**KING ALFRED THE GREAT,**

**THE DEFENCE OF WESSEX**

**AND THE**

**MAKING OF ENGLAND**

**850 – 1000**

**BOOK FOR REVIEW:**

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* Punctuation
* Formatting of paragraphs
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# FOREWORD

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he defence of Wessex from the ravaging onslaughts of the Vikings and Danes in the ninth century and beyond was as vital for the survival of freedom and civilization in England as the Battle of Britain in the Second World War. That is sober fact, and Although both epics of defiance have acquired elements of fiction and myth, the parallel is clear to see: a peaceful people taking up arms reluctantly but with determination, suffering defeat after defeat, but led to eventual victory by two men of a genuinely heroic mould.

In the 1940s the mood of a nation reluctantly at war was embodied in a man who even gloried in it! He was a man of action and eloquence, a statesman and a writer, though mixed with the weakness of headstrong impetuosity which took his helpers much determination to correct and save him from from costly errors. Eleven hundred years before, the vision and leadership of the greatest of English kings confers on the epic story a nobility lifting it above all other sagas of the North, or even, for those in tune with its music, the victories of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis.

For not only freedom and civilization were at stake, but also, in both ages, the faith of a nation; and although, to tell it kindly, the Christian faith in the 1940s did not exercise the interest of most Britons as it had done in the other fateful wars three centuries before, there remained a bed-rock of belief and accepted ideas of conduct, inherited from parents and grandparents and reinforced by the teaching of day- and Sunday schools. The parallel only holds true so far, of course, and the average British soldier, when presented with the idea of a great crusade for the liberation of Europe, would respond with his customary brief words.

But with that, the defenders, Saxons in 878 (sometimes with Cymric aid) and in 1040 the British, sized up the enemy and knew that defeat in this war meant the loss of nationhood, freedom of thought, movement and speech and, for millions, the loss of family and life itself. We, with after-knowledge, realise that the later peril was even more desperate than that menacing the Saxons. The Vikings and their successors terrorised northern Europe for two hundred years, the Nazis and their war-machine did likewise but for less than a tenth of that time. But once Vikings had won English land they settled, farmed and in due time were content to give up Woden and Thor and live at peace as Christians with their English neighbours and become English themselves. But a Nazi overlordship could never have developed so humanely, and Churchill did not overplay the danger when he warned of “the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.”

The chroniclers did not call the enemies ‘the Vikings’ or Norsemen nor even Danes, though the last of these, with the power of a state behind them, were the most fateful for Wessex. They called them ‘the heathen’ or ‘pagans’, a refrain echoed after Saxon days, though with much less justification, by the poet of the *Chanson de Roland*: ‘Paiens ont tort, et Chrestiens ont dreit.’

# THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE

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ngland possesses in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* a continuous record of her early history that no other European nation can rival. For more than three hundred years chroniclers faithfully recorded the news brought by travellers to their monasteries, of events that were shattering or re-shaping the world outside. They told of wars, ravage and slaughter, of lands harrowed and wasted, of solemn oaths forsworn; they told of earthquakes, dragon-lights in the heavens, famine and plague, flood and ‘wildfire’ on the moors; and then, gleaming through the fire-shot darkness, the kings who strove by sword and by treaty to weld the various petty kingdoms into one nation. But most gladly they lingered over the one who, when the life, freedom and faith of his kingdom seemed all but lost, created hope and victory out of despair and for his lifetime guided his people into the ways of knowledge and peace.

These chroniclers wrote on steadily through the 500 years of Anglo-Saxon rule and beyond, from the first coming of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes into post-Roman Britain,to the high noon of the West Saxons, and on to the deepening shades of late Danish England, to the murk of the Norman tyranny and the descent into “chaos and foul night” of the reign of Stephen. Not every year has an entry – and in centuries of fire and storm the monks may have counted themselves happy with nothing to record. But when the martial kings of Wessex were campaigning to make the country one under their own rule, or when they raised and led army after army to repel the ferocious attacks of the Danes, then the scribes wrote all they knew, recounting the marches and countermarches, the battles and sieges, with a detail which showed that, for all their vows of unworldliness, they rightly felt an impassioned concern for the struggles to the death of Christian Saxon and heathen Dane.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moreover, unlike chroniclers elsewhere, they wrote in their native speech, here English. It is so different from ours that much of it can only be understood after study. But it is recognizably the rough, muscular ancestor of our own dulcified speech, and even to a struggling student something of their patient strength and their pride in the courage and endurance of the English comes through.

One might almost call the *Chronicle* a national enterprise, for it seems that a master copy was circulated to centres of learning where resident scribes made copies and sometimes inserted information on their own account. Six of these copies survived the destruction of the monasteries and initiated a renewed interest in Anglo-Saxon in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. But other scholars in late Saxon or early Norman times and later wrote down what they had heard – or read in some source now unknown – of the history, true or legendary, of England and Wales. They were William of Malmesbury, Æthelweard, ‘Florence’ (otherwise John or William) of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon, Matthew of Westminster, Roger of Wendover, Symeon of Durham and Bishop Asser, to the last of whom we owe a unique debt for his biography of his master and friend, King Alfred the Great.

Ever since the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was published in modern English, successive editors and historians have praised it for its unique value as a source for English history: it has been called “a substantial monument…to which it would not be easy to find a parallel in any nation, ancient or modern”, “a collection…of traditions which gives (it) unique importance”[[2]](#footnote-2) and “a historical source of the first importance over centuries”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This does not make the *Chronicle*, for all its virtues, a forerunner of the classic *Haydn Dictionary of Dates*. We must be grateful – and wonder not a little – that throughout the disasters which fell upon England in the later tenth and the eleventh centuries the annalists persevered in recording them in ever greater detail; but on the other hand, certain important events in the earlier times, such as the Saxon conquest of the Upper Thames valley, are skimmed over because no true memory from that illiterate and pagan time had come down to the annalist. But reading through the whole work we witness nothing less than the making of England.

Yet for all its unique value it can be tantalising, because for every question that it answers, at least in topography, it raises a new one. The particular problem for modern readers of the *Chronicle* is one which no Anglo-Saxon could have foreseen: to identify some of the places where actions took place. The annalists took much care to name the sites of the battles and other great events, but while the majority of the names are recognizable, some have changed very greatly, and others have disappeared altogether. This uncertainty has provided good sport for local historians wishing to bring the scene of a notable event home to the honour of their county. Asser’s Cynuit of 878, with different interpretations outlined in these pages, is such a case, and no amount of proof to the contrary will shake the conviction of the local patriot. E’en though vanquished, he will argue still.

It is rather more puzzling, though, when academic historians of national repute take on trust what previous writers have said and do not trouble to visit the scenes and check the probability for themselves; and generations of their students must have furrowed their brows over relief maps of the West of England, trying to make strategic sense of movements of Danish forces which apparently led nowhere. I do not presume that this study will correct received knowledge, but I hope that for some readers it will offer a little diversion – perhaps in a double sense –– and lighten a dark place here and there.

The historical sources of the quotations in this study are, unless indicated otherwise, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (*ASC*), Bishop Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* (*Asser*) and the *History of the Kings of England*, by ‘Florence’ of Worcester (d.1119), whose “deep knowledge and great industry have rendered this Chronicle of chronicles pre-eminent over all others.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

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As to personal names, I have preferred to keep the Old English names of most of the royal house of Wessex, but Eadweard, Ælfred, Æthelstan and Æthelred would be unwarrantably pedantic.

Note: The term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ relates to the commonalty of the Germanic tribes who settled in the south of Britain from the fifth century onward: a. the Angles, by and large, between the Mersea, the Humber and the Thames, their kingdom later known as Mercia; b. the Saxons,’sax-men’, south of the Thames, the West Saxons, Wessex, and the small kingdom of East Saxons, Essex. (The term also covers the North- and South- folk (Norfolk and Suffolk) who settled in the lands formerly of the Iceni, and the Jute settlements of East Kent and the Isle of Wight). In later days under the supremacy of Wessex, the simple ‘Saxon’ covered them all.

The term “Viking” seems to be used indiscriminately nowadays for the warriors and marauders from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, but it should not be applied to those who had left the roving life. The Great Heathen Army which overran all England, but western Wessex, was probably made up mainly of Danes, though no doubt many freebooters tramped along.

# THE HEROES FROM THE SEA

*Look at me, dread me! I am the Hereward,*

*The watcher, the champion, the berserker, the Viking,*

The land-thief, the sea-thief, young summer-pirate.

*Ship with me boldly, follow me gaily*

*Over the swan's road over the whale's bath,*

*Far to the southward where sun and sea meet,*

*Where from the palm-boughs apples of gold hang;*

*And freight there our long-snakes with sandal and orfray,*

*Dark Moorish maidens and gold of Algier.*

*A oi![[5]](#footnote-5)*

S

o sang Kingsley's hero, Hereward the Watchful, Hereward the Wake, and as his hand swept across the harp-strings, the Danes and Norsemen among his listeners roared their praise and hammered on the board like blacksmiths gone berserk.

And well they might. It was over the whale's bath and along the swan's way that their forefathers had sailed their longships from the barren fells and dark fjords of the Northland to the peaceful creeks and plains of England, from mountain poverty to lowland wealth. Sturdy, independent-minded people were these new English of the Danelaw in the years around 1066; and for some time after that catastrophic year they stood fast in the islands of the fens and held them in the face of Norman ruthlessness, treachery and guile.

They were a settled, tenacious people, too, and whether or not they owned the land they farmed, they felt they had a stake in it, for their chiefs were of their own race and all lived under laws when, even when they broke them, they acknowledged and feared.

That had not always been their way, but five or six generations had turned lawless marauders into law-abiding farmers. Raiders from Denmark - and in Cumberland, from Norway - had settled to a life of hard and sweating toil. The invaders, having won themselves land by the sword, had taken to the plough and made of England their peaceful home. But they had made many a perilous voyage and fought many a bloody fight to get there.

# SEA ROVERS, SEA ROBBERS

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VERYONE knows of the Vikings; everyone knows roughly where they came from, a little of where they went and what they did – fight, kill, burn, pillage, rape and enslave. Far fewer know why. Eastward by sea or river they voyages, for trade or tribute to Kiev and the Black Sea, to Constantinople and onward for gold and fighting, and the wealth that fighting brought; then south and south-west to Friesland and Flanders, to ‘Angle-land’, Normandy, Brittany, and Galicia in the far corner of Spain; and westward to the Orkneys and Shetland, the Hebrides and Ireland, the Faeroes and Iceland, and on to Greenland and the New World beyond the storm-swept northern sea. To most of these, at first, they dealt out the *dona Danorum*:destruction, rape, plunder and murder. Later they spent their energy and blood in colonisation, with success in Iceland, Normandy and parts of Ireland and Britain. In Iceland they found a land virtually empty of people; in Ireland they traded and ruled in the east for two centuries until overwhelmed in 1012 or 1014 by the army of Brian Boru. In Normandy they established themselves powerfully and at length acquired a veneer of Roman and Christian civilization. They attacked England, at first sparely, then in force, for two hundred years, overran all the eastern plain and the north and settled there in strength; but in seeking to expand westward they clashed with an enemy whom they might often defeat but could never overwhelm, the Kingdom of Wessex. This struggle, which in the long run ensured the spread and fusing of racial stocks and gave birth and strength to the English nation, is the matter with which we are now concerned.

No one knows for sure why the Vikings had this name. Scholars have offered various suggestions: a Viking was a pirate who came from the ‘Vik’, the Vestfold, the land on both sides of the Oslo Fjord; or who lay hidden in a ‘vik’ or bay; or lived in a ‘wic’ or camp or town; or hunted the ‘wikan’ or seal; or was a sea warrior who made a ‘viking’, a raid to distant shores; or one who ‘departed’ for a long absence from home.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is also a Saxon verb meaning “to beach” ( a ship).

The first has been generally accepted as the most likely, but that does not mean that these sea-robbers were necessarily Norwegian, for Norway and Denmark as yet scarcely existed as functioning nation states, and a freeman’s loyalty was directed to his home, his family and in time of battle, his chieftain. Indeed, the man or woman from the Vestfold may have felt much in common with the people across the narrow sea in Jutland: the languages were much the same, and the Skagerrak was a thoroughfare rather than a barrier for hardened seamen. The real barrier to converse and commerce in Norway was the hostile mountain range of the Dovre, and the nature of that land answers the earlier question: Why? The natural beauty and grandeur of Norway work their ‘magic’ on the modern traveller and tourist, and the unscaled heights and the unreachable recesses of the valleys and hidden caves inspired in the people living in their shadow two thousand years ago an awe which led them to imagine those forts of mystery as the timeless abode of trusted gods; - and in the forbidding depths between, the underground scramble-holes of those malevolent caricatures of humanity, more to be feared than any of the gods -– the trolls.

One hardly need say that these Norse farmers and sailors and their families had not been introduced to the poetic concepts of the Romantic Landscape and Pantheistic Sympathy! What they did know was that a barren mountain would not feed them, and there was no substitute for good flat land ready for the plough. Otherwise, starvation.

It was the ‘true’ Norse, those of the Vestfold, the west coast, of the Trondhjem and Bergen fjords and Gudbrandsdal, who at the start of the ‘Viking era’ were suffering this shortage of land when immigrants, forced themselves out of Sweden, moved in. The Vestfold folk moved out, but not in mere desperation, in a spirit of venture: they had heard of new land for the taking and settling across the western sea, and that was their primary and – though often and long postponed – final objective.

But that is not how the rest of the world saw them, because they also went raiding and, in time, and were characterised by their victims as ‘white Vikings’ or ‘black’ – that is ‘dark’– or ‘red’ (red-haired) Danes, but their ventures, as noted earlier, took them to Shetland and round Cape Wrath into the Hebrides and on to Cumbria and the Irish Sea and not directly into Wessex. The English regarded the raiders from any direction as Danes from the very start.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To be sure, the peoples who suffered at their hands had no time for ethnological reflection. For them the Vikings were ferocity, malevolence and bad faith incarnate. The Danish historian Johannes Brøndsted says that “early monastic historians, in their records of the Vikings, emphasised the cunning, cruelty and treachery of this warlike people. The sagas, on the other hand, show them in a different light, telling of the boldness, generosity, frankness and self-discipline of these famous warriors ... The Viking took nothing more seriously than his family ... The members of it are bound to assist and, if need be, avenge each other, and the honour of the family is supreme ... (The) fundamental principle of family responsibility and family obligation created a stubborn trait in the Viking character, as well as a check on any individual's disposition to forgive an affront or a wrong, for there was no escape from the family.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But unfortunately for the rest of Europe, this made the Viking an even more formidable enemy.

Their victims in England saw only their savagery and unwarranted cruelty, but one cannot withhold admiration for their other qualities: their hardihood, their initiative, their readiness to adapt, their tactical intelligence and, for some, their magnificent stature and comparative bodily refinement (they regularly washed and combed their hair and bathed weekly). Theirs was not the savagery of unthinking barbarians. They aimed to overwhelm and let no one mistake them.

Piracy and marauding, however, were not the only outlets for the energy of the Vikverskar or Vikverjar (dwellers in Vestfold). Trade and bargaining came as easily to them as fighting and in the right circumstances made a surer way to fortune. “The Norse trader of those days was none of the cringing and effeminate chapmen who figure in the stories of the middle ages. Free Norse or Dane, himself often of noble blood, he fought as willingly as he bought; and held his own as an equal, whether at the court of a Cornish kinglet or at that of the great Kaiser of the Greeks.”[[9]](#footnote-9) And while the men of Norway and Denmark rowed to the west and south, the men of Sweden travelled and traded the length of the Baltic and into Russia and beyond. Amid all the carnage and violence, the trader steered his *kaufskip* to well-known lands, from Norway to Iceland or Shetland, or – most venturesome – after 900 to Greenland or to the high end of the Gulf of Bothnia or even round the North Cape into the White Sea and the northern coast of Russia.

Nevertheless, the name ‘viking’ was not given to those who made purely peaceful voyages, though it was said, for instance, of a great traveller Bjø**r**n that “he was sometimes in viking but sometimes in trading voyages”: “*var stundum í víking enn stundum í kaupferðum*. ”[[10]](#footnote-10)

To begin with, “the name of Viking was honourable, it spoke of courage and daring and readiness to face the unknown”.   But when the sea-rovers settled down in England to a life of landed responsibility and Christianity, Time brought in his revenges, and the old-time sea-robber, though now largely displaced as a threat by organised Danish armies, was no longer seen as a hero but as a pirate and nothing more. Besides that, when the legends of their deeds were at last written down, the transcribers were monks and clerics, who detested their ancestors’ heathendom and had no mind to grant them absolution in any way. Never, or almost never, did they present the enemy as Danes or Vikings, but always as Pagans or Heathen.   “It is easy to understand the bitterness with which the attacks were regarded ... But it is easy also to forget that the bitterness was felt because the Vikings were heathens and barbarians, a despised race.” 5 And yet the Vikings, had they known, might have fairly claimed that they were doing as the Saxons and Angles and Jutes had done from the fifth century onwards, when they too as heathens had stormed over the land, slaying Christian British and Welsh by the hundred and thousand. These Saxon conquests and victories are recorded by the chroniclers, but any note of reproach is buried in a collective oblivion. We, fourteen hundred years later, are not called on to judge. It is enough to acknowledge the strength and moulding power that the old enemies, when reconciled, brought to the new nation, and recognise in Dane and Old Saxon (and Cymric and Briton) their unconquerable love of freedom to which we owe our own, and be thankful.[[11]](#footnote-11)

While the attackers moved like a single army, the defenders and their leaders were generally identified not with the greater Wessex but with their sub-kingdoms (later shires) : “Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, steered his fleet filled with warriors from Kent toward East Anglia   ; ‘Eanulf the ealdorman, with the people of Somerset, fought at the mouth of the Parrett with the Danish army’ ; ‘when the king heard of this, he sent an army of West Saxons and Mercians (to drive the pagans back)’. According to the Chronicle, they consciously defended their homeland as Christians - as the West Saxons had been since mid-seventh century.

In recent decades the traditional concept of the Vikings as barbarian slayers and nothing more has been modified both by historians and by the evidence of artefacts that the Vikings caused to be made by skilled workers in their homelands as well as those carried off in raids or plundered from the dead in battle.

Excavations in Denmark and York, and collections and museums in Scandinavia and indeed throughout the world, speak eloquently of the art fashioned for the Vikings and of the love of wealth and display which drove some of them to their conquests. Wessex saw none of this except in the carving which adorned the longships. For the whole of England, from Northumbria, where the Vikings launched the first ferocious attack on the holy site of Lindisfarne, down to Tavistock, where two centuries later they robbed and destroyed a minster, Vikings were the destroyers, were the destroyers, the fiends of the ghastly ‘spread eagle’, each one a new devil, prowling like a roaring lion and seeking whom he might devour. No doubt the targeting of religious houses, with the wholesale slaughter of monks, the despoiling of priceless

1. Most often, from the rape of Lindisfarne onwards, the chroniclers refer to the aggressors not as Danes but as ‘the heathen’ attacking ‘the Christians’. Christianity was first preached to the West Saxons in 634 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ingram, J : p ii; 2A. Stenton, F: Anglo Saxon England, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whitelock, 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tribute by contemporary, John of Worcester [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kingsley’s Hereward sings as an enthusiastic improviser, careless of the alliterative pattern required in Anglo Saxon heroic verse. A Saxon harp would not have taken such free-hand treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brøndsted, J, 38 – 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. do 316-‘7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kingsley, Charles: 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kingsley, Charles: 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Collingwood : 59 ff [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The recorded arrival of the Saxons under Hengist and Horsa in the south-east in 450 obscures the fact, unrecorded but archaeologically proven, that Germanic tribes, notably the Angles from Schleswig-Holstein, had been long settled in the coastland of Essex, (probably occupying the area devastated by the Romans after the revolt of Boudicca.) For this, and much on the Saxon Shore, see Miles,J.N.L: *The English Settlement,* 82 *ff)* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)