores how agency emerges from the interactions between humans and non-humans (animals, plants, objects, biological processes, landscapes, and places).[47] It is therefore a post-humanist theoretical approach. The notion of "thing-power" has been explored in relation to objects both real and fictional.[48] Jacqueline Fay has recently used new materialism to explore the production of "Englishness" through "encounters between early medieval bodies and a host of material entities."[49]

Agency is not an innate quality of an object. Object agency is an emergent quality. By that I mean that when things are brought into association with people, places, ideas, and other things, agency emerges from the relationships between them. We harness the emergent agency of objects in our everyday lives without a second thought. Cookbooks are a good example.

The Australian Country Women's Association cookbook is an iconic Australian book. It is also an assemblage. Bound up in this cookbook are mid-twentieth-century ideas about food and nutrition, the relationship between

45 Jones and Boivin, "Malice of Inanimate Objects," 337; Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 162.

46 Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 37–38; Downes, Holloway, and Randles, "Introduction," 11.

47 Harris, "Becoming Post-Human," 18.

48 Miller-Bonney, Franklin, and Johnson, *Incomplete Archaeologies*; Paz, *Nonhuman Voices*; Hostetter, "Disruptive Things in *Beowulf*"; Reddan, "Thinking through Things."

49 Fay, *Materializing Englishness*, 4.

food and the land, and conventional social roles. Family and community connections and memories may be embedded in a treasured copy of this cookbook, instantiated by marginal notes in different hands, food splatter marks, and dog-eared corners on the pages of favourite recipes. A modern cookbook, say one of the many inspired by the late Dr. Michael Mosley, has a different set of components: modern medical science of nutrition and human biology, different technologies of cooking, changing social rules about food, and different sources of food. Two objects, same genre, but vastly different assemblages.

Assemblage theory focuses on relationality, on the "affects and effects" of the deliberate bringing into association of diverse objects, people, landscape, and ideas.[50] This concept borrows particularly from the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari.[51] Ideas and beliefs can be actants; practices and processes can equally be part of an assemblage.[52] A theoretical model which focuses on the collaboration between disparate elements has great explanatory power.[53] Part of its usefulness lies in its insistence that an assemblage is an alloy—not simply the aggregate of its parts, but something new and different from them. This difference stems from the interplay between the components in an assemblage—their lively hum.

For example, in chapter 5, I analyze the persuasive power of the Alfredian texts as objects, as text-bodies. "Text-body" is a phrase coined by Jane Bennett—a shorthand for the distributive network of words, readers, senses, and space.[54] The analytical focus is not on the content of the Alfredian texts, the message they contained, but on the recursive connections between the text-bodies, the people who handled them, how they were accessed, and the cultural constructs which may have shaped people's responses to these objects. The agency of Alfredian text-bodies emerged from these connections, from the dynamic relationships between specific things, people, places, and ideas.

No actant, certainly no human, exists in isolation from other actants. Agency is distributed between actants in any assemblage, although it may not be distributed evenly. Actants interact in dynamic and non-linear ways.

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50 Hamilakis and Jones, "Archaeology and Assemblage," 83; Lucas, *Archaeological Record*, 167–68.

51 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus.*

52 Harris, "Becoming Post-Human," 23; Franklin et al., "Introduction," ix.

53 Knutson, "Itinerant Assemblages," 815. For recent examples, see: Kay, "Baby in the Brick" and Averett, "Beyond Representation."

54 Bennett, "Systems and Things," 232.

Actants form circuits, "in which effect and cause alternate position and redound on each other." As an assemblage is fundamentally different from its constituent parts, it follows that the agency of an assemblage—its capacity to produce action—is different from that of its parts.[55]

Given that object agency emerges from the relationships between the components of an assemblage, it also follows that as those components change over time, the agency of the assemblage itself may alter. People die, technologies develop, regimes fall, and new ideas circulate. Assemblage theory eschews essences and final, fixed forms in favour of flow—a constant state of flux which is nevertheless historically contingent.[56] Any analysis of an assemblage has to slide the focus from the qualities of a material phenomenon at a specific point in time to its changing, unfolding, flow of relations.[57] For the purpose of analysis, we first artificially freeze the assemblage *in* time, as if putting it under a microscope for a biopsy, then adjust the focus to consider the phenomenon as it changes *through* time. Social practice theory has an equivalent concept, called "zooming in" and "zooming out" on a practice, like switching the focal length on a camera.[58] As with assemblages, it is helpful to take a snapshot of the social practice first, "frozen" in time for close analysis, before lengthening the focus to see how the practice emerges, changes, and perhaps decays.[59]

Why Use Social Practice Theory as well as Assemblage Theory?

In order to understand the process of Alfredian reform, we need to give the objects of Alfredian reform their due, to acknowledge their agency and efficacy. However, we also need to analyze human behaviour—what Alfred's elites actually did. Social practice theory investigates meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities.[60] In chapter 6, "Social Practices," the focus is on the behaviours through which Alfredian ideology was imbibed, accepted, and acted upon. I argue that Alfred created a

55 Knutson, "Itinerant Assemblages," 807; Harris, "More than Representation," 90.

56 Harris, "More Than Representation," 89; Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 164.

57 Fowler and Harris, "Enduring Relations"; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 97–121.

58 Nicolini, "Zooming In and Zooming Out"; Nicolini, "Zooming: Studying Practices"; see also the essays on zooming in and zooming out in Spaargaren, Weenink, and Lamers, *Practice Theory and Research*.

59 Schatzki, "Edge of Change."

60 Nicolini, *Practice Theory*, 8.

new social practice of lifelong learning and modified the existing social practices of education and the administration of justice. I examine how Alfredian social practices were "bundled," amplifying their agency.

Social practice theory makes humans the centre of attention while acknowledging that they interpret and manipulate their world through material culture. It sites the social (to paraphrase Theodore Schatzki) in human interaction with materiality.[61] Social practice theory accords with assemblage theory in its acknowledgment of object agency but differs from assemblage theory in its insistence on human exceptionalism as an actant.

Social Practice Theory: Conceptualizing Agency

Schatzki defines agency as a "doing." A doing is "an event, an occurrence, an accomplishment or a carrying out." Agency is not limited to humans, and does not imply intentionality, merely responsibility or causality.[62] Defining agency as a "doing" avoids any inference of intentionality. It is an umbrella term which allows for different ways of acting, different ways of being agential.[63]

Social practice theory is usually applied to the modern, Western, world in the areas of science, climate change, and sustainability policy, education, and consumption.[64] A theory used to investigate aspects of the modern, Western, world might seem a curious framework for an inquiry into a very different kind of community over a thousand years in the past. There are, however, significant advantages to using social practice theory to examine Alfredian Wessex. One of the principal benefits of social practice theory as a framework of analysis is that it does not champion either the individual or the structure.[65] This makes it particularly apt for the early medieval period, which did not have the structures and institutions of the modern Western state, and equally did not have the modern Western liberal concept of the sovereign individual. Instead, social practice theory focuses on routinized patterns of behaviour, *ways of doing things*.

Modern applications of social practice theory, particularly studies of consumption in the context of climate change and sustainability, provide valuable insights into how behavioural change is achieved or stymied, even amongst groups who believe in the existence of climate change and the need

61 Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory," 249.

62 Schatzki, *Site of the Social*, 190–93.

63 Schatzki, *Site of the Social*, 199–201.

64 Nicolini, *Practice Theory*, 2.

65 Spaargaren, Lamers, and Weenink, "Introduction," 6.

for sustainable practices. These studies reinforce the argument that ideology is not enough, is not sufficient on its own to drive change, and that other factors, other *agents* in combination with ideology beget behavioural change. The quantitative analysis, the questionnaires and the data-gathering which underpin most practice-based studies of brand loyalty and patterns of consumption, demonstrate that social practice theory is apt to explain behaviour and behavioural change. Social practice theory works as a framework for investigating behaviour, even if the time, place, and behavioural changes being examined are very different.

An example might help to clarify the theory. Tom Hargreaves observed and analyzed an extended program to instil environmentally friendly work practices in a UK office.[66] As the program started, the participants paid the greatest attention to the nuts and bolts of the new behaviours. How to ensure that lights and equipment were turned off at the end of each day and that paper wastage was minimized took precedence over ensuring prior individual belief in the importance of these actions. As the new behaviours became entrenched, participants correlated environmentally friendly practices to their identity as an employee of the company. Failure to conform made individuals feel that they had let the side down. Hargreaves also found a close connection between practices and the social order which sustained those practices. A "no bin day" proposal to cut waste was opposed, diluted, and finally quashed by the Facilities Management Team. To change behaviour requires the cooperation of those who have the capacity to undermine or reject that change.

Hargreaves's analysis demonstrates how social practice theory can identify important elements of group behaviours, ways of doing things. Practical, mundane action by a group can precede the individual adoption of belief; collective behaviour can be linked to belonging and expression of identity; and practices can become embedded in social hierarchies and power structures. Social practice theorists conceptualize the necessary components of a social practice in slightly different ways, just as models of new materialism differ. Elizabeth Shove's "deliberately slim-line" version identifies materials, competencies, and meanings as the elements of practice.[67]

66 Hargreaves, "Practice-ing Behaviour Change."

67 Shove and Walker, "Governing Transitions," 472.

Materials, Competencies, and Meanings

The categories of materials, competencies, and meaning are heuristic devices—it will be helpful to consider them separately at first. However, in performing a practice, these elements fuse together, like the strands of a rope. In particular, meaning becomes embedded in both the competencies and the materials used to perform a practice ("performing" is used in the sense that scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler use it—as a form of social action).[68]

Social life is a nexus of "doings and sayings"—and the doing is always "doing with things."[69] The "doing" thus requires competencies, Shove's second category, which means skills, know-how, and techniques. "Meaning" is a subjective belief in the merit of a practice and the social or symbolic significance of participation in the practice. An alternative phrase, "understanding and attunement," draws attention to the combination of reasoning and affect which constitute "meaning"—a blend of reasoned explanation and what matters or what people care about.[70]

In Alfredian reform, the urgent need to reorient the community back to God to avoid annihilation became an overarching Alfredian meaning, conditioning different social practices. Social practices often do not operate in isolation. They are "bundled" with related practices, forming connections and feedback loops, melding into one another.[71] "Bundling" is the term social practice theorists use for the recursive influence individual practices can have on other practices, particularly when meaning is shared across practices.[72] Alfredian social practices such as education and justice were "bundled." The use of the vernacular, the tendency to place the king at the centre of activity, and the shared common meaning meant that these two practices reinforced each other. Meaning was absorbed and affirmed through carrying out Alfredian social practices.

68 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

69 Reckwitz, "Status of the 'Material,'" 212.

70 Nicolini, *Practice Theory*, 164.

71 Shove, Panzar, and Watson, *Dynamics of Social Practice*, 81–96; Hargreaves, "Practice-ing Behaviour."

72 Hargreaves, "Practice-ing Behaviour"; Schatzki, "Edge of Change."

How Practitioners Imbibe and Affirm Meaning through Conducting a Practice

A practice is an embodied, materially mediated bundle of human activities based upon shared understanding.[73] Practices are one way in which a group may differentiate itself from others. Knowledge, values, affectivity, and goals are shared and espoused; people become predictable. There is more to practice as a mechanism of group identity than this, though. People who carry out a practice orient themselves to others who carry out the same practice. People carrying out a practice (sports, birdwatching, online games) calibrate their routinized behaviours to those of other practitioners.

A successful practitioner demonstrates competency and is likely therefore to be valued by the group, and become influential or powerful. As practices are not reified entities, but may change, either suddenly or incrementally, there is usually an ongoing process of adjustment between practitioners, calibrating alignment, so that the group shifts together.[74] Interaction, accommodation, mentoring, and the according of respect may flow between members of a well-functioning group of practitioners. Defective or incompetent performance may mark an individual as recalcitrant or apostate. The distribution of routinized behaviour among a community may well amplify the impact of the practice and help to entrench it in the group.

Feedback, in the sense of reasoned explanation and "oughtness," are imparted as the practitioner learns the practice through instruction. It is an important component of embedding a practice through performance. As the practitioner learns the practice through instruction and correction, she acquires technical competency while imbibing a particular viewpoint, an accepted way of interpreting behaviour, actions, and events, and "making sense" of things. In this way a person learning a social practice is socialized or channelled into particular patterns of behaviour, certain ways of doing things. That normative flavour may be reinforced by praise and respect or censure and scorn, depending upon whether the practitioner follows or flouts the accepted way of doing things. External validation and the inculcation of a sense of belonging to a group reinforces or perpetuates the understanding and attunement shared generally by practitioners.[75]

Repeated performance of a practice should reinforce and deepen understanding and attunement, which inspires continued participation. In a well-functioning social practice, meaning and performance act as recursive rein-

73 Schatzki, "Introduction: Practice Theory," 2–3.

74 Barnes, "Practice as Collective Action."

75 Nicolini, *Practice Theory*, 164–68.

forcers of each other. As Schatzki puts it, if a course of action "makes sense," then it achieves or is likely to achieve desired ends in ways which accord with a mental evaluation of what is appropriate or justifiable.[76] Repeated performance of a practice can, in propitious circumstances, increase a practitioner's commitment to the goals and values of the practice, reinforcing its meaning. As I show in the next chapter, this was particularly the case with military reforms. The success of Alfred's innovations against the Vikings validated the "truth" of Alfredian ideology.

Military Innovation: Proof of the Pudding?

Military reform is one of the most notable and celebrated aspects of Alfredian reform: notable because the degree of innovation was profound, and celebrated because those innovations were spectacularly successful. Alfredian military reforms imposed significant financial burdens on the elites who carried out those reforms, and effected a substantial transfer of power and authority to the king. In carrying out Alfred's military innovations, his elites demonstrated a willingness to bear considerable expense and to relinquish substantial autonomy. This can only be because they bought into Alfredian ideology and the future it promised.

Earlier, I used Trump's 2016 election campaign as a modern example of how objects and behaviours can be used to inculcate an ideology and cohere a community. Alfredian ideas spread as labour was performed on the burghal network, so that common understandings were established and confirmed as things were done. Objects and behaviours were agential in all stages: the expression of ideology, the reception of "the message," and the actions which performed and advertised a communal identity based upon that ideology. These steps were not discrete phases, nor were they chronological. It is useful to remember that practice is inevitably messier than theory.[77] Looking at military reform first up provides an opportunity to appreciate the "messiness" of the lived experience of Alfredian reform: to understand that an assemblage has greater agential power than the sum of its parts, and that assemblages and social practices melded and overlapped. In the chapters that follow Alfredian military reform, I artificially segregate ideology, assemblages, and social practices. The purpose of this artificial dis-

76 Schatzki, "Practice Mind-ed Orders," 52–53; see also Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory," 254.

77 Innes, *State and Society*, 5.

tinction is to allow a deeper analysis, like putting biopsied material under a microscope.

Alfred became king because the constant threat of the Vikings required a mature ruler capable of leading his followers into battle and demonstrating military prowess, that *sine qua non* of early medieval kingship. Participation in warfare was also an integral part of aristocratic life.[78] The fact that early medieval warfare was both the measure of a king and a fundamental aristocratic activity made warfare an excellent opportunity to link the actions of elites in response to their king's directions with the ideology being promoted in his name. Alfredian military reform hit that sweet spot—creating a powerful feedback loop between beliefs and actions. After all, the West Saxons must have been aware that they were the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom to successfully fend off Viking groups intent on conquest.

78 Halsall, "Anthropology."