



# ALFRED THE GREAT

**Daniel Anlezark**

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## Abbreviations

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<i>Alfred the Wise</i>	<i>Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately on the Occasion of Her Sixty-fifth Birthday</i> . Edited by Jane Roberts and Janet L. Nelson, with Malcolm Godden. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997.
<i>EHD</i>	<i>English Historical Documents: Volume 1, c. 500-1042</i> , 2nd ed. Translated by Dorothy Whitelock. London: Eyre Methuen, 1979.
Lapidge and Keynes	Michael Lapidge and Simon Keynes. <i>Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources</i> . Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983.
Reuter	<i>Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conference</i> . Edited by Timothy Reuter. Studies in Early Medieval Britain 3. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

## Preface

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This small book is about one of the great figures of history. Alfred the Great was king of Wessex—the southern part of present-day England—from 871 until his death in 899, during a period often called the “Dark Ages,” though perhaps better called the early Middle Ages. This foundational moment of European history is not famous for its contributions to human development and is increasingly neglected in schools and universities. The period began with the collapse of Roman rule in the west in the fifth century. It was a difficult time, when people lived through rapid economic decline, falling living standards, social fragmentation, and an international order rooted in violence. Across the following centuries a handful of rulers attempted to restore something like the old order, and others attempted to create something new. One of these was Alfred. Alfred fought against Vikings who wished to overrun his country, but his response was not only to fight back on the battlefield, but to surround himself with the greatest minds that he could find, at home and abroad. Alfred’s cultural renewal inspired his contemporaries, and left a legacy in the area of law, literature, and education that underpins many of our global society’s highest aspirations to this day. Alfred’s Wessex was not Baghdad under Harun al-Rashid, or Italy in the Trecento; his resources were far more limited, but

his vision was also great. This book tells Alfred's story, but does so in the awareness that he has been the object of historical study for more than a thousand years, and any book about him could easily be thousands of pages long. Furthermore, many of the historical sources for Alfred's reign are closely associated with his court or that of his successors, and historians have noted their polemical character. With what I hope is due caution, I have focused on these primary sources in the account that follows. In particular these are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (the *Chronicle*) and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. I have aimed to be concise rather than omit details in offering a new reading of aspects of Alfred's life. The first chapter explores the genesis of the Alfredian legend and tries to understand his early life. The second chapter is concerned chiefly with his wars with the Vikings and his role in redefining England. The final chapter reconsiders Alfred's contribution to English literary history. The inflection given to Alfred's story by Asser and the chronicler reflects the king's own ideological and political program, and this requires caution when reading them. The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury felt he had to apologize to readers for the barbarity of Anglo-Saxon names. We are more sensitive about cultural difference, but for the reader unaccustomed to early English history, names can present a challenge. Many names in the West Saxon royal family begin with the component "Æthel-", which means "noble." Anglo-Saxon names usually have meanings: Alfred's father was Æthelwulf, meaning "noble-wolf," cognate with the Germanic "Adalwolf," which has become "Adolf." More than one Æthelwulf appears in this book, beside Æthelreds and Æthelstans. Alfred's name, unique among Æthelwulf's sons, does not begin with "noble." His contemporaries would have heard his name with meaning—"Ælf-ræd"—"elf-counsel." The reader can pursue the meanings of others.

I would like to thank those who have encouraged and supported this project. Francis Leneghan, Anya Adair, Margaret Rogerson, and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe read the book in draft, and rescued me from some errors. The format of this series requires brevity and asks authors to keep footnotes to a minimum, meaning that my pervasive debt to the work of some scholars is greater than it might seem to the reader. The anonymous readers for the series offered suggestions that have both tightened the argument and made the book better. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Anne Rogerson, for putting up with Alfred around the house.



Alfred's England, ca. 890.