

2.3 Alfred and the Vikings

Recap

1. Put the following in chronological order in terms of when they controlled Britain. To impress, can you give approximate dates, too?
 - a. The Vikings
 - b. Alfred the Great and his descendants
 - c. The Anglo Saxons
 - d. The Romans
2. Which kingdom did Alfred rule over and can you name any others?
3. Why were the Vikings so feared?

Starter

Below are two objects from the rule of Alfred the Great. What can we learn about Alfred from these two sources?



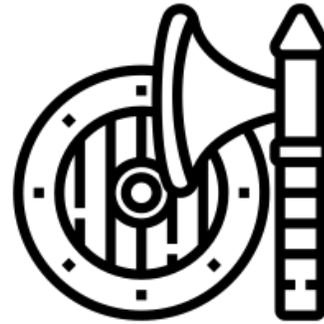
A silver coin from the reign of Alfred. According to the Royal Mint, on the left is a 'stylised portrait of Alfred crude in its execution but nonetheless full of personality'. On the right is a 'skilfully worked arrangement of the name Londonia'.



On the left is the Alfred Jewel, one of the most celebrated objects surviving from Anglo-Saxon England. Its inscription reads **+ÆFLRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN** ('Alfred ordered me to be made').

Why is Alfred known as 'Alfred the Great'?

During the ninth century, the Vikings returned in increasing numbers. By the 860s, it seemed as if the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms might be conquered altogether. Only the kingdom of Wessex stood in their way.



Adapted from 'A History of Britain' by Simon Schama (pg. 56-61).

When Alfred was born in Wessex 849 that kingdom had replaced Mercia as the most dominant Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

The Vikings continued to be a menace, as they had been since the late eighth century. Whilst in the first half of the ninth century, they had tended to land, plunder, and depart, by the 850s their stays were becoming more protracted.

In 850, a fleet which the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle puts as 250 ships, captured Canterbury and London and sent the Mercian king, Berhrtwulf, packing.

Some Anglo-Saxons were able to buy off the Vikings with silver, giving them vast sums in return for a promise of peace. But after a while this no

longer worked. In 864, the ealdormen of Kent had duly coughed up their fee to keep the Vikings at arms' length – the Vikings decided to put the place to the sword anyway, just for the hell of it.

The following year, 865-6, the great Christian kingdom of Northumbria was destroyed at the hands of the biggest Viking fleet Britain had yet seen. York, Northumbria's southern capital, fell in 867.

In 869 it was the turn of Edmund, king of East Anglia. Edmund had grown sick of making payments to the Vikings. He chose instead to resist. He failed and was decapitated and impaled.

It was now obvious to Alfred, who in 871 had become king of Wessex, that he was next.

Key Terms

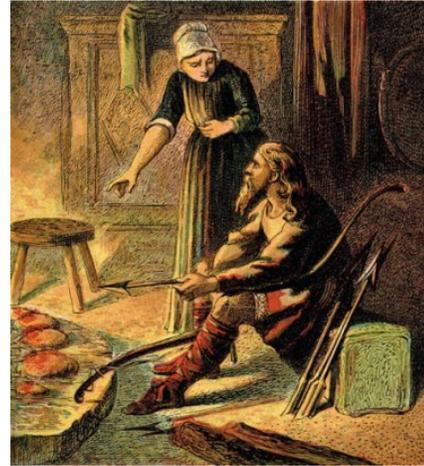
Protracted	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle	Ealdormen	Decapitated
Drawn out for a long period of time	An account of English history written between 890 and 1150. Its authors were anonymous, but they were likely churchmen.	Anglo-Saxon Noblemen	To have one's head cut off

By 876, the Vikings, led by a *jarl* called Guthrum had positioned themselves at Cambridge. Guthrum calculated that from this town he could strike south and west and make Wessex his own.

When the Vikings moved into Wessex, stationing themselves at Gloucester, Alfred knew he had to delay and sought to buy himself time by making treaties and exchanging hostages with Guthrum.

For a while, the tactic seemed to work, but Alfred was pessimistic about holding a pagan like Guthrum to any sworn oath. Sure enough, on Twelfth Night, January 878, Guthrum launched his surprise attack on Chippenham, knowing the Christians would be distracted by religious celebrations. The town was seized, and Alfred fled.

What happened next is at the heart of Arthur’s legend. A fugitive in the swamps of Athelney, Somerset, he began to turn the tide against the enemy, using the inaccessible bogs as a defensive stronghold. Asser describes the prototype of the guerrilla fighter, leading ‘a life of great distress amidst the woody and marshy places of



Somerset [with] nothing to live on except what could be foraged from raids’, reduced to begging hospitality from peasants. The story goes that, whilst taking shelter in the home of a peasant woman, Alfred was asked to watch her cakes (small loaves of bread) as they cooked by the fire. Alfred was so distracted by his problems that he let the cakes burn and received a scolding from the peasant woman.

Humbled and destitute, Alfred’s future looked uncertain.

It is at this moment that he was said to have had a vision or a dream. In it, St Cuthbert appears and gives him assurances that God will see to his eventual victory over the Vikings.

Key Terms

Guthrum	Twelfth Night	Fugitive	Guerrilla
A Viking leader	A celebration that takes place on the Twelfth Night after Christmas	Someone fleeing from captivity or is hiding	A fighter who attacks by surprise, avoids large battles, and often lives off the land/local population

By the spring of 878 Alfred had gathered together an army and he led it to victory over Guthrum's Vikings at Edington. It was a victory so complete that Alfred could drive the Vikings all the way back to Chippenham. Besieged by Alfred's forces, Guthrum capitulated.

This was no ordinary surrender. Guthrum was so impressed by the battle-God, Alfred, that he decided to become Christian and was baptised along with thirty of his warriors. Alfred stood as his godfather and raised Guthrum from the font during the ceremony.

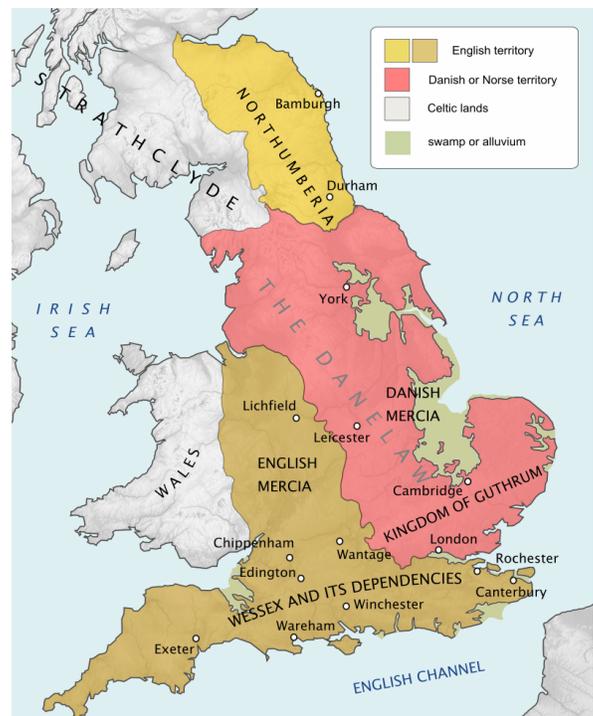
Yet Alfred's victory was over one *jarl*, not over all the Vikings. Alfred was not able to completely liberate Britain, but he was able to strike a deal, forcing the Vikings to settle for much less than half the country (see map). The area the Vikings controlled became known as the Danelaw.

It was, at best, a stand-off, and the Vikings would return. But it was also an important moment in England's history.

In 886, when Alfred entered London, something deeply significant happened. He was, as Asser wrote, acclaimed sovereign lord of 'all the English people not under subjection to the

Danes'. And it was at this time that he began to be called 'King of the Anglo-Saxons'. Some coins of the period go further and style him *rex Anglorum* (king of the English). It was this title with which his grandson, Athelstan, would be crowned in 927.

There can be no doubt that during the life of Alfred the idea of a united English kingdom had become a conceivable and desirable one.



Key Terms

St Cuthbert	Capitulated	Danelaw	Sovereign
An Anglo-Saxon saint	Surrendered	The area of Britain controlled by the Danes (see map)	In this context, a ruler with no one ranked higher

Review and Consolidation

How do each of these images help us tell the story of Alfred and the Vikings?



In the 850s and early 860s, the Vikings returned and started spreading across more of Britain. They removed the Mercian king, Berhtwulf, and killed Edmund, king of East Anglia, when he tried to resist them. By 871, only Wessex remained unconquered, and it was clear to Alfred that he was next.



Discussion Questions

1. From what we have read, what sort of leader was Alfred? What attributes (skills) did he have?
2. Why do you think people find the story of Alfred the Great so appealing?
3. Poet Rudyard Kipling once said, 'If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.' Do you agree with this and, if so, why do you think it is?



