

Alfred the Great: The Traditions of Western Civilization
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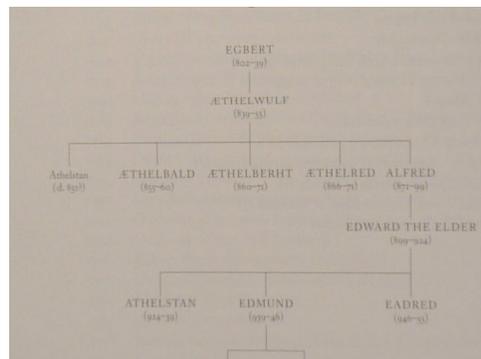


Mezzotint of Alfred the Great

The purpose of this lecture is to show through visual images and music the central role that Alfred the Great played in transmitting the traditions of western civilization. By western civilization, I mean to include Europe and those countries that have been formed in the shadow of Europe, including both Americas.

The traditions were formed in the cities of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome, and the forests of Germany. The content was the moral and spiritual formation of character from the revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments; the love of wisdom in the Greek traditions of philosophy; the appreciation of order and the rule of law in Rome which continued through Christian Rome; the love of liberty, honor, and courage in the forests of Germany.

In contrast to the spurious multiculturalism of today, which is based on relativism, Alfred took all these cultures seriously in order to extract from them the best that they have to offer.



Family Tree of Alfred

Before we go too far, let's place Alfred the Great in time and place. He lived from 849-899 A.D. He comes from a line of Saxon kings, including his father Aethewulf and grandfather, Egbert, and is followed by descendants who build on his accomplishments in founding what we today would call England.



Map of Alfred Country

Let's now place Alfred geographically. This map shows the main geographical locations directly connected with Alfred. Wessex, Wantage, Vale of the White Horse (north of Wantage, west of London), Winchester, London, St. David's, and Athelney.



Matthew of Paris

Matthew of Paris in his *Gesta Abbatum*, c. 1250, was the first one to call Alfred “the Great.” Alfred was the only English king to receive that title. Matthew was impressed with the fact that Alfred's reign had been pivotal in replacing the ‘Heptarchy’ of seven kingdoms—Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Wessex—with rule over most of southern England. The northern part of England was still controlled by the Danes. The poem of Kipling is still relevant to contemporary foreign policy:

“Dane-geld”
(A.D. 980-1016)
Rudyard Kipling

IT IS always a temptation to an armed and agile nation,

To call upon a neighbour and to say:—
“We invaded you last night—we are quite prepared to fight,
Unless you pay us cash to go away.”
And that is called asking for Dane-geld,
And the people who ask it explain
That you’ve only to pay ’em the Dane-geld
And then you’ll get rid of the Dane!

It is always a temptation to a rich and lazy nation,
To puff and look important and to say:—
“Though we know we should defeat you, we have not the time to meet you.
We will therefore pay you cash to go away.”

And that is called paying the Dane-geld;
But we’ve proved it again and again,
That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld
You never get rid of the Dane.

It is wrong to put temptation in the path of any nation,
For fear they should succumb and go astray,
So when you are requested to pay up or be molested,
You will find it better policy to say:—

“We never pay any-one Dane-geld,
No matter how trifling the cost;
For the end of that game is oppression and shame,
And the nation that plays it is lost!”

I personally am distrustful of rulers called “the Great” even when it is associated with men who had a great impact on Alfred such as Charlemagne or Charles the Great and Gregory the Great. I can easily live with St. James the Greater because it serves to distinguish him from St. James the Lesser. It is also the name of my parish church in Baton Rouge. When you get to Peter the Great or Frederick the Great, you might want to conflate Madame Roland on her way to the guillotine with Ed McMahon setting up Johnny Carson, “O Great ones, what crimes are committed in thy name?”



Alfred Tower, Stourhead Gardens

There are various statues or monuments to Alfred in England that provide interpretations of the greatness of Alfred. The most interesting of them is the Alfred Tower at Stourhead Gardens, Wiltshire, England, one of the great follies of the 18th century. They called them follies because they had no utilitarian value.

The earliest version of the inscription for the tower is the most effusive in making the case for Alfred as a great innovator: “In memory of Alfred the Great, The Founder of the English Monarchy, The 1st encourager of Learning He founded the University of Oxford. The Giver of most excellent Laws, Jurys, the Bulwark of English Liberty. He instituted a *well regulated Militia*, divided England into Shires or Countys & by a determined courage & unwearied attention to the increase of our Naval Force protected us from Foreign Invasions & extended our Trade to the remote parts of the Globe. He was the complete Model of that perfect Character, which, under the Name of a Sage, the Philosophers have been fond of delineating, rather as a fiction of Their imagination, than in hope of ever seeing it reduced to practice.”

What greater tribute to the vision of Margaret Thatcher than that?

The inscription goes on to add, “Britons will revere the Ashes of that Monarch by whose Lessons They have (under the protection of Divine Providence) subdued Their Enemys this year with invincible Force by Land & Sea, in Europe, Asia, Africa & America, stopd the Effusions of human blood & given peace & rest to the Earth...1762.” (Malcolm Kelsall, “The Iconography of Stourhead” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 46 (1983), pp. 141-132) The significance of this date is the end of the Seven Years’ War (what we call in the U.S. the French and Indian War). Alfred has always been put to patriotic uses.

These magnificent gardens were created by the banking family of Henry Hoare II (1705-1785). He started the gardens in 1715 and they remained in the family until 1947. The tower was begun in 1765 and completed in 1772 precisely on the spot where, according to the inscription: “Alfred the Great AD 870, on this summit erected his standard against

Danish invaders. To him we owe the origin of Juries, the establishment of a Militia, the creation of a Naval Force. Alfred, the light of a benighted age was a philosopher and a Christian, the father of his people, the founder of the English.”

How did this come about? In the summer of 1764 Henry Hoare II known to his family as “the Magnificent” wanted to celebrate the end of the Seven Years War against France and the accession of George III. He explained his inspiration in a letter he wrote to his elder daughter Susanna: "I have one more scheme which will crown or top it all. As I was reading Voltaire's *L'Histoire Générale* lately, in his character of Alfred the Great he says, Je ne sais'il y a jamais eu sur la terre un homme plus digne des respects da la posterité qu'Alfred le Grand, qui rendit ces services à sa patrie. Out of gratitude to him I propose...to erect a Tower on Kingsettle Hill where he set up his standard after he came out of concealment in the Isle of Athelney near Taunton, and the Earl of Devon had worsted the Danes...I intend to build it on the plan of Sn Mark's Tower at Venice, 100 foot to the room which the staircase will lead to and 4 arches to look out in the 4 sides to the prospect all round."



Alfred the Great: Stowe Shrine of British Worthies

He also goes on to add, “The form is Gothic as at Stowe because this is a declaration of Whig adherence to the famous Anglo-Saxon ‘ancient constitution’ of the realm to which the enemies of Stuart absolutism had appealed.” At Stowe, there are the Temple of Liberty and the shrine of Modern British Worthies, which also includes Alfred the Great.

Let’s take up some of the claims of the inscription at Stourhead one by one in order to lay the groundwork for a more interesting interpretation of Alfred’s significance.



Detail from Mezzotint of Alfred the Great

Was he the first King of England? In a detail of our first slide, you can see Alfred styled as the King of the Saxons rather than the King of England. The latter honor is more correctly ascribed to his descendants in the 10th century. But they could not have accomplished this unless Alfred had beaten the Vikings in the 9th century.



Detail of Mezzotint of Alfred the Great

Was he the founder of Oxford University? In this detail from our mezzotint, he is described as the founder of Oxford University. True in spirit, but not in fact. In the 19th century there was a long drawn-out attempt to build a memorial in Oxford to Alfred. which is recounted in:

<http://www.headington.org.uk/oxon/broad/history/alfred.htm>



William Camden by R. White from Camden's *Britannia*, 1695 edition

The erroneous claim of Alfred as the founder of Oxford was promulgated by William Camden (1551-1623), whose comprehensive history, *Britannia*, was published in Latin, in 1586 and later translated into English. Camden a great English historian interpolated this claim as a short passage into his 1603 edition of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*.



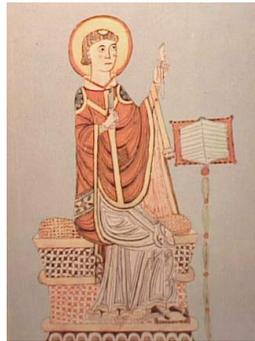
Camden's Motto: Pondere Non Numero

Camden's Motto: 'Pondere Non Numero' is an important one for historians who prefer judgment to cliometrics, "By weight not by number." The main reason we know anything about Alfred's life is because Bishop Asser wrote his biography while Alfred was still alive. Historians are still debating the "weight" of this biography and its historical validity.

In the weighing of the stories about Alfred, we should always keep in mind the wise observation of G.K. Chesterton in his Preface to *The Ballad of the White Horse*:

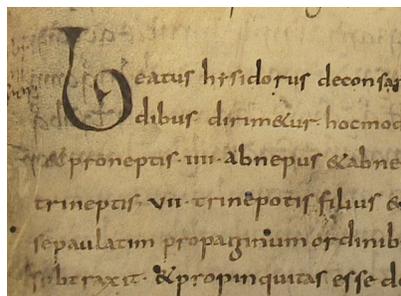
"But I am not concerned to prove the truth of these popular traditions. It is enough for me to maintain two things: that they are popular traditions; and that without these popular traditions we should have bothered about Alfred about as much as we bother about Eadwig.

One other consideration needs a note. Alfred has come down to us in the best way (that is, by national legends) solely for the same reason as Arthur and Roland and the other giants of that darkness, because he fought for the Christian civilization against the heathen nihilism. But since this work was really done by generation after generation, by the Romans before they withdrew, and by the Britons while they remained, I have summarised this first crusade in a triple symbol, and given to a fictitious Roman, Celt, and Saxon, a part in the glory of Ethandune. I fancy that in fact Alfred's Wessex was of very mixed bloods; but in any case, it is the chief value of legend to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition: it telescopes history."



Venerable Bede Sharpening His Quill Codex at Engelberg Abbey, Switzerland

Was he the first encourager of learning? This picture shows the Venerable Bede, whose dates are (672–735), sharpening his quill. This Northumbrian saint wrote his *History of the English Church and People* more than a 100 years prior to Alfred. If anyone deserves the title of creator of the English people, it is Bede. But, if Alfred was not the first, it is significant that he included Bede's book in his translation program of what we would title today the Great Books. We shall see that Alfred's publishing program would warm the hearts of the Liberty Fund and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.



Initial Page of Bede's History

In this picture we see the opening page of Bede's *History* which starts, "Britain is an island in the Ocean, and was once called Albion." Note that he did not say, "perfidious Albion" which only came into use later as a term of disparagement by the French.

Originally this decorated initial page from the eighth century was thought to have been done in the scriptorium in Lindisfarne, but is now thought to have been done closer to Alfred's territory in Winchester or Canterbury.

Bede is not only venerable, he is remarkable. Although his ancestors were illiterate barbarians, and he never traveled much more than from Lindisfarne in the north to York in the south, he replaced the "past of pagan genealogies, folk-tales and heroic legends...with the Latin learning of the Christian Church." (R.W. Southern, "Bede" in *Medieval Humanism and other studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970, p. 5)

Christopher Dawson goes so far as to say that this Northumbrian culture as exemplified in Bede "marks a new starting point for Western culture." (*Formation*, p. 174) But the Northumbrian monastic culture was itself a synthesis of the golden age of Irish monasticism and the Roman mission emanating from Canterbury. The Irish monks of the Celtic west were crucial to the monastery of St. Columba in Iona. Combined with the Benedictine abbeys of Jarrow and Wearmouth, they in turn became missionaries to the pagans in Europe—Frisians, Saxons, and Franks.



Offa's Coin

Was Alfred the first English giver of laws? In this picture we see a coin of Offa, king of Mercia (757–796) who initiated English coinage, constructed Offa's dike as a security measure against the invading Welsh kingdom of Powys, and codified part of the law which Alfred himself drew on later.

In his preface to his law code, Alfred explains that he examined many existing law codes from the Old Testament to those of previous Anglo-Saxon kings in neighbouring kingdoms:

"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 Ælthelberht (who first among the English people received baptism), and which seemed to me most just, I collected herein, and omitted the others.”

We would, of course, like to know exactly the criteria for his rejection but we are forced to notice that he consulted “the advice of my councilors” and showed a large amount of humility in not writing down all his statutory legislation. To speak more accurately, Alfred thought of himself as a law-finder rather than a law-giver.

The echoes of Alfred can be found in the observation of Sir Matthew Hale, the great defender of the common law against the positivism of Thomas Hobbes:

“It is reason for me to preferre a law by which a kingdome hath been happily governed four or five hundred years than to adventure the happiness and peace of a kingdome upon some new theory of my own.” (Quoted in Bruno Leoni, *Freedom and the Law*, New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961, p. 94)

When he codified laws, he started with the Ten Commandments from Moses and then proceeded to the laws of Ine and Offa. Ine was very closely related to Alfred because he was an early King of Wessex from 688 to 726. Asser in his genealogy stresses that two persons of fairly recent historical vintage were two brothers, “Ingild and Ine, the famous king of the West Saxons...Ine journeyed to Rome, and honourably ending this present life there he entered the heavenly land to reign with Christ.” (Asser p. 67) Ine was also noted for his code of laws, which he issued in about 694. Ine’s journey to Rome has interesting parallels to Alfred’s journeys to Rome; the fact that Alfred did not choose to leave the real political world provides an interesting contrast to the more monastic model of Ine.

Alfred stresses the importance of the faith in Christ and trust in his mercy as the inspiration behind his attempt to mitigate, if not totally eliminate, revenge by introducing wergild. In his own words, “They then established, through that mercy which Christ taught, that for almost every misdeed at the first offence secular lords might with their permission receive without sin the monetary compensation, which they then fixed...” But mercy had its limits in a barbarian culture. Alfred goes on to add, “only for treachery to a lord did they dare not declare any mercy, since Almighty God adjudged none for those who despised Him, nor did Christ, the Son of God, adjudge any for the one who betrayed Him to death; and He commanded everyone to love his lord as Himself.” (Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 163-164)

Although he did not eliminate the practice of the blood feud which was a strong part of previous Anglo-Saxon traditions, he imposed heavy penalties for breach of oath or pledge. As Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (Book IV, Chapter 5) said: “With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of it what was said of the laws of Solon,

that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may perhaps in due time prepare the way for a better.”

Enunciating a rule of law, and grounding that law in the Mosaic Old Testament tempered by the Golden Rule of the New Testament is exactly what Alfred accomplished. If William Blackstone could say that Christianity is part of the laws of England, we owe it to Alfred that this was possible.

Winston Churchill put Alfred’s contribution to legal development in judicious terms, “The Laws of Alfred, continually amplified by his successors, grew into that body of customary law administered by the shire and hundred courts which, under the name of the Laws of St. Edward (the Confessor), the Norman kings undertook to respect, and out of which, with much manipulation by feudal lawyers, the Common Law was founded.” (Winston Churchill, *The Birth of Britain*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966, p. 120)

He may not have been responsible for the technical development of the common law, but his personal involvement in judicial cases is a Solomonic precursor of equity courts. Blackstone’s eloquent prose states the claim:

“We are next to consider the several species and distinctions of courts of justice, which are acknowledged and used in this kingdom. And these are either such as are of public and general jurisdiction throughout the whole realm; or such as are only of a private and special jurisdiction in some particular parts of it. Of the former there are four sorts; the universally established courts of common law and equity; the ecclesiastical courts; the courts military; and courts maritime. And first of such public courts as are courts of common law of equity.

THE policy of our antient constitution, as regulated and established by the great Alfred, was to bring justice home to every man's door, by constituting as many courts of judicature as there are manors and townships in the kingdom; wherein injuries were redressed in an easy and expeditious manner, by the suffrage of neighbours and friends. These little courts however communicated with others of a larger jurisdiction, and those with others of a still greater power; ascending gradually from the lowest to the supreme courts, which were respectively constituted to correct the errors of the inferior ones, and to determine such causes as by reason of their weight and difficulty demanded a more solemn discussion. The course of justice flowing in large streams from the king, as the fountain, to his superior courts of record; and being then subdivided into smaller channels, till the whole and every part of the kingdom were plentifully watered and refreshed.” William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book III, Chapter IV

In the same book Blackstone warns us about attributing too much to Alfred, “Just as we are apt to impute the invention of this, and some other pieces of juridical polity, to the superior genius of Alfred the great; to whom, on account of his having done much, it is usual to attribute every thing: and as the tradition of antient Greece placed to the account

of their one Hercules whatever achievement was performed superior to the ordinary prowess of mankind.”

The legal codes that culminated in Alfred reflected a concern for the poor and disadvantaged. The arbitrary behavior of the nobility was restrained to some degree by the rule of law. Predictability replaced revenge as the foundations of justice.

It is interesting to note that although Alfred is included in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* as a Saint, he did not make it into the Catholic Church list of Saints, leaving Edward the Confessor as the only English king who made it to sainthood.



Alfred the Great: Statue by Count Gleichen, Wantage

The statue of Alfred by Count Gleichen erected in 1877 in his birthplace of Wantage in the Vale of the White Horse, contains a more accurate description of Alfred’s accomplishments than the Alfred Tower.

“Alfred found learning dead, and he restored it. Education neglected, and he revived it. The laws powerless, and he gave them force. The Church debased, and he raised it. The land ravaged by a fearful enemy, from which he delivered it. Alfred’s name shall live as long as mankind respects the past.” (Quotation from Richard Abels’ fine book, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, New York: Longman, 1998 p. 4)

Ponder that last statement carefully. Reflect that Alfred’s name has not lived—in the U.S. for sure and barely in England, which at best remembers burnt cakes. The fact is that mankind no longer respects the past.

Alfred is for most of us, including me until I had to teach an adult Christian education class at my Episcopal Church, what I would call a guilt name. Someone you’ve heard of, but can’t give an account of anything that he did. Don’t feel bad if you knew nothing about Alfred before you arrived here today. I took informal polls of my Episcopal friends in Baton Rouge and only one, ex-congressman Henson Moore had the foggiest idea of who he was.

Alfred's wish for fame and renown is clear from what he added to his translation of Boethius: "I desired to live worthily as long as I lived, and to leave after my life, to the men who should come after me, the memory of me in good works." (Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, chapter XVII taken from *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred*, translated by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, London: Penguin Books, 1983, pp 132-33)

Sadly, this has not come true in spite of the fact that he sponsored the compiling of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. We, or at least, professional historians, do know more about Alfred than any other Saxon King, but in spite of this fact, he is little recognized by the general public.

If Alfred was not always a great innovator, does he still deserve our attention? I will argue that he should precisely because he was a transmitter of the best traditions of the past. As one recent scholar put it, Alfred was more "an agent of continuity...a restorer...a seeker after other's tracks." (David Horspool's *King Alfred: Burnt Cakes and other Legends* (Harvard University Press, 2006 p. 184).



Canterbury Codex Aureus

Let us start over and take a look at the beginning of Asser's *Life of Alfred*. What you are looking at is the Canterbury Codex Aureus, ("Golden Gospels"). The manuscript was produced circa 750, one hundred years before Alfred's birth, in the scriptorium of Christ Church, Canterbury.

The image you see is the opening of the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, the gospel of Matthew. This first chapter traces the genealogy of Christ all the way back through David and Solomon to Abraham.

Before getting into the details of the genealogy, it is worth noting the incredible richness of the cultural traditions which Alfred inherited. Thomas Cahill's recent book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, has reminded us of the enormous role of the Irish monastic tradition. But it is important to recognize that increasingly in the 8th and 9th centuries, the

tradition becomes more accurately called the Hiberno-Saxon Tradition in both book illumination and monastic orders.

Although the Irish initiated the high art of book illumination, the center of gravity shifted from Ireland and Wales to Scotland (Iona), Northern England (Lindisfarne in Northumbria) and then to Southern England (Canterbury in Kent, and Winchester in Hampshire).

This shift, according to Karl Nordenfalk, was a “move away from the restricted material conditions of Ireland to the more wealthy patronage of the Anglo-Saxon kings. However, Insular art would scarcely have attained its high degree of originality had it not been given its first specifically Celtic imprint on Irish soil. On the other hand, it would not have reached its high level of complexity and perfection had it remained within the confines of Ireland alone. Not only did the Anglo-Saxons bring new ornamental motifs to its vocabulary, but they also had a specific genius for order and clarity, and this they combined with a fresh inventiveness which the Irish seemingly did not possess to the same degree.” He also claimed, “We would see more clearly had not both Lindisfarne and Iona in turn been completely destroyed by the Vikings. But whereas at least a part of the Lindisfarne library manuscripts—and especially its greatest achievement, the book written in honor of Saint Cuthbert—has been preserved, only a later product, the Book of Kells, has survived from Iona, if that is indeed where it was made....In any case, the final word should not rest either with Ireland or Northumbria, but with both, one no less essential than the other for the creation of an art which, standing at the beginning, supremely vindicates the right of the Middle Ages to be called a new epoch in the history of Western art.” (Karl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting*, New York: George Braziller, 1977, p. 26)

The Codex was stolen from Britain by the Vikings who subsequently bribed the English into buying it back. The story of its return to England was told by another Alfred:

“Inscription + In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I, Earl Alfred, and my wife Werburg procured this book from the heathen invading army with our own money; the purchase was made with pure gold. And we did that for the love of God and for the benefit of our souls, and because neither of us wanted these holy works to remain any longer in heathen hands. And now we wish to present them to Christ Church to God's praise and glory and honour, and as thanksgiving for his sufferings, and for the use of the religious community which glorifies God daily in Christ Church; in order that they should be read aloud every month for Alfred and for Werburg and for Alhthryth, for the eternal salvation of their souls, as long as God decrees that Christianity should survive in that place. And also I, Earl Alfred, and Werburg beg and entreat in the name of Almighty God and of all his saints that no man should be so presumptuous as to give away or remove these holy works from Christ Church as long as Christianity survives there.

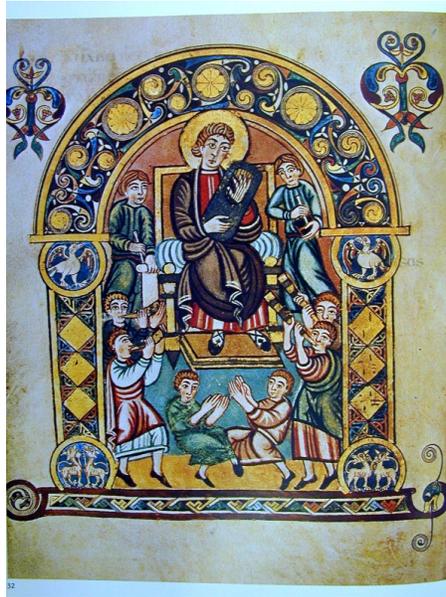
Alfred

Werburg

Alhthryth their daughter”

Unfortunately, the holy works were removed from Christ Church again, and, somehow, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was in Spain, and in 1690 it was bought for the Swedish royal collection and so returned to Scandinavia and is now back in the Swedish Royal Library at Stockholm.

We saw that the first chapter of Matthew traces Christ's genealogy back to Abraham. The first chapter of Asser's *Life of Alfred* traces the genealogy of Alfred all the way back to Adam! There are several curious additions to Alfred's genealogy that are important to note in addition to the basic fact that the warrior barbarian tribes thought family ties and genealogy to be all-important. Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* is a chilling example.



David Composing the Psalms: Canterbury Psalter

Here we have a picture of David composing the Psalms from the Canterbury Psalter. Asser introduces David indirectly with a long quote from the 5th century Roman poet Sedulius:

”Since the pagan poets sought in their fictions to swagger either in high-flowing measure, or in the wailing of tragedy’s speech, or with comedy’s absurd Geta, or by means of any sort of verse whatever to relate the violent crimes of evil deeds and sing of monumental wickedness, and with scholarly application commit these many lies to paper: why should I—a poet accustomed to chanting the measures of the harp in the manner of David, and of taking my place in the holy chorus and hymning heavenly melodies in pleasing diction—be silent concerning the renowned miracles of Christ who brought us salvation?” (Asser, p. 67)

There are many reasons why we can link Alfred to David. Directly connected to this slide, Alfred as part of his education programme translated the first 50 Psalms into vernacular Anglo-Saxon.



Daniel Maclise, “Alfred the Saxon King (Disguised as a Minstrel) in The Tent of Guthrum the Dane” (1852)

There is a famous story told in William of Malmesbury about Alfred as a CIA agent who gathers intelligence by disguising himself as a minstrel and sneaking into the tent of Guthrum the Dane. We can guess that he sang more vigorous songs with his harp than Hrothgar’s beautiful wife in the movie *Beowulf*. Although the Viking pagans are usually thought of as crude simple barbarians, here they are shown in an oriental decadence. One could even say of them as it used to be said of Americans (and still is, of course, in Europe today): they went from barbarism to decadence without once knowing civilization. Alfred, of course, subsequently defeated the Vikings at the famous battle of Edington in 878. He called out his *fyrð* or voluntary militia which also endeared him to later classical republicans and country whigs who were opposed to the Standing Army. Not only did he defeat him, but more importantly he forced the pagan Guthrum and twenty-nine of his men to convert to Christianity!



Alfred Jewel

There is even speculation that the most important artifact that has come down to us from the time of Alfred, the Alfred Jewel, shown here, depicts David holding the rod and the staff from the famous 23rd psalm. The jewel made of gold and cloisonné enamel, covered with a transparent piece of rock crystal, bears the inscription "Alfred ordered me to be made" "AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN" and is now kept in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. It was discovered in 1693 at North Petherton in Somerset, on land belonging to Sir Thomas Wroth (c. 1675-1721), only four miles from Athelney, where King Alfred took refuge from the Vikings in 878, and where he is alleged to have burnt

the cakes. The jewel may have been used as a bookmark. When Alfred sent a copy of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, he may have included this precious "aestels."

Another Old Testament connection to the Alfred Jewel can be seen in the large eyes which have been interpreted as the eyes of Solomon, known for his wisdom and judiciousness. (slide of Aethulwulf and Alfred in Rome, 125)



Alfred's Father Aethulwulf Receiving a Blessing from Pope Leo IV

Another reason that Alfred would identify with David was that David was chosen by Samuel and anointed for kingship as a child, preferred by the Lord over his older brothers. In this picture, we show Alfred's father, Aethulwulf, receiving a blessing from Pope Leo IV. Alfred went on pilgrimage to Rome twice as a young man and was either confirmed or anointed by the Pope. The young man on the right in this picture could easily represent Alfred.

Alfred was the youngest of four brothers who all reigned and died young. But even while young, according to Asser, he was favored by his family. It was a miracle that he became king. The close connections to Rome go back a long way in Alfred's family.

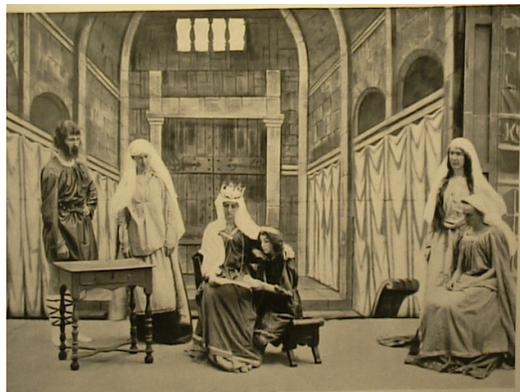


Tableau of King Alfred Memorizing Book, King Alfred Millenary, 1901

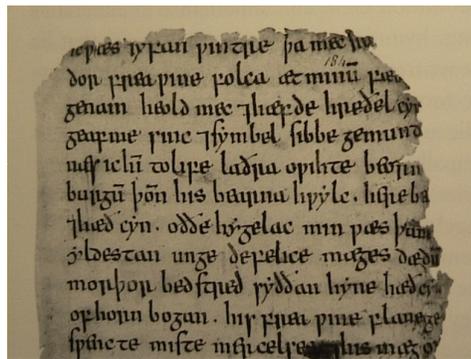
We now return to Alfred's upbringing to link him to the Anglo-Saxon traditions of heroic poetry and *Beowulf*. In this picture we have a tableaux done for the King Alfred Millenary of 1901 (incorrectly dated according to recent historical evidence). The lavishly produced book to celebrate this event shows the Victorian England at its finest and most grandiloquent. Tributes, dinners, and statues can be seen in the marvelous book edited by Alfred Bowker. Here we have the scene in Asser where Alfred and his older brothers are challenged by his mother to memorize a book of poetry. Alfred was attracted to the book by the sheer physical beauty of the opening initial. We have already seen that kind of beauty. Alfred, of course, memorized the book with the help of a tutor and won the prize.



Stained Glass Window of Caedmon

But what kind of poetry was it that Alfred throughout his life cherished?

There is a rich vernacular tradition of religious Anglo-Saxon poetry developed in the age preceding him. The Venerable Bede relates the story of Caedmon, the peasant from Whitby Abbey, who reluctantly sings a great Creation hymn and subsequently becomes a monk.



Beowulf Manuscript

Alfred may also have been memorizing the Anglo-Saxon poem of *Beowulf*. I had a choice between this picture which shows the original poem of *Beowulf* and Angelina Jolie. I chose the former because I thought there might be some young impressionable

interns here. The fact remains that this great poem in its original form, not the Hollywood version, which totally perverts the real message of Beowulf, was both pagan and Christian. The poet was Christian and the subject matter was the great heroic ethic of the German forests!

We get a hint of the importance of such poetry in a famous letter of Alcuin of York, who was the brain trust behind Charlemagne's educational reforms and ecclesiastical reform. to the Bishop of Lindisfarne in 797: "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?" What does Hiniel, a legendary warrior who appears in Beowulf, have to do with Christ? Probably a lot more than Angelina Jolie has to do with Grendel's mother.

Christopher Dawson has stressed the civilizational task of the Christian Church during the Dark Ages. "In such a world, the Church had to undertake the task of introducing the law of the gospel and the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount among peoples who regarded homicide as the most honorable occupation and vengeance as synonymous with justice. It is not surprising that some found the task appallingly difficult and that medieval culture was in a state of continual tension between the opposing ideals of the Christian and the warrior." (Christopher Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967, p. 162)

Other medieval examples abound in Santiago Matamoros, the Knights Templar, the Monks of War, *The Song of Roland*, and the literatures connected with the Crusades and the Crusading spirit.



David Wilkie's Alfred and the Burning of the Cakes

In this picture we see a 19th century rendition of Alfred and the burning of the cakes by a great Scottish genre painter, David Wilkie. The background for this story is that Alfred had received numerous setbacks from the invasions of the Vikings. He had lost battle after battle as the Vikings conquered almost all the remainder of the Anglo-Saxon sections of Britain. Alfred had withdrawn to the swampy area, called Athelney. While wandering through the woods he stumbled across a cottage with a swineherd and his wife. The swineherd goes off and leaves Alfred alone with his wife who is baking some cakes on the fire. She asks him to watch the cakes; Alfred does not and is roundly scolded by the woman who does not recognize him. There are many aspects to the story that connect with Alfred's humility. He does not pull rank and reprimand her, but instead

learns from her. Pay attention to your simple duties even if you are pondering the larger questions of the protection of the realm.

Adam Smith, as usual, had it right in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; he would have agreed with the swineherd's wife: "The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty."

In the full quotation from Adam Smith, we have the justification of King Alfred's position compared to that of his predecessor, Ine, who chose to leave the world and retreat into a monastery:

"The administration of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country: that he is occupied in contemplating the more sublime, can never be an excuse for his neglecting the more humble department; and he must not expose himself to the charge which Avidius Cassius is said to have brought, perhaps unjustly, against Marcus Antoninus; that while he employed himself in philosophical speculations, and contemplated the prosperity of the universe, he neglected that of the Roman empire. The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty."



**Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury
(1504-1575)**

We owe the story of Alfred and the Cakes to Matthew Parker (1504-75), Archbishop of Canterbury, who was the first to print Asser's *Life of King Alfred* in 1574. He picked it up from a 10th century manuscript he thought was written by Asser, Alfred's biographer.

The story of the cakes originally appeared in an anonymous *Vita S. Neoti* (Life of St Neot), probably composed in the late tenth century, whose author is thought by many

scholars to have made it up. A later version of the story was incorporated into the *Annals of St Neots*, which appear actually to have been compiled at Bury St Edmunds during the second quarter of the twelfth century. Parker noticed the similarities between the *Annals* and Asser's *Life*, and deduced that the *Annals* were written by Asser, although in fact it was the later compiler of the *Annals* who had made use of the *Life*. He therefore interpolated the story exactly as he found it in the *Annals* at the appropriate point in his text of Asser's *Life*.

But the story reflects Alfred's Christian understanding of both his mission and that of his Anglo-Saxon followers. To be a "chosen people" or a "new Israel" does not lead to a swaggering triumphalist imperialism. It is the heaviest of duties and obligations. Alfred saw his duties in the light of adverse divine judgment for his personal sins and the sins of his fellow Anglo-Saxons. One can read the following passage and be reminded of Christ's forty days in the wilderness.

"There is a place in the remote parts of English Britain far to the west, which in English is called Athelney and which we refer to as 'Athelings' Isle'; it is surrounded on all sides by vast salt marshes and sustained by some level ground in the middle. King Alfred happened unexpectedly to come there as a lone traveller. Noticing the cottage of a certain unknown swineherd (as he later learned), he directed his path towards it and sought there a peaceful retreat; he was given refuge, and he stayed there a number of days, impoverished, subdued and content with the bare necessities. Reflecting patiently that these things had befallen him through God's just judgement, he remained there awaiting God's mercy through the intercession of His servant Neot; for he had conceived from Neot the hope that he nourished in his heart. 'Whom the Lord loveth', says the apostle, 'He chastiseth; He scourgeth every son whom he adopteth' (Hebrews xii, 61). In addition to this, Alfred patiently kept the picture of Job's astonishing constancy before his eyes every day. Now it happened by chance one day, when the swineherd was leading his flock to their usual pastures, that the king remained alone at home with the swineherd's wife. The wife, concerned for her husband's return, had entrusted some kneaded flour to the husband of sea-borne Venus [Vulcan, the fire god, that is, the oven]. As is the custom among countrywomen, she was intent on other domestic occupations, until, when she sought the bread from Vulcan, she saw it burning from the other side of the room. She immediately grew angry and said to the king (unknown to her as such): 'Look here, man, You hesitate to turn the loaves which you see to be burning, Yet you're quite happy to eat them when they come warm from the oven!'

But the king, reproached by these disparaging insults, ascribed them to his divine lot; somewhat shaken, and submitting to the woman's scolding, he not only turned the bread but even attended to it as she brought out the loaves when they were ready."

Parker's interest in Alfred is almost enough to have escalated Alfred from a DWEM (Dead, White, European Male) to a WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant). There was a great interest in the early church by the Elizabethan Protestants who wanted to find a pure church in Anglo-Saxon England before the Roman Catholic mission of Augustine of Canterbury.



Hobthrush Island off Lindisfarne, Northumbria

In this picture we see Hobthrush island off Lindisfarne, in Northumbria. This was the site of the first hermitage of St. Cuthbert (c. 634-687), one of the most important English saints celebrated by Bede in both his history and also a prose life. St. Cuthbert was a favorite of Alfred.



Animal Life on Lindisfarne

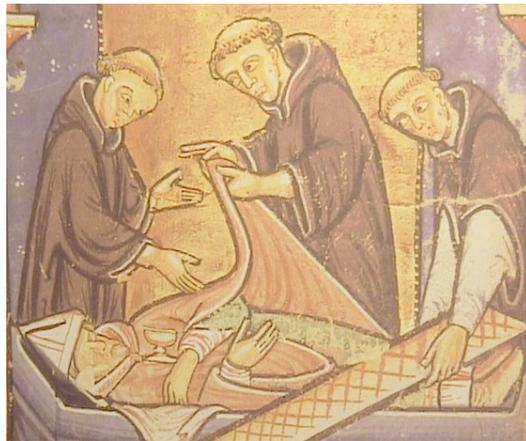
Similar to the Irish saints by whom he was greatly influenced, St. Cuthbert had the same love of nature and created animals that you find in St. Francis.

Alfred's retreat to Athelney can also be compared to the flight to the desert of the monastic life and the retreat of St. Cuthbert to Lindisfarne. Living in poverty, he contemplated his own sins and those of the Saxons over whom he ruled. Alfred was convinced that the Vikings were the scourges of God, a just punishment for the sins of the Saxons.



The Vikings

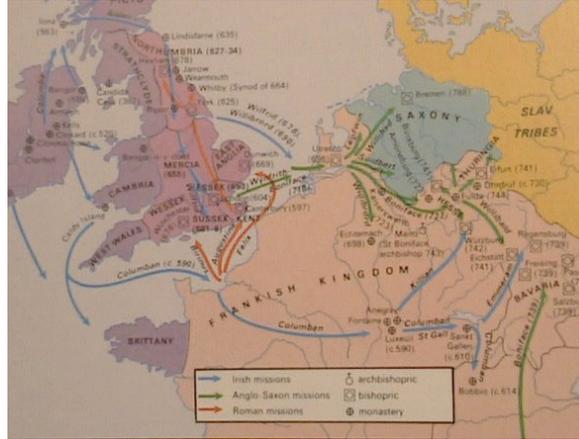
The Vikings they did come. In fact, the onslaught started in 793 when they proceeded to conquer and destroy Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne had been founded in 635 by an Irish monk, Aidan, who came from the earlier monastic settlement of Iona off the coast of Scotland. The Lindisfarne Gospels are presumed to be the work of the monk named Eadfrith, who became Bishop of Lindisfarne in 698 and died in 721. Current scholarship indicates a date around 715, and it is believed they were produced in honor of St. Cuthbert.



St. Cuthbert's Remains

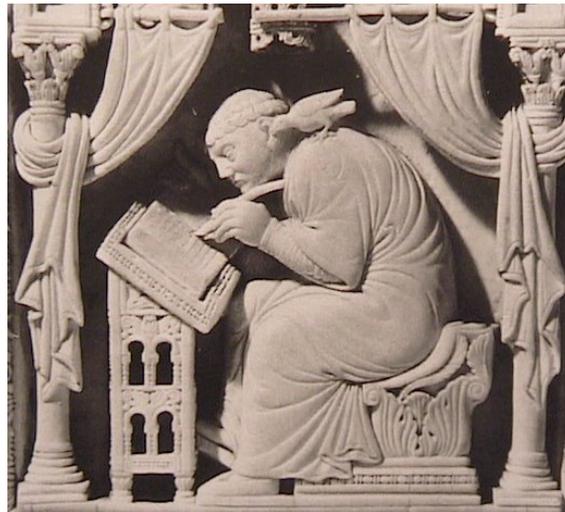
In fact the onslaught was so bad that St. Cuthbert's remains, shown here, were disinterred from Lindisfarne and transferred to Durham where they remain in the cathedral to this day.

There is a charming story told by William of Malmesbury that St. Cuthbert appeared to Alfred in Athelney as a pilgrim. The king shared his last loaf of bread with him. This appeared in Malmesbury's *Gesta regum anglorum* (Deeds of the English kings (449-1127) produced about 1125. It was such a popular story that it was painted by the American painter Benjamin West. In fact, George Washington had a print of the painting over his mantel at Mount Vernon.



Monastic Influences

Since we have so many monastic influences on Alfred, let's try to get the big picture. You can see in this map the multiple lines of influence. Italian monks go to Ireland, Irish monks go to England, English monks go to Germany, and the Franks are caught in the middle. To sort out all this history, I can do no better than refer you to the numerous books by Christopher Dawson on Christian culture, which puts all this in perspective.



Gregory the Great, late 10th century ivory from Reichenau

Foremost in Dawson's views and that of many other scholars of the period is the importance of Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), Pope from September 3, 590 until his death in 604. Here is shown at his writing desk possibly composing one of the books that Alfred later translated into the vernacular.

One of Alfred's most important debts is owed to Saint Gregory the Great, Gregory had sent St. Augustine to Canterbury to convert the Saxons. The conflicts between the Roman monks and the Irish monks were only (if then) settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664.



Gregory the Great in Thackeray's *Lectures on English History*

In this picture we see a humorous version of the story related by the Venerable Bede of Gregory the Great who when he first encountered blue-eyed, blond-haired English boys at a slave market, allegedly said, "Non Angli, sed Angeli." ("They are not Angles, but Angels.") The drawing is by Thackeray who deliciously retells the story in his *Lectures on English History* which appeared in *Punch* in 1842.

"It chanced that two lovely British children, sold like thousands of others by their ruthless Saxon masters, were sent to Rome, and exposed upon the slave-market there. Fancy those darling in such a situation.

There they stood—weeping and wretched, thinking of their parents' cot, in the far Northern Isle, sighing and yearning, no doubt, for the green fields of Albin!

It happened that a gentleman by the name of Gregory, who afterwards rose to be Pope of Rome—but who was then a simple clerical gent, passed through the market, with his friends, and came to the spot where these poor British children stood.

The Reverend Mr. Gregory was instantly struck by their appearance—by their rosy cheeks, their golden hair; their little jackets covered all over with sugar-loaf buttons, their poor nankeens grown all too short by constant was and wear: and demanded of their owner, of what nation the little darlings were?

The men (who spoke in Latin) replied that they were *Angli*, that is, Angles or English.

'Angles,' said the enthusiastic Mr. Gregory, 'they are not Angles, but Angels;' and with this joke which did not do much honour to his head, though certainly his heart was good, he approached the little dears, caressed them, and made still further inquiries regarding them.

Miss Pontifex (one of the little girls). And did Mr. Gregory take the little children out of slavery, and send them home, ma'am?

Mr. Hume, my dear good little girl, does not mention this fact; but let us hope he did: with all my heart, I'm sure *I* hope he did. But this is certain, that he never forgot them, and when in process of time he came to be Pope of Rome...he despatched a number of his clergy to England, who came and converted the benighted Saxons and Britons, and they gave up their hideous idols, and horrid human sacrifices, and sent the wicked Druids about their business." Volume 26 of his *The Works* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1886), Miss Tickletoy's first lecture on English history.

Although Thackeray approaches all this with tongue-in-cheek, one can't help but feel that he truly admired Alfred the Great. Since it is hard to find in his collected works, I will take the liberty of quoting at length the passage where he concludes with comparing Alfred to George Washington:

“Miss Tickletoy: But, dears, I don't think it right to make one single joke about good King Alfred; who was so good, and so wise, and so gentle, and so brave, that one can't laugh, but only love and honour his memory. Think of this, how rare good kings are, and let us value a good one when he comes. We have had just fifty kings since his time, who have reigned for near a thousand long years, and he the only Great one. Brave and victorious many of them have been, grand and sumptuous, and a hundred times more powerful than he: but who cares for one of them (except Harry the Fifth, and I think Shakspeare made *that* king)—who loves any of them except him—the man who spoiled the cakes in the herdsman's cottage, the man who sang and played in the Danes' camp?

There are none of you so young but know those stories about him. Look, when the people love a man, how grateful they are! For a thousand years these little tales have passed from father to son all through England, and every single man out of millions and millions who has heard them has loved King Alfred in his heart, and blessed him, and was proud that he was an Englishman's king. And then he hears that Alfred fought the Danes, and drove them out of England, and that he was merciful to his enemies, and kept faith at a time when everyone else was deceitful and cruel, and that he was the first to make laws, and establish peace and liberty among us.

Who cares for Charles the Second, secured in his oak, more than for any other man at a pinch of danger? Charles might have stayed in his tree for us, or for any good that he did when he came down. But for King Alfred, waiting in his little secret island, until he should be strong enough to have one more battle with his conquerors, or in the camp of the enemy singing his songs to his harp, who does not feel as for a dear friend or father in danger, and cry hurra! With all his heart, when he wins?

All the little Children. Hurray! Alfred for ever!

Yes, my dears, you love him all, and would all fight for him, I know.

Master Spry. That I would.

I'm sure you would, John, and may you never fight for a worse cause! Ah, it's a fine thing to think of the people loving a man for a thousand years! We shan't come to such another in the course of all these lectures—except mayhap if we get so far, to one George—

Mr Mortimer (aloud, and with much confidence). George the Fourth, you mean, miss, the first gentleman in Europe.

Miss T. (sternly). No, sir; I mean George Washinton,—the *American* Alfred, sir, who gave and took from us many a good beating, and drove the *English-Danes* out of his country.

Mr. Mortimer. Disgusting raddicle!—Delancey, my dear, come with me. Mem!—I shall withdraw my son from your academy.”

Alfred the Great was also indebted to Gregory for his nurturing of the monastic tradition of St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547). St. Benedict's motto was "Orare est laborare, laborare est orare" ("To pray is to work, to work is to pray"). The "Divine Office" (office coming from the Latin word for work) stems from this. The Benedictines began to call the prayers the *Opus Dei* or "Work of God."

In 1965 Pope Paul VI had proclaimed Benedict the patron saint of Europe. The current Pope, Benedict the XVI, chose his name partially on the basis of this historical tie: "filled with sentiments of awe and thanksgiving, I wish to speak of why I chose the name Benedict. Firstly, I remember Pope Benedict XV, that courageous prophet of peace, who guided the Church through turbulent times of war. In his footsteps I place my ministry in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples. Additionally, I recall Saint Benedict of Nursia, co-patron of Europe, whose life evokes the Christian roots of Europe. I ask him to help us all to hold firm to the centrality of Christ in our Christian life: May Christ always take first place in our thoughts and actions! ”

It was Pope Benedict XV who called World War I the "suicide of Europe." There was an attempt to bring Europe back to life when Pope John Paul II called for the European Constitution to "include a reference to the religious and in particular the Christian heritage of Europe." (*Ecclesia in Europa*, June, 2003) That did not happen. Instead a watered-down formulation was arrived at referring to "the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe."

It is also interesting to note that John Paul II received the Charlemagne Prize in March 2004 for his work in promoting European understanding and peace. There are many who would like to claim Charlemagne as the "father of Europe." The view has a great deal of validity in the light of his coronation as Emperor by Pope Leo III. Walter McDougall has built on the contemporary importance of this claim in an address that I will quote at length: "Will 'Europe' Survive the 21st Century?" (Available in full from the website of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200707.mcdougall.willeuropesurvive.html>)

“We began by contrasting Europe in 2007 with Europe in 1907. Let us conclude by invoking a grander timeline, that of European civilization itself. Once upon a time the term Europa referred only to a beautiful maiden in Greek mythology who attracted the wandering eye of Zeus, or else to a directional term referring to the Greek side of the Hellespont as opposed to the side on the peninsula Greeks called Asia Minor. The Roman Empire, encompassing parts of three continents around the Mediterranean, had no concept of Europe, and the Germanic tribes whose invasions dissolved the empire based at Rome certainly had no concept of Europe as a geographical, cultural, religious, linguistic, racial, or political entity. Nor did the Arabs, who swept out of the desert in the seventh and eighth centuries of the common era full of zeal for Allah and his prophet Mohammed. The Arabs overran fully half of all the provinces of Christendom, imposing their rule by sword and Quran on Mesopotamia, Syria, Lebanon, the Holy Land, Egypt, all of North Africa, and almost all of Spain. The Umayyad Caliphate even dreamed of expanding the Dar al Islam, the Land of the Faithful, across the Pyrenees and extirpating Latin Christendom altogether. But its Saracen soldiers were checked, for ever as it turned out, by the knights of a Frankish prince named Charles “the Hammer” Martel at Tours in 732.

That victory allowed the heirs of Charles the Hammer to imagine a destiny for the Franks, indeed for all the Christian tribes, greater than mere survival. Chief among them was his tall, imposing grandson, also named Charles. Exceptionally skilled at war, diplomacy, administration, and court politics, he created by sheer force of will a great empire that among his own subjects earned him the epithet Charles the Great, to wit Karl der Grosse or Charlemagne. The glory and booty he won in battle kept the lords and knights satisfied. His religious donations and support for public morality won over the clergy. His protection of commerce and administration of royal law pleased the merchants. His reign was immensely popular. Moreover, though not himself literate, Charlemagne gathered around him the most learned monks from the British Isles, Italy, France, and the Low Countries. He founded schools, patronized art, and presided over a Little Renaissance in the midst of the Dark Ages. Above all, Charlemagne was a pious man who believed himself called to unite the Christians orphaned by the collapse of the Roman Empire and spread the gospel to pagans north and west of Francia. He succeeded in all this to a remarkable degree: indeed, the empire based at his capital of Aix-la-Chapelle coincided remarkably with the boundaries of the original Common Market formed in 1957: France, the Low Countries, West Germany, and northern Italy.

What every pupil used to learn about Charlemagne is that the Pope crowned him Emperor of the West at a Christmas Day mass in the year 800. What few people know is that the year before, in 799, an anonymous court poet bestowed a still grander title. He dubbed Charlemagne “King and Father of Europe.” A continent, a civilization, had been willed into being by one man. Moreover, that self-conscious European idea survived the crackup of Charlemagne’s empire to inspire monarchs, popes, philosophers, conquerors, and at last economists and mere bureaucrats for 1,200 years. The idea had to wait until the spiraling orgy of nationalism spent itself utterly in World War II. But then, indeed in the year 1950, the good burghers of the Rhineland town Germans call Aachen and the French

Aix-la-Chapelle, established a prize to be awarded annually to the person who did most to advance European unity. The town fathers named it the Charlemagne Prize after the “King and Father of Europe” who had made their city his capital.

What would Charlemagne make of Europe today? He would marvel, of course, at the wealth and technology. He would praise and bless the ubiquitous peace. He would recognize instantly the Islamic Challenge and tell Europeans it was ten times worse back in his day! Nor, having been a state builder himself, would he likely object to the intrusive EU bureaucracy. Indeed, it is fetching to think Charlemagne would discern in the EU the culmination of the great work he began over a millennium ago, and give glory to God. But three features of Europe today would doubtless grieve and trouble him greatly: military impotence; spiritual emptiness; and demographic decay. How long, the Emperor would surely ask, can a civilization expect to survive without arms, without faith, without children?”

The parallels between the Carolingian Renaissance and Alfred the Great are extremely important and not fully spelled out in the scholarly literature. One can make a strong claim that Charlemagne’s politico-religious thought was theocratic, a form of caesaropapism similar to the Byzantine claims. It is not clear that Alfred the Great’s thought follows the same tracks, but more work needs to be done on the issue.

But there were definite links of Alfred the Great to both Saxon tradition and the Frankish tradition that even preceded any possible connections to Charlemagne. When Alfred was engaged in his scholarly activities, his works of peace, he had asked for help from abroad and he received it. John the Old Saxon wrote an acrostic poem to Alfred, which captures his spirit: “Behold, may all the Graces descend from heaven upon you! You shall always be joyous, Alfred, through the happy walks of life. May you bend your mind to heavenly affairs; be disgusted with trappings. Rightly do you teach, hastening from the deceptive charm of worldly things. See, you apply yourself ever to gain the shining talents: run confidently through the fields of foreign learning.” (*Alfred the Great*, Penguin classics, p. 192)

There is a remarkable letter of Fulco, Archbishop of Rheims from 883-900, to King Alfred c. 886. Presumably Alfred had also written him to secure scholars who could lead his renaissance in England. Fulco sent Grimbold, a monk from St. Bertin’s in Saint-Omer where Fulco had been Abbot from 887-883. He was a favorite of Fulco who had wanted to make him a Bishop, but he recognized his duty to the larger Christian duty.



St. Remigius Baptizing Clovis

Fulco neatly ties together St. Gregory who sent St. Augustine to Canterbury with St. Remigius (c. 437–January 13, 533) who brought about the conversion to Christianity of Clovis, King of the Franks, at Christmas, 496. Remigius was one of those bishops drawn from the old Gallo-Roman aristocracy who preserved the ancient Roman traditions of learning. Just as they were working on the barbarians, the barbarians were working on them. The blending of the two produced a new semi-barbarian culture.

Fulco describes Remigius as “truly the Apostle of the Franks...the Frankish peoples were once freed from manifold error by St. Remigius.” Clovis was baptized in Christian pomp and pagan militarism; 3,000 warriors followed Clovis to the font. “Clovis proved to be the archetypal barbarian. Brutal, ignorant and totally amoral, he stole treasure, split skulls and collected concubines with amazing gusto.” (*Barbarian Europe*, Gerald Simons, New York: Time-Life Books, 1968, p. 59). In spite of this, his reign was one of the turning points in the success of Catholicism and a climactic moment in European history. Clovis led the campaign against the Goths, i.e. Arianism.

But Alfred was certainly a more Christian king than Clovis. At the Battle of Edington in 871, he defeated Guthrum, the Danish King. Guthrum and about thirty of his followers were baptized and swore to remain Christians. Alfred stood as Godfather to Guthrum.



Boethius *On the Consolation of Philosophy* Italy: 1385

Alfred was not only indebted to the explicitly Christian sources of Western Civilization, but also to the classical sources. Similar to the Christian Humanism of the Renaissance, he incorporated the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.

There is the famous quote from Tertullian, "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem." I think it is fair to say that the influence of Christianity on Alfred was stronger than any other single intellectual influence, although one should not overlook that he imbibed much Platonism from his regard for and translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. On the top of this picture Boethius is instructing his students and below he is shown in prison before he is executed by the Arian Ostrogothic king, Theodoric in 524 A.D.

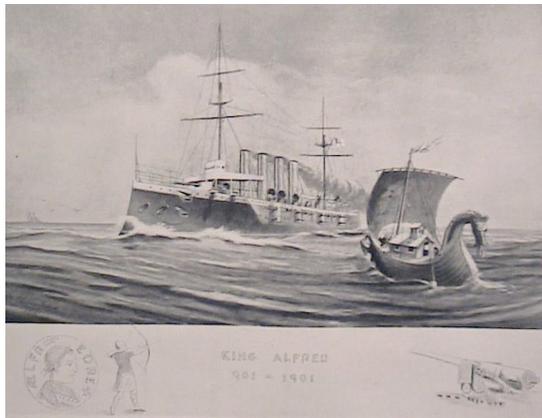
Alfred even softens the Platonic dismissal of wealth in his translation by adding an Aristotelian common sense observation that the liberal use of riches can be virtuous. Alfred wished to enrich both his people and the monarchy in order to make them more virtuous and provide for the common defense.

Alfred's common sense let him to a carefully stated economic sounding statement of what is required for good ruling. In Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* he interpolates this passage:

"Desire for and possession of earthly power never pleased me overmuch, and I did not unduly desire this earthly rule, but that nevertheless I wished for tools and resources for the task that I was commanded to accomplish, which was that I should virtuously and worthily guide and direct the authority which was entrusted to me. You know of course that no one can make known any skill, nor direct and guide any authority, without tools and resources; a man cannot work on any enterprise without resources. In the case of the king, the resources and tools with which to rule are that he have his land fully manned: he must have praying men, fighting men and working men. You also know that without these tools no king may make his ability known. Another aspect of his resources is that he must have the means of support for his tools, the three classes of men. These, then are

their means of support: land to live on, gifts, weapons, food, ale, clothing, and whatever else is necessary for each of the three classes of men. Without these things he cannot maintain the tools, nor without the tools can he accomplish any of the things he was commanded to do. Accordingly, I sought the resources with which to exercise the authority, in order that my skills and power would not be forgotten and concealed: because every skill and every authority is soon obsolete and passed over, if it is without wisdom; because no man may bring to bear any skill without wisdom. For whatever is done unthinkingly, cannot be reckoned a skill. To speak briefly: I desired to live worthily as long as I lived, and to leave after my life, to the men who should come after me, the memory of me in good works."

(Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, chapter XVII. (Keynes & Lapidge, pp 132-33)).



Alfred as Founder of the English Navy

Did Alfred create the English navy? He did engage in a shipbuilding program with vessels of his own design to oppose the Danish longships and a system of fortified towns (buhrs) for defence against land-invaders.

It can be said that the enemies of the Anglo-Saxons and the Carolingians in the 8th and 9th centuries were the Muslims from the south and Pagan Scandinavians from the north. One is tempted to say, "So, what else is new?" Although England was never attacked directly by the Muslims, surely Alfred would have known of their attack on Rome in 846 when Leo IV had briefly to flee Rome. Remember that Leo IV had possibly anointed Alfred when he was five years old.

Many of these themes are pulled together artistically in the Stanza dell'Incendio di Borgo in the Vatican. The paintings from Raphael's workshop, 1514-1517, commemorate Leo X by reminding the viewers of the earlier Leo's. Leo III's coronation of Charlemagne on Christmas Day, 800; the Fire in the Borgo miraculously extinguished by Leo IV in 847; the Battle of Ostia where the Muslims were lost in a storm at sea.

Even if Alfred did not have to confront the Muslims directly, the radical Muslims have not forgotten Alfred the Great, King of the Saxons. Ahmadinejad said Iran has developed a strategic "war preparation plan" for what he calls the "destruction of Anglo-Saxon civilization." Iran's top strategist, Hassan Abbasi is on record stating: "We have a strategy drawn up for the destruction of Anglo-Saxon civilization... we must make use of everything we have at hand to strike at this front by means of our suicide operations or by means of our missiles. There are 29 sensitive sites in the U.S. and in the West. We have already spied on these sites and we know how we are going to attack them."

Free market Thatcherite economic policies are routinely denounced in France and elsewhere as Anglo-Saxon. Tony Blair in speech to the European Parliament in June of 2005 wanted to demolish "the caricature ... that Britain is in the grip of some extreme Anglo Saxon philosophy that tramples on the poor and disadvantaged." It's too bad that Tony did not take the time to study the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of King Alfred the Great.

Even Gordon Brown is trying to find a new British national day, similar to our Fourth of July which will stand for an "expression of British ideas of standing firm in the world in the name of liberty responsibility and fairness." January 2006, The Fabian Society. He could do worse than choose October 26, the day Alfred died and by which he is celebrated as a Saint in the Book of Common Prayer.



G.K. Chesterton

How can we take arms against this sea of troubles? G.K. Chesterton in his epic poem, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, 1911, captured the essential truth of Alfred's eclectic vision in a manner that should inspire us today in a task that is never finished. His preface, which is not published in his collected poetry, contains the best interpretation of the wise use of tradition that I have seen; I quote this at length for a sense of Chesterton's wisdom:

"This ballad needs no historical notes, for the simple reason that it does not profess to be historical. All of it that is not frankly fictitious, as in any prose romance about the past, is meant to emphasize tradition rather than history. King Alfred is not a legend in the sense that King Arthur may be a legend; that is, in the sense that he may possibly be a lie. But

King Alfred is a legend in this broader and more human sense, that the legends are the most important things about him.

The cult of Alfred was a popular cult, from the darkness of the ninth century to the deepening twilight of the twentieth. It is wholly as a popular legend that I deal with him here. I write as one ignorant of everything, except that I have found the legend of a King of Wessex still alive in the land. I will give three curt cases of what I mean. A tradition connects the ultimate victory of Alfred with the valley in Berkshire called the Vale of the White Horse. I have seen doubts of the tradition, which may be valid doubts. I do not know when or where the story started; it is enough that it started somewhere and ended with me; for I only seek to write upon a hearsay, as the old balladists did. For the second case, there is a popular tale that Alfred played the harp and sang in the Danish camp; I select it because it is a popular tale, at whatever time it arose. For the third case, there is a popular tale that Alfred came in contact with a woman and cakes; I select it because it is a popular tale, because it is a vulgar one. It has been disputed by grave historians, who were, I think, a little too grave to be good judges of it. The two chief charges against the story are that it was first recorded long after Alfred's death, and that (as Mr. Oman urges) Alfred never really wandered all alone without any thanes or soldiers. Both these objections might possibly be met. It has taken us nearly as long to learn the whole truth about Byron, and perhaps longer to learn the whole truth about Pepys, than elapsed between Alfred and the first writing of such tales. And as for the other objection, do the historians really think that Alfred after Wilton, or Napoleon after Leipsic, never walked about in a wood by himself for the matter of an hour or two? Ten minutes might be made sufficient for the essence of the story. But I am not concerned to prove the truth of these popular traditions. It is enough for me to maintain two things: that they are popular traditions; and that without these popular traditions we should have bothered about Alfred about as much as we bother about Eadwig.

One other consideration needs a note. Alfred has come down to us in the best way (that is, by national legends) solely for the same reason as Arthur and Roland and the other giants of that darkness, because he fought for the Christian civilization against the heathen nihilism. But since this work was really done by generation after generation, by the Romans before they withdrew, and by the Britons while they remained, I have summarised this first crusade in a triple symbol, and given to a fictitious Roman, Celt, and Saxon, a part in the glory of Ethandune. I fancy that in fact Alfred's Wessex was of very mixed bloods; but in any case, it is the chief value of legend to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition: it telescopes history."

In his poem itself, he captures the essential spirit of Alfred's battle for western civilization and the religious basis for its defense:

The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

The men of the East may search the scrolls
For sure fates and fame,
But the men that drink the blood of God
Go singing to their shame.
The wise men know what wicked things
Are written on the sky,
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings,
Hearing the heavy purple wings,
Where the forgotten Seraph kings
Still plot how God shall die.
"I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.
Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?

To stitch all these themes together, I would like to close with a short video of three and a half minutes, combining most of the images you have seen with some stirring music. The music is from the 18th century *Alfred: A Masque*, libretto by James Thomson (1700–1748) and David Mallet and put to music by Thomas Arne (1710-1778)

Rule, Britannia

WHEN Britain first at Heaven's command
Arose from out the azure main,
This was the charter of her land,
And guardian angels sung the strain:
Rule, Britannia! Britannia rules the waves! 5
Britons never shall be slaves.

The nations not so blest as thee
Must in their turn to tyrants fall,
Whilst thou shalt flourish great and free
The dread and envy of them all. 10

Still more majestic shalt thou rise,
More dreadful from each foreign stroke:
As the loud blast that tears the skies
Serves but to root thy native oak.

Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame; 15
All their attempts to bend thee down
Will but arouse thy generous flame,

And work their woe and thy renown.

To thee belongs the rural reign;
Thy cities shall with commerce shine; 20
All thine shall be the subject main,
And every shore it circles thine!

The Muses, still with Freedom found,
Shall to thy happy coast repair;
Blest Isle, with matchless beauty crown'd 25
And manly hearts to guard the fair:—
Rule, Britannia! Britannia rules the waves!
Britons never shall be slaves!