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Before England was England: The Anglo-Saxons in Britain from the End of the Roman Empire Down to the Reign of King Alfred the Great

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BEFORE ENGLAND WAS ENGLAND: THE ANGLO-SAXONS IN BRITAIN FROM THE END OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE DOWN TO THE REIGN OF KING ALFRED THE GREAT

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Abstract

The collapse of Roman power in the West sent reverberations throughout Europe that would continue to be felt for another thousand years. By the time of its demise in AD 410, Roman rule had endured in Britain for almost four centuries. The original inhabitants of the island known to the Romans as 'Britannia' were of Celtic stock and spoke languages which resemble Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic as spoken today. English – literally, the language of the Angles – was unknown in Britain during Rome's apogee. A Germanic tongue closely related to modern Frisian, English made its first appearance in Britain towards the end of the Roman period, at a time when Roman authority in western Europe was fragmenting and when barbarian invaders from across the North Sea started to infiltrate the province of Britannia. The cause of Rome's decline is still disputed. In an earlier paper published in this series ('Why Did Rome End?'), I argued that the demise of Rome's suzerainty in the West owed itself not to long-term underlying factors but rather to unforeseen contingencies connected with Hunnic migrations across the Eurasian Steppe. In this paper, I explore the fate of one of Rome's most highly prized ex-provinces in the centuries that followed the withdrawal of her legions from Britannia and the abandonment of a people by that stage substantially Romanised. I argue that a concept of Englishness was late in the making and forged in response to Viking invasions which began at the tail-end of the eighth century. Though iconic as an English hero, King Alfred of Wessex fashioned a national identity that was, in various ways, ideological and that did not in any meaningful sense reflect the political or cultural realities of the earlier Anglo-Saxon period. Like many national identities, 'Englishness' is essentially an artificial construct that emerged through historical contingency.

I: The Anglo-Saxon Settlement in Britain

The people to whom we refer as 'the English' first appeared in Britain in the mid fifth century, after Roman civilisation in the West had tottered and Roman legions had evacuated the island. The term derives from one of the three predominant tribes from Lower Germany who arrived in boats from 430 or thereabouts – the Angles – who settled in what is today Norfolk, Suffolk, the Midlands, and Northumbria. The English, in origin, were a synthesis of three tribal groups who arrived in Britain from Lower Germany at the end of the Roman period – the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes, who settled different portions of what had been the Roman province of Britannia. These peoples have gone down in history as barbarian invaders, replacing an indigenous language and culture with their own. Reality, of course, is never so simple. One of the most difficult and vexing questions is how far it makes sense to speak of an 'England' before King Alfred of Wessex, ('the Great') some four centuries after the arrival of the first English-speaking peoples. Even after Alfred's time, the notion of an 'English' nation was at best fragile, and it was not until William of Normandy, in the eleventh century, that a politically unified entity called 'England', under a single crown with a centralised judicial, fiscal, and administrative system, finally emerged. Until then, England's claim to national status was tenuous, if not illusory. The arrival of Saxons and their related kindred in Britain did not immediately herald a self-conscious English nation which emerged out of the embers of the Roman Empire. Instead, 'England' as a political, linguistic, legal, and cultural idea took centuries after the Settlement to forge.[1]

The end of Roman power in Britain is a matter of ongoing debate. Most of the written evidence relating to this ill-documented period is either of later provenance or of dubious reliability. The most contemporary written Latin source for the political and military configuration of Roman Empire of the late fourth and early fifth centuries consists of the *Notitia Dignitatum* (literally, 'List of Offices'), which details the governmental and legionary structure of the Roman power in the East (dating from around 395) and in the West (dating from around 420). This late imperial document survives to us in a later fifteenth-century illuminated copy, commissioned by the Italian Renaissance scholar Pietro Donato in 1436, and housed today in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.[2] The document is not without its difficulties, and the fact that the administrative catalogue for the western half of the empire seems to have been compiled some ten years after the collapse of Roman power in Britain is itself suspect.

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[1] For a general overview of the period from 410 to 1066, see M. Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons* (Penguin, 2021).

[2] There are other copies of this document surviving from the sixteenth century which were copied from the now lost *Codex Spiriensis* housed in Speyer Cathedral in 1542. For recent discussions of its publication, meaning, and significance, see B. Brenk, 'Notitia dignitatum', in I.H. Garipzanov., C. Goodson, H. Maguire, (eds.), *Graphic signs of identity, faith, and power in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages* (Brepolis, 2017), 109-124; W. Eger 'Notitia dignitatum' in J.F. LePree, L. Djukic (eds.), *The Byzantine Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia.* (Santa Barbara and Denver, 2019: vol.2), 94-95; S. Belocchi, S. Carminati, A. Mariani, 'La distribuzione degli opifici di Stato nella Notitia Dignitatum. La fabrica L[e]ucensis Spatharia.' *Latomus* 81 (2022), 19-86.

Nevertheless, the evidence it provides for a reduction of legionary capability in what is now Wales and Chester can claim contemporary archaeological support. By the end of the fourth century, archaeology suggests that large fortress structures in Britain which had sustained Roman legions in previous centuries were fast dwindling in size.[1] The cause is uncertain, though it has been conjectured that with the incremental menace of Sassanid Persia in the East at the end of the fourth century, military manpower was transferred to Rome's eastern frontier from the western provinces. Numismatic evidence further indicates that, from 382, the minting of coins in Britain all but dried up and that new coin had to be imported from the mainland, principally from the imperial mint at Mediolanum (modern Milan) in northern Italy. Mediolanum itself came under attack in 402 at the hands of Gothic marauders under Alaric's leadership, whereupon the principal mint was transferred to the western imperial capital at Ravenna, the administrative hub occupied by the incompetent emperor in the West, Honorius, the younger son of the late eastern emperor Theodosius I and brother of the reigning emperor in the East, Arcadius.[2] From 402, Italian coin had ceased to reach Britain *tout court*. The loss to Britain of the Italian coinage supply had dire consequences, because the army now could not be paid and, as late imperial coins discovered in the Hoxne Hoard indicate, had to be remunerated in clipped and debased currencies.[3]

Literary sources depict Roman Britain in the first decade of the fifth century in a state of political turmoil, with one provincial governor after the next being deposed and replaced.[4] Writing about a hundred years afterwards, the Constantinopolitan historian Zosimus records that Britain at the start of the fifth century experienced an emerging power vacuum, with many embarking on looting missions in quest of food and necessities and arming themselves against invading tribes, in lieu of a standing army to protect them.[5] Even if exaggerated, the picture which Zosimus paints is one of a disintegration of law and order prompted, it would seem, by a worsening economic crisis which had resulted in the collapse of the Roman military and, in consequence, of the whole political governance of Roman Britain. The time was ripe for raiding missions from across the sea. As the Germanic tribes poured across the Rhine and Danube into the heart of the continental empire, from 408 the island of Britain faced a comparable menace at the hands of a tribe from lower Germany, known as 'Saxons'.

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[1] See P.J. Casey, 'The fourth century and beyond', in P. Salway (ed.), *The Roman Era*: *The British Isles 55 BC to 410 AD* (Oxford, 2002), 75-94.

[2] G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2007), 187-8, 201-2.

[3] The so-called 'Hoxne Hoard' consists of a large collection of buried money dating from the end of the Roman period in what is now Suffolk, excavated by Eric Lawes in 1992 (for an account, see the obituary of Eric Lawes in *The Guardian* (23 July 2015). For more general discussions of the hoard and its historical significance, see C. Johns and R. Bland, 'The Hoxne late Roman treasure', *Britannia* 25 (1994), 165-73; R. Bland, 'Hoarding in the Iron Age and Roman Britain: The puzzle of the late Roman period', *British Numismatic Journal* 84 (2014), 30-6.

[4] For a more general overview of the evidence, see A.R. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 456-60; G. Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages* (Oxford, 2013), 12-13.

[5] Zosimus, *New History* (ed. R.T. Ridley (Canberra, 1982), 128-9; see also B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), 48-9.

Much of the evidence for these Germanic newcomers comes not from Britain but from the neighbouring Roman province of Gaul (modern France). In 455, a Gallo-Roman aristocrat by the name of Sidonius Apollinarius alludes to Saxon pirates plundering the British coastline in their stitched boats.[1] A generation or so earlier, a Gallo-Roman Bishop called Germanus of Auxerre, having crossed the Channel to combat heresy, helped the beleaguered Britons against Pictish and Saxon incursions.[2]

That Roman Britain at this time faced an existential crisis is beyond doubt. From much later, in the ninth century, English scholars serving in the court of King Alfred began to compile a national history in their own native tongue, known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which continued to be updated well into the twelfth century, almost a hundred years after the Norman Conquest. The *Chronicle* claims that the first Saxon appearance on the island of Britain came about in the year 449 with the arrival of two brothers, Hengist and Horsa, on the invitation of a local British chieftain by the name of Vortigern. The second brother was killed in battle with Vortigern, but the first, who survived, became king of Kent. The story first appears in the account of the Venerable Bede writing a century before the time of Alfred, who relates similar stories about Saxon warriors arriving in fleets consisting of three boats to create the kingdoms of Sussex and Wessex, which the *Chronicle* repeats with confused dates.[3] Bede relates that once the earliest Saxon invaders met with success, they sent word to their kinsmen in Lower Germany that Britain, rich in agriculture, was ripe for the taking, which resulted in hordes of invaders settling the land and massacring the indigenous population.[4] Modern scholarship has been disposed to doubt the legend, partly because the tradition of Hengist and Horsa belongs locally to Kent, partly because the name Vortigern, which means something like 'High Ruler' in Brittonic, is almost certainly apocryphal.[5] Yet, even if Bede gave an embellished legend, a much earlier source might indicate that the story, however embroidered, contains some element of veracity. The earliest account of the arrival of Saxons on the shores of Britain comes not from a Saxon but from a British source, a parchment containing a letter by a local Briton named Geldas titled *The Ruin of Britain*, exhorting his British countrymen to rise and resist the Saxon invader. According to the account, the Saxons arrived in three boats on the eastern shoreline of Britain and eventually ravished the land.[6] Though the parchment is not securely dated, the consensus view places it somewhere in the second quarter of the sixth century, roughly two centuries before Bede and some three before Alfred, making it a much more reliable witness.[7] What distinguishes Geldas

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[1] Sidonius Apollinarius, *Letters*, trans. O.M. Dalton, vol. 2 (1915), 149.
[2] 'The Life of St Germanus of Auxerre', in T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1995), 85-91.
[3] D. Whitlock (ed.), *English Historical Documents, c.500-1042* (Oxford, 1979), 152-5.
[4] B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds), Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford 1969), 40-1, 48-53.
[5] Horsall, *Worlds*, 15, 60; P. Heather, *Empires and Barbarians* (2009), 124, 282; 6.
[6] Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works* (ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom, 1978), 17, 22, 26-7.
[7] H. Wiseman, 'The derivation of the date of the Badon entry in the *Annales Cambriae* from Bede and Gildas', *Parergon* 17 (2000), 1-10.

from the later authors who drew on a similar tradition is the claim that the Saxons originally appeared not as invaders but as invitees. This is not improbable in the light of the Roman practice of using barbarian mercenaries to police their frontiers. Bede places the arrival of the first Saxons in the reign of the western emperor Marcian, who ascended the throne in 449. Archaeology indicates that Saxons were already in Britain by around 430.[1] An even earlier and nearly contemporary source, *The Gallic Chronicle of 452*, though saying nothing about an invasion, attests a Saxon uprising against the Britons in 441.[2]

Together, the sources show that the native British population faced a major disruption in the mid fifth century after the departure of the last Roman legions. Whether the Saxons had arrived as invaders or as peaceful settlers, political turbulence is in evidence by the middle of the century, and the sources indicate that the main source of division was racial. According to Gildas, the Britons elected a Roman noble called Ambrosius Aurelianus to lead them against the Saxon insurgents. After defeating the Saxons in battle, peace was restored.[3] This tradition is repeated later by Bede, who places the events described in the reign of the eastern emperor Zeno (474-491).[4] The evidence is just too fragmentary and remote to enable any authoritative inference from it. Other examples from the late Roman world of newcomers settling peacefully within the borders of the empire and later facing reprisals, such as that of the Goths who settled in the Danube basin in the 360s and 370s, only to meet with ethnic cleansing at the hands of Roman armies subsequently, could indicate that the Saxons were not perpetrators but victims of a local population which had initially allowed them to settle peacefully but later turned upon them. If so, the tradition of a 'Saxon invasion' of Britain has been largely exaggerated. More interesting, however, is the evidence of archaeology, which might suggest that far from being a two-way split between a 'Saxon east' and a 'British west', Britain in the mid fifth century was more like a patchwork of different ethnicities living in proximity to one another which, even if not intermingling, lived side by side in relatively peaceful conditions. The best indication comes from funerary practices. Though the Britons had centuries earlier practised cremation, from the third century AD onward their preferred method of disposing of the dead was inhumation. The Saxons, in contrast, as burial sites from northern Germany between the Elbe and Weser rivers indicate, were given to the method of cremation, as the concentration of funerial urns at burial sites signifies. From around 430, cremation makes a re-appearance in Britain, one of the most thoroughly excavated sites being Spong Hill in what is now Norfolk.[5] But the Saxons also practised a burial method known as 'furnished inhumation', where bodies were interred with grave goods in tow. Two principal styles of furnished inhumation emerge in eastern Britain from around 430: the first is known as the 'Saxon Relief

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[1] M. Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1993), 101-2.
[2] Birley, *Roman Government*, 464.
[3] Gildas, 27-8.
[4] Wiseman, 'Derivation', 7, 9.
[5] Horsall, *Worlds*, 26-30, 104, 223-34.

Style' which appears in the area around the Humber; the second, in evidence in the region around the Thames, is known as the 'Quoit Brooch Style' and is more reminiscent of old Romano-British culture.[1] The second of these is significant for cultural cross-fertilisation.

How should the archaeology best be interpreted? The traditional view was that Saxons arrived in Britain in droves, massacred the local population *en masse*, and in eastern England initiated a wholesale cultural displacement of the indigenous British people.[2] In the 1960s, that position was questioned on the basis that the figures of people arriving from across the North Sea cannot have been greater than that of the local British inhabitants, and that what the Quoit Brooch Style signifies is a cultural transfer among the British elite, which began to adopt Saxon burial practices and, perhaps, the Saxon language.[3] Recent DNA analysis from teeth and bones of inhumed bodies indicates that at least some of those buried in eastern England in the fifth and sixth centuries were of Germanic origin, though it is impossible to know the numbers with any degree of certainty.[4] But even if there had been a significant migration into Britain from Germany, it remains highly unlikely that the numbers of migrants even nearly matched those of the indigenous British population in the late imperial period. The etymology of the English language reveals no more than about thirty native Brittonic words, which itself indicates that the newcomers did not integrate with the pre-existent population. This stands in marked contrast to the fate of other ex-Roman provinces, such as Gaul, Spain, and Italy, where the barbarian hordes intermingled and adopted the language and culture of the Romans whose power they had displaced. If the Saxons did not eliminate aboriginal British settlements, they did not mingle with them or adapt to their way of life. Place names like Walton - literally, 'Welsh town', where 'Welsh' signifies the Gallic (*i.e.* non-English) population – in modern England would imply that British settlements survived in dotted areas, and that self-contained communities of Saxons and Britons lived cheek by jowl without intermingling.

The earliest sources speak of Saxons arriving in Britain, and little mention has yet been made of the other two tribal groups who, together with the Saxons, eventually made up what came to be known as the English nation – the Angles and Jutes. Two centuries later, Bede attests that the peoples who settled Kent were Jutes, whilst the settlers of East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria were Angles and those of Wessex, Sussex, and Essex Saxons. The last of these – the Saxons – as their name implies, emigrated from Saxony in what is today Germany; the Jutes came from Jutland in today's Denmark, whilst the Angles came from the middle lands, the Angeln.[5] Though

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[1] H. Williams, 'Cemeteries' as central places – Place and identity in Migration Period Eastern England', in L. Larsson and B. Hårdh (eds.), *Central Places in the Migration and Merovingian Periods* (Stockholm, 2002), 341-62.

[2] B. Ward-Perkins, 'Why did the Anglo-Saxons not become more British? *English History Review*115 (2000), 518-21.

[3] Halsall, *Worlds*, 103-13.

[4] N.J. Higham and M.J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven, 2013), 87-91.

[5] Bede 50-1.

these clean distinctions are tempting, archaeology paints a more complex picture. Saxon brooches are found all over Britain, and some artefacts dug up in what is today East Anglia are found in other parts of the island.[1] What archaeology also reveals, however, is a significant migration from Scandinavia in the later part of the fifth century, some three centuries before the fateful arrival of the Vikings. Wrist clasps found in what is now Norway are attested in the area around the Humber and Wash and eventually over East Anglia. From the end of the fifth century, the Quoit Brooch Style disappears, and a new style which used the geometric forms of animals comes into fashion, which indicates that the inhabitants of that region were starting to identify as 'Saxon'.[2] The material evidence indicates that the religion of these new settlers was pagan, which stood in stark contrast to the Christian religion of the Romanised Britons. Gildas attests that the latter took refuge in the western parts of the island, in what is today Wales and Cornwall, and continued as far as possible to lead a Roman lifestyle. In this case, archaeology supports the literary testimony, as remains of amphorae imported from the eastern Mediterranean dating from the fifth and sixth centuries have been discovered in Tintangel in the far south-west, in Wales, and elsewhere in the West Country. Yet, with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the quantity of imported goods from the continent sharply deteriorated at this time. There is abundant evidence that in the fifth century, some of the Romanised Britons reoccupied Iron Age forts and used artefacts recycled from earlier centuries. One example is Cadbury Congresbury along the River Severn, which used items of pottery and glass from the century previous.[3] According to Gildas, the principal threat to the Britons was the Saxons in the East, with whom they were engaged in a protracted war of attrition until the British victory over the Saxons at Badon Hill.[4] The witness of Gildas to the ruin of Romano-British settlements is borne out by archaeology. London, Lincoln, and York by the end of the fifth century had crumbled into nothingness and were virtually derelict.[5]

The Anglo-Saxon Settlement marked a time of cataclysmic change in British history. An island which had been governed mainly peacefully for four hundred years under the aegis of Roman power was left to the depredations of Saxon hordes who imposed their own language, culture, and way of life upon an island which was foreign. Though archaeology suggests that the newcomers distinguished themselves markedly from the aboriginal British populations whom they displaced, we do not yet have evidence of an 'English' identity emerging. The first sign of an 'English' people appears several centuries later in the writings of Bede and was propagated politically a century after that by Alfred of Wessex, as a rallying cry to the peoples of Wessex

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[1] J. Hines, 'The becoming of the English: Identity, material culture and language in early Anglo-Saxon England', *ASSAH* 7 (1994), 50-2.

[2] Hines, 'Becoming', 52-3; Halsall, *Worlds* 267-9.

[3] R. Fleming, *Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400 to 1070* (2010), 32-5; Ward-Perkins, *Fall*, 117-20.

[4] Gildas, 28.

[5] Fleming, *Britain*, 28; R. Naismith, *Citadel of the Saxons: The Rise of Early London* (London, 2019), 43; K. Leahy, *The Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Lindsey* (Stroud, 2007), 25-6.

and Mercia to resist the new onslaught of the Vikings in the ninth century. The next section looks at the developmental period of English history when independent kingdoms took shape in Britain, with kings and rulers who were fiercely competitive and separatist.

II: The establishment of the kingdoms

In his magisterial treatise titled *History of the English*, the twelfth-century priest and scholar Henry of Huntingdon wrote that the Anglo-Saxon settlement resulted in the creation of seven kingdoms known to modern historians as 'the heptarchy' – Kent, Sussex, Essex, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria.[1] Much earlier, in the eighth century, Bede gives witness to at least twelve kingdoms, though even this may be inaccurate.[2] Archaeology provides a rather different picture. Little in the material record dating from the end of the fifth century indicates a society that was sharply divided socially.[3] This changed dramatically in the last third of the sixth century, when suddenly archaeology indicates a rapid drop in number of furnished burials but, conversely, a sharp rise in number of extremely ostentatious burial sites. Historians have connected this to the emergence of English placenames ending in '-ing' (*e.g.* Reading, meaning 'Reada's people'), where the name of the settlement may have been taken from a military leader in a ruling elite.[4] Consensus belief now is that over the two centuries that followed the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, there was a concentration of wealth in the hands of a small ruling warriors, who became the *de facto* aristocracy in the kingdoms and fiefdoms over which they governed. This is of course a theory, but when gravesites start to indicate lavish funereal rites, it is natural to associate this with a widening socio-economic rift. An intriguing document known as the 'Tribal Hidage' lists thirty-five tribes in England sometime between the seventh and ninth centuries. The document whose original form is now lost comes down to us via later manuscript copies, the earliest of which dates from the eleventh century. Though historians debate its real significance, the majority holds that it was a list of assessments in terms of hides for territories south of the Humber.[5] Intriguing about the list is that it casts Wessex, assessed at 100,000 hides, as vastly richer and more prosperous than its neighbours further to the north and east.[6] Because we know so little about the list or what it really means, historical inferences from it can, at best, be tentative. But, if it is true that some regions were growing vastly richer than others in the period stretching from the seventh to the mid eighth century, when the list is

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[1] Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. D. Greenway (Oxford, 1996), 16-17.

[2] D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 2000), 4-7.

[3] Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, 91-5.

[4] J.M. Dodgson, 'The significance of the distribution of the English place-name in *-ingas, -inga* in south-east England', *Medieval Archaeology* 10 (1966), 1-29.

[5] D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London and New York, 2000), 9.

[6] B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York, 1990).

roughly dated, it would be reasonable to infer that the Anglo-Saxon world at that time was a patchwork of fiercely independent and competitive communities, each seeking to impose its power and influence on the others. If so, the impression we should draw of 'England' at this time is not of a united nation forged in a common cultural identity, but a quilt of smaller, warlike kingdoms, each striving for pre-eminence in a world of slender natural resources.

Writing in 731, Bede is our earliest and most reliable source for the identity of these early kings. The king of the South Saxons was a man named Ælle. The West Saxons were led by Ceawlin, while Kent was ruled by Æthelberht, the first of the English kings to convert to Christianity.[1] It has been speculated that the last of these, a Jute, had Scandinavian origins, a hypothesis confirmed by the evidence of grave goods in the eastern part of Kent which follow a style more reminiscent of those found in parts of Denmark and Norway than in the Saxon parts of England.[2] What is also clear from the archaeological record is that the Kentish kings were trading extensively with Gaul, which by this stage was becoming known as Francia.[3] This trading link was cemented by a marriage tie in the late 570s between Æthelberht and a Frankish princess called Bertha.[4] Because Bertha was a Christian, Æthelberht used his wealth to build her a new place of worship at the neglected Roman town of Durovernum, now referred to as 'Cantwaraburh' ('the stronghold of the Kentish people'), or, by us, 'Canterbury'.[5] Bede relates that in 597 a Roman monk called Augustine arrived on the Isle of Thanet in eastern Kent on a mission to convert the English. By the end of the next year, Bede reports that over 10,000 of Æthelberht's subjects had converted.[6] The Frankish link was vastly important also to the establishment of Æthelberht's wealth, because of the copious amounts of gold that were flowing into Gaul at that time from Constantinople. Archaeology reveals the extent of wealth and luxury to which the early rulers were exposed. At Kingston Down in Kent, a female grave site belonging to a wealthy aristocrat contains a beautiful gold brooch inlaid with glass.[7]

A similar story of power consolidation emerges further to the north, in the kingdom of Northumbria, under the auspices of a certain king called Æthelfrith, who according to Bede, extended his power over the region by military methods and engaged in extensive fighting with the Britons.[8] Not only did he turn northward into what is now Scotland, but he warred also with Anglo-Saxon neighbours to the south, into the kingdom of Deira ruled over by Æthelric.[9] Æthelric's son, Eadwine, took refuge in East Anglia with its king Rædwald, who engaged with Æthelfrith on the River Idle

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[1] Bede, 148-9.
[2] M. Welch, 'Anglo-Saxon Kent to AD 800', *The Archaeology of Kent to AD 800* (Woodbridge, 2007), 209-20.
[3] Welch, 'Anglo-Saxon Kent', 191-2.
[4] Welch, *loc. cit.*
[5] N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (Leicester, 1984), 5-6, 21-5.
[6] Bede, 72-9.
[7] L. Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art* (Ithaca, 2012), 55-7.
[8] Bede, 74-7.
[9] Bede, 60.

and slew him.[1] Bede lists Rædwald as the fourth in the list of over-kings, who protected southern Britain against the depredations of Æthelfrith of Bernicia.[2] The fashion for lavish burials is attested archaeologically further to the south, in Essex. At Prittlewell, a tomb dating from the early part of the seventh century has been discovered, with an inner chamber measuring four square metres. It contains a fantastic array of grave goods, including gilded crosses, which would imply the influence of Christianity among the rich rulers of the region.[3] The famous Sutton Hoo find in East Anglia reveals dazzling wealth, including drinking-horns, gold-embossed shields, silver dishes, bottles, and other household utensils.[4] Historians have speculated that this treasure belonged to none other than Rædwald of East Anglia, though there is no firm evidence to make the claim certain. But what is most significant about the Sutton Hoo find is that it furnishes strong evidence for a Scandinavian connection in the House of the Wuffings, the family from which Rædwald came. There is little evidence that Saxons buried their dead in ships, whereas there is strong evidence that such a practice was common in Scandinavia at the time, largely because a sea journey represented the conveyance from this life to the next. This lies in references in the famous epic *Beowulf*, dated to the tenth century, to King Scyld, the founding father of the Danish royal family, whose dying wish was to be escorted to the next life across the sea.[5] The sensational wealth of these early rulers which is now incontrovertibly attested by archaeology puts paid to the once-held view that early Anglo-Saxon England was impoverished or isolated. Though the material prosperity of the Early Middle Ages was still not comparable to that of the Roman Empire at its height, it would be crass to claim that the Anglo-Saxon kings were peasant rulers. Evidence of archaeology shows beyond question that early England was, at least in some quarters, very prosperous.

The later testimony of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions rulers called *bretwaldas* who ruled over the whole of Britain. Almost certainly, this is hyperbole. No doubt, many of the early kings became very rich and powerful within their own spheres of influence, but there is little good reason to think of England at this stage as being unified under a single leadership, or 'high king'. Bede testifies to large palace dwellings, particularly in connection with Eadwine of Northumbria, who lived in a large, fortified dwelling at Yeavering in the Cheviot Hills. Since the Second World War, excavations have revealed such a place in the same location which Bede identified.[6] Its hall was about eighty feet long and fifty feet wide. Other similar structures are in evidence in Northumbria, at places such as Sprouston, Doon Hill, and Bamburgh. Further to the south, in Kent, similar structures appear at Lyminge and in Hampshire

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[1] Bede, 174-81.
[2] Bede, 148-51, 179-80, 212-13.
[3] L. Blackmoor, I. Blair, S. Hirst, C. Scull, *The Prittleworth Princely Burial: Excavations at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, 2003* (London, 2019).
[4] M. Carver, *The Sutton Hoo Story: Encounters with Early England* (Woodbridge, 2017), 8-14, 129-34, 191, 195.
[5] *Beowulf*, lines 34-42, 3158.
[6] Bede, 188-9; B. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (Liverpool, 2009).

at Cowdery's Down.[1] At this time, the most powerful king among the Anglo-Saxons was doubtless Eadwine, who made war not only on his Anglo-Saxon neighbours but also upon the Britons living further to the west. In 633, the British ruler of Gwyneth, Cadwallon, made war on Eadwine and killed him in battle.[2] According to Bede, Cadwallon went on a mission to rid Britain of the Anglo-Saxons once and for all. Cadwallon managed to subdue Northumbria entirely and placed the son of Æthelfrith, Eanfrith, on the throne of Bernicia, upon whose untimely death the throne passed to Osric. The latter put up temporary resistance to Cadwallon in 634, but to little avail, and eventually the British warlord marched into Northumbria to establish direct rule. The second son of Æthelfrith, Oswald, revolted against Cadwallon and killed him in battle.[3] Further to the south, in Mercia, King Penda, who had joined with Oswald to rid Northumbria of the menace of Cadwallon, turned against his former ally. Bede attests that they clashed at a place called Maserfelth, perhaps Oswestry in Shropshire, where Oswald won a victory and had the head of Penda impaled on a stake.[4] According to Bede, the death of Penda was a turning point in the victory of Christianity in England, because Penda was the last of the pagan Anglo-Saxons.[5] Bede relates that Penda's armies ravished Northumbria as far as the Firth of Forth, whereupon Oswald offered peace and a quantity of treasure to boot. Penda refused the bribe and pressed on against his northern foe, whereupon he lost his life at Heavenfield. A variant tradition exists in a ninth-century document called *History of the Britons*, according to which Penda did accept the gift.[6] In 2009, a truly spectacular find known as the Staffordshire Hoard, unearthed in the village of Hammerwich, reveals a collection of treasure containing five kilograms of gold and about 2 kilograms of silver, including military items such as war-helmets and swords, all exquisitely decorated. Historians have speculated on the identity of the Staffordshire Hoard with Penda's gift, though there are too few secure connections.[7]

For all its division and bloodshed, the first two centuries of the Anglo-Saxon Settlement give witness to a rapid expansion of wealth and material culture. The great treasure hoards which recent decades have excavated illustrate that the early Anglo-Saxons, far from being primitive or uncultured barbarians, soon developed an exquisite taste in material finery which became the envy of Europe. Where the wealth came from is largely a matter for speculation. Nevertheless, the case of the rulers of Kent, as well as the Sutton Hoo discovery, indicates that England was not isolated economically or commercially from the outside. Trade and commerce with the continent must have been happening at a considerable pace, and this would imply that the communities which had taken shape in the ruins of Roman Britain became settled

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[1] J. Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton and Oxford, 2018), 114-31.
[2] Bede, 148-9, 162-3, 202-5.
[3] Bede, 212-17.
[4] Bede, 288-93.
[5] Bede, 292-3.
[6] J. Campbell, 'Bede I', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), 13.
[7] See the collection of essays in C. Fern, T. Dickinson, L, Webster (eds.), *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure* (London, 2019).

and civilised. A sense of 'England' was still in the making. By the time of Bede in the early eighth century, the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain were still independent, though no doubt trade between them would have been a vital part of their economic growth and efflorescence.

III: The consolidation of Mercia

The seventh century, at the tail-end of which Bede lived, was a time of radical religious and cultural transformation for England. In 664, on the prompting of the Roman papacy, a synod of Christian bishops met from all over Britain and Ireland to discuss reforms to the monastical discipline and the date of Easter. The driving force behind reform was Wilfred, a monk from Lindisfarne in Northumbria, whose biographer details a mission to Rome in the late 640s, pro-papal affiliations, and zeal to bring Christianity in Britain, still a fledgling religion among the Anglo-Saxons, to the Roman standard.[1] At stake was radical difference between the styles of the Celtic and Roman traditions over tonsures, use of horses, and points of theological doctrine. Bede explains in a treatise titled *The Reckoning of Time* that the Anglo-Saxons referred to the fourth months of the year as 'Eostremonath' after their pagan goddess Eostre and continued to do so after their conversion to Christianity. In the seventh century, a controversy arose in the Church as to the precise date of Easter, whether it should take place on the day after Passover, which in the Jewish calendar always fell on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan, or whether it should always fall on a Sunday. In the fourth century, Rome had ruled that Easter should always fall on a Sunday regardless of which day Passover fell. But then a debate arose as to what to do if Passover itself fell on a Sunday, whether Easter should be celebrated on the same Sunday or on the next. The habit in Britain hitherto had been to allow Easter and Passover to coincide if necessary.[2] This led to a division in Northumbria, whose king, Oswiu, adhered to the teachings of Lindisfarne, but whose Kentish wife, Eanflæd, followed the Roman rule. The Synod of Witby resulted in a victory for the Romanist party, but Wilfred, whose religious stance put him in conflict with the ruler of Northumbria, found that his political position in his native land became unstable and moved to Francia, at the Court of King Clothar III.[3]

The death of Wilfred on 24 April 710 saw England in a divided state. The southern kingdoms had little difficulty accepting the Roman ruling on Easter, but Northumbria remained committed to the older habit. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede draws up a list of the bishops administering in the southern lands of Wessex, Essex, Sussex, East Anglia, Lindsey, and the Isle of Wight, but notes that all of these had

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[1] Stephen of Ripon, *The Life of Wilfred*.
[2] H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 1977), 103-5; C. Corning, *Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Church*, (New York and Basingstoke, 2006), 4-13.
[3] Bede, 308-9, 314-7; Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfred*, 118.

fallen subject to the kingdom of Mercia.[1] The driving force behind the rising power of Mercia in the generation after Bede was King Offa, famous for the dyke which divided the power of Mercia with that of the Britons further to the west.[2] Historians debate the purpose of the dyke, whether it marked a political boundary, military checkpoint, or served some other end. Unfortunately, the historical evidence for Offa is scanty, given that Bede died in 735, nearly a generation before Offa's birth, and the shadowy witness of later eighth-century chroniclers is not a patch on the work of Bede himself. But whatever the dyke's purpose, it is clear that Offa was an extremely powerful king who used his power and influence to exercise sway over other parts of Anglo-Saxon Britain. A key sign of Mercian influence to the south lies in the re-establishment of the abandoned Roman town of Londinium (London) as a settlement in the seventh century, which had originally fallen in the realm of the kings of Essex, but by the end of the eighth century fell within the domain of Mercia.[3] The main source of evidence consists of royal charters issued by King Æthelbald of Mercia (r. 716-757), who reigned in the generation leading up to that of Offa himself. The trading hub of 'Lundenwic', as it was known, gave Æthelbald a huge resource of wealth which meant that by the middle of the eighth century, Mercia had emerged as the richest and most powerful kingdom among the Anglo-Saxons. Even in 731, in the last years of his life, Bede records that all the kings to the south of the Humber had fallen subject to Æthelbald.[4] After Bede's death in 735, we gain chance insights into the life of Æthelbald from the writings of a monk called Boniface (originally, Winfrith) of Wessex, whose gained sainthood for his missionary work in Francia. Bonface wrote a letter to Æthelbald praising him for his charity among the poor but scolding him for his lavish lifestyle, as well as for looting churches and monasteries.[5] In 749, the king held a council at Gumley near Leicester promising that he would cease from imposing fiscal impositions on church institutions. In return, churches and monasteries were commissioned to help build bridges and fortresses against enemies.[6] This is confirmed by some important finds of a timber crossing at Cromwell Lock on the Trent.[7] What is clear from the period, albeit scantily documented, is that Mercia was commissioning building work and other types of military and political fortification in the middle of the eight century.

The question which has boggled historians, however, is the identity of the enemy which the Mercian kings tried to avert. One important source is the *Life of St Guthlac*, written at some point before 749, which attests that the Britons were

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[1] Bede 558-61.

[2] K. Ray, I. Baptry, *Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2016), 56, 127-8.

[3] J.R. Maddicott, 'London and Droitwich, c.650-750: Trade, industry, and the rise of Mercia', *ASE* 34 (2005), 16-23.

[4] Bede, 558-9.

[5] D.C. Douglas, G.W. Greenaway (eds.), *English Historical Documents, c. 500-1042* (1953), 266.

[6] S. Keynes, 'The reconstruction of a burnt Cottonian manuscript: The case of MS. Otho A.I.' *British Library Journal* 22 (1996), 137.

[7] Blair, *Building*, 189-91.

menacing Mercia on its western frontier.[1] In 757, Æthelbald was murdered at the hands of Beornred, who in turn was toppled by Offa, the greatest Anglo-Saxon king of the eighth century.[2] In 764, Offa brought Kent under his jurisdiction. A Mercian charter from the period shows Offa dispensing lands around Canterbury and treating the Kentish kings as vassals.[3] In 771, he brought Sussex under his control by force of arms and reduced the local leaders there to a status of vassalage.[4] In 776, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records a clash between Mercian and Kentish armies, but other documentary sources might suggest that Offa experienced a threat from the Britons to the west.[5] One crucial piece of archaeology which might support such a conjecture is the Pillar of Eliseg at the abbey of Valle Crucis in Denbighshire in Wales, erected in the early ninth century by one of the British kings of Powys. The monument is a boast about the military exploits of the ruler's grandfather, Eliseg, who had done much to wrest power from the land of the Angles. Historians have dated the events recorded on Eliseg's Pillar to the 780s, which would overlap with the reign of Offa.[6] In 785, Offa led another expedition into Kent, where he deposed the last remaining vassal, King Egbert, and imposed direct Mercian rule.[7] This gave Mercia direct control over the mint at Canterbury. At the start of the eighth century, coins had been struck at about twenty separate mints over Britain, but by the start of Offa's reign, this had dropped to three – at London, Ipswich, and Canterbury – two of which lay in Offa's direct control. This led to an explosion in the quantity of silver coins minted by Offa.[8] After 785, the numismatic finds indicate that over ninety-five percent of coins minted bore the name of Offa, and in a few of those cases, of his queen Cynethryth.[9] The habit of depicting both king and queen was otherwise unknown in Europe of the period outside Constantinople itself, which might provide an insight into the extent of Offa's international contacts beyond the boundaries of Britain.

On the European continent, a new dynasty had set up in Francia descended from Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne. In 751, Pippin of Francia took the unprecedented move of being anointed king, a practice which followed the kings of the Bible, and his son Charles (better known as Charlemagne), was anointed as a boy in 781.[10] In imitation of this new practice, which would become standard in the Later Middle Ages, Offa requested to have his own son anointed at Canterbury, but the archbishop declined.[11] In response, Offa proposed to create an archbishopric in

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[1] *English Historical Documents*, 771-5.
[2] *English Historical Documents*, 174.
[3] F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1971)*,* 207-8.
[4] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 208-9.
[5] *English Historical Documents*, 178.
[6] T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064* (Oxford, 2013), 414-19.
[7] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 217-18.
[8] R. Naismith, 'The coinage of Offa revisited', *British Numismatic Journal*, 80 (2010), 77-9.
[9] R. Naismith, *Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England: The Southern English Kingdoms, 757-865* (Cambridge, 2012), 8, 54-8, 100-1, 206.
[10] C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London, 2009), 376-8.
[11] *English Historical Documents*, 860.

Mercia. He sent an embassy to Pope Hadrian in 786 to request a papal nuncio to Britain. The papal embassy declared it unlawful to deny the son of the king the symbols of blessing.[1] A new archbishopric was established at Lichfield in Mercia which incorporated all the lands between the Thames and the Humber which lay directly under Offa's control. In consequence, Offa's son, Ecgfrith, was consecrated king.[2] To the south, rumblings in Wessex presented a challenge to Offa's authority when Cynewulf ascended the throne of Wessex, which unlike the other southern kingdoms had retained independence, with papal blessing, in 786.[3] Later that year, Cynewulf was killed in a bloody coup. [4] The kingship of Wessex passed to Beorhtric, with the backing of Offa, who cemented the political tie by offering his daughter in marriage. The official documentation describes Beorhtric as 'king of the province' rather than the traditional 'king of Wessex', which would imply that Mercia had placed Wessex under its suzerainty.[5] Offa's imperialist ambition directly resulted in a falling out with the Franks, who at this time were establishing control in Germany, France, and northern Italy, and had designs on Britain also. The cause of the fallout seems to have been the proposal of marriage of one of Charlemagne's daughters to Ecgfrith which, when frustrated, led to a commercial embargo. One of our principal sources is an Anglo-Saxon churchman in the service of Charlemagne, Alcuin of York, whose letters provide a crucial insight into the political relations between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the newly emerging Holy Roman Empire. [6] This led to Egbert of Wessex being sheltered in Francia.[7] The cooling of relations between Offa and Charlemagne seem to have been repaired in 796, when a letter sent to offer from Charlemagne addresses him as his 'dearest brother'.[8] What had led to this thawing of ill-relations is a matter for speculation, though it seems likely that with the new existential threat posed by the Viking raids which began in 793, it became rapidly clear to the Christian kings of Europe that they needed to unite against a sudden and unexpected threat from the north from pagan invaders who had no truck with the religion or culture of their southern neighbours.

In 800, Charlemagne was anointed emperor in Rome, an event which heralded a movement known to historians as 'the Carolingian Renaissance'. Charlemagne at this time had begun to loot treasures from ancient Roman buildings and to export them across the Alps to adorn his new cathedral at Aachen. The fashion for imitating Roman practices is reflected also in the coin types issued by Offa at that time, as well as in some of the building projects in Mercia, which show a greater propensity for Roman

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[1] *English Historical Documents* 836-40.
[2] *English Historical Documents* 180, 860, 862.
[3] *English Historical Documents* 175-6, 179-80.
[4] *English Historical Documents*, 175-6.
[5] *English Historical Documents*, 180, 187.
[6] *English Historical Documents*, 341. On Alcuin, see S. Allot, *Alcuin of York: His Life and Letters* (York, 1974).
[7] *English Historical Documents,* 180, 187, 848.
[8] *English Historical Documents*, 848-9.

tiling and masonry.[1] The grander style of building has given historians to speculate as to the purpose of Offa's Dyke, whether it was a border project designed to rival Hadrian's Wall, as if Offa were setting himself up as a new emperor in his own land.[2] What is curious is that the boundary is set up between Mercia and the Britons to the west, rather than between Mercia and the more powerful Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the south. This has often been linked to a growing awareness of a common kinship between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that had begun to emerge in the eighth century, which had previously been lacking. In 731, on completion of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede repeated refers to 'the English', or *Angli*, to describe the peoples who inhabited the kingdoms conventionally referred to as the heptarchy, to follow a phrase used in the twelfth century by Henry of Huntingdon. The first time the word is documented is a century earlier, when Pope Gregory the Great most famously referred to two English youths on the slave market in Rome as '*non Angli, sed Angeli*'. By the eighth century, it seems that the terms 'Angle' and 'Saxon' had become virtually synonymous, though the term 'Angle' was in wider currency. In 736, Æthelbald of Mercia described himself as the ruler of the 'south Angles' (*sutangli*), a term which refers to the peoples of Mercia, Kent, East Anglia, Sussex, Essex, and Wessex. St Boniface of Wessex in a famous letter speaks of the kinship ties between the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the continental Saxons, referring to them as 'the race of the English'. Æthelbald refers to himself as 'the ruler of all the English'.[3] This notion of 'Englishness' was forged to create a belief in the racial difference between the inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon Britain and the British peoples to the west known as the *wilisc*, or 'Welsh'.[4]

With Offa's imperial ambitions came a new sense of 'Englishness', to be distinguished from 'Welshness' which became the term used to refer to the British peoples whom the Anglo-Saxon settlers in the fifth century had displaced. Offa died on 29 July 796, leaving a legacy of a united Anglo-Saxon empire to the south of the Humber. In the same summer, he was succeeded by his son Ecgfrith, the new king of Mercia.[5] Later that year, Ecgfrith died also, leaving a power vacuum behind him.[6] At this time, Britain faced the new menace of Viking invasions which would change the face of English history indelibly.

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[1] D. Parsons and D. Sutherland, *The Anglo-Saxon Church of All Saints, Brixworth, Northamptonshire: Survey, Excavation and Analysis, 1972-2010* (Oxford, 2013), 232-3; J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), 274-7.

[2] D.J. Tyler, 'Offa's Dyke: A historiographical reappraisal', *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011), 159-61.

[3] *English Historical Documents*, 494, 812-13, 816.

[4] *English Historical Documents*, 398-407.

[5] *English Historical Documents*, 846, 855.

[6] *English Historical Documents*, 855

IV: The Viking invasions and the rise of Wessex

The first half of the ninth century was a disaster for Anglo-Saxon Britain. Out of nowhere, boatloads of Norsemen appeared on raiding missions, siezing land, loot, and slaves. Not only Britain but also Francia and Ireland were severely affected by the turmoil which the Viking invaders brought. By 851, the Norse armies had seized London and Canterbury, still Mercian possessions, and went on to wrest Wessex from Mercian control. Egbert's son, Æthewulf, rose up to meet the invaders and defeated them at Carhampton. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it was the greatest victory inflicted upon a pagan army by the English.[1] In 853, Æthewulf sent to Rome to rally support in defence of a Christian kingdom.[2] The king entrusted the rule of Wessex to Æthelbald and Æthelberht, two of his sons.[3] The latter of these did much to cement ties with West Francia and the Holy See, but in 865 Æthelberht died and was replaced by his son Æthelred, surnamed 'the Unready'.[4] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the years of Æthelred's reign as unstable, with repeated Viking raids through East Anglia and into Northumbria. In 867, the Viking armies marched on York and conquered Northumbria.[5] Then, they turned against Mercia, whose king Burghred appealed to Wessex for help.[6] This was a key turning point in the relationship between Wessex and Mercia, both historically at enmity, but now united against a common Norse threat. Æthelred of Wessex led his troops into Mercia to resist the Viking hordes, whereupon the Norse armies withdrew to York.[7] In summer 869, the pagan armies resumed their campaign against Mercia and subdued East Anglia, martyring the East Anglian king, Edmund, at what is now known as Bury St Edmunds.[8] In 870, they turned against Wessex. By 871, the Viking invaders had been repelled by Æthelred at the Battle of Ashdown.[9] Æthelred died that year to be buried at Wimbourne to be succeeded by his last surviving son, Alfred, who would go on to earn the title of 'the Great'.[10]

The first evidence of Alfred's soubriquet comes from the thirteenth century, in a chronicle composed by Matthew Paris.[11] Contemporary evidence for Alfred consists of a biography written in his lifetime by a Welsh Bishop called Asser, titled *Life of King Alfred*, who spent considerable periods at the court of the Wessex ruler. The difficulty for modern historians is that the only surviving MS copy, dated to the tenth century, was destroyed by fire when the Cottonian Library burnt in 1731, and so we are reliant on later printed copies. According to Asser, Alfred journeyed at the age of six with his

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[1] *English Historical Documents*, 188.
[2] *English Historical Documents*, 189.
[3] *English Historical Documents*, 187-8.
[4] *English Historical Documents*, 190-1.
[5] *English Historical Documents*, 191.
[6] *English Historical Documents*, 192.
[7] *English Historical Documents*, 192.
[8] *English Historical Documents*, 192.
[9] *English Historical Documents*, 193.
[10] *English Historical Documents*, 193.
[11] S. Keynes, 'The cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 28 (1999).

father to Rome in 835, at which time the Pope decreed him to be a future king.[1] In 868, he married a Mercian noblewoman called Ealhswith.[2] When he ascended the throne of Wessex in 871, Mercia faced an existential crisis at the hands of Viking marauders. Alfred faced a Danish attack at Wilton in Wiltshire and was defeated, whereupon the Saxons made peace with the Danes after yielding substantial amounts of tribute.[3] The following year, in 882, the Vikings invaded Mercia again and seized Repton, a decisive victory for the Danes which led to the effective collapse of Mercia as a power.[4] According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Mercia's king Burghred fled into exile together with his wife Æthelswith, the sister of Alfred. The Vikings put in place a puppet ruler, Ceolwulf.[5] In 885, the Vikings renewed their attack on Wessex, getting as far as Exeter, but by 877 they agreed to withdraw to Mercia on negotiated terms.[6] Again, in 878, the Vikings launched another attack on Wessex and drove Alfred and his court into exile.[7] Alfred with a band of his thegns vanished into the woods of Somerset.[8]

It is when Alfred took refuge in the house of a swineherd that the legend of the burning of the loaves emerges. The story first appears in a biography written about a hundred years later, the *Life of St Neot*, and was inserted in the sixteenth century into Asser's biography. Here, in Somerset, in the Levels, Alfred established a fortress called Athelney, from which he struck out against the Viking invaders.[9] According to the tradition, the fortunes of Wessex began to turn in Alfred's favour. At Edington, Alfred inflicted a severe defeat on the Danes, who were forced to surrender.[10] This resulted in a conversion to Christianity of the Danish hostages.[11] The conversion of the Danish ruler Guthrum led to negotiations between Alfred and the Danes over the future of Mercia, which was partitioned between the two rulers along a line defined by Watling Street.[12] In western Mercia, which fell under the control of Wessex, the newly installed vassal Æthelred adopted the title 'ealdorman', recognising thereby his subordinate status to Alfred.[13] One consequence of the treaty between Alfred and Guthrum was the idea that the peoples of Wessex and Mercia were part of one 'English' race (*ealles Angelcynnes witan*). The first time the word *Angelcynn* appears in official documentation comes from 855, in a Mercian charter, but from this point onward it starts to be used with far greater frequency. From the mid-870s, the coin types of Alfred of Wessex bear the title *Rex Anglorum*, which certainly was a propagandist initiative on the part of Alfred to convince his Mercian subjects that they

[1] *English Historical Documents*,880.
[2] Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 76, 88-91.
[3] Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 51.
[4] Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 43; *English Historical Documents*, 194.
[5] *English Historical Documents*, 194, 200.
[6] *English Historical Documents*, 194-5.
[7] *English Historical Documents*, 195.
[8] *English Historical Documents*, 195, Asser, 83.
[9] Asser, 84, 103.
[10] Asser, 85-6; *English Historical Documents*, 196.
[11] Asser, 85.
[12] *English Historical Documents*, 416-7.
[13] Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 180-2

were not annexed peoples to the power of Wessex, but rather part of a common English stock which incorporated peoples of Kent, Sussex, East Anglia, and Northumbria.[1]

Alfred is credited with the creation of the *burhs*, fortress towns which yield the modern suffix *-bury*. An intriguing early medieval document known as the 'Burghal Hidage' lists thirty or so fortified places in Wessex, together with an account of the hides rendered in taxation. In Anglo-Saxon England, the hide was used to assess the food rent due from an area, as well as the obligations to maintain military service, fortress work, and bridge repair. The document comes down to us through two principal channels, one of which was badly damaged in a fire in 1731, but the main body of whose text was preserved in a transcript by Laurence Nowell in 1562. The other version comes down through seven later MSS. The document probably dates from the generation after Alfred, during the reign of his son, Edward the Elder. The later dating of the document is because it includes Oxford and Buckingham, which according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were not included as *burhs* until 918, after Edward had taken possession of London and Oxford. What the Burghal Hidage shows is a new organised system of taxation coming into effect under a single authority. In total, the hides assessed for all the *burhs* under Alfred's control totalled 27,000, which gave Alfred a colossal standing army to defend his network of fortresses.[2] In 886, Alfred recaptured London, calling it Lundenburgh, and began to restore it.[3] The rebuilding of London was part of a larger project of re-construction after nearly a century of devastation at the hands of the Vikings. Alfred resurrected scholarship and learning, which had fallen into disrepair in the half century leading up to his reign and had many works of Classical literature translated into English.[4] Two of these appear to have been works of Gregory the Great, the sixth-century pope who commissioned the conversion of the English some three centuries before the time of Alfred. Others included Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Orosius' *Contra Paganos*, Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.[5] Alfred himself is said to have translated a portion of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, though the authenticity of the claim has been debated.[6] Whether Alfred wrote anything or not, no doubt during his reign there was a cultural renaissance in Wessex and Mercia. For this reason, he commissioned the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which ended in 890 with Alfred ruling England peacefully. There can be little doubt of the heavy hand of propaganda in the work, which was added to subsequently down as far as the twelfth century. But the court of Alfred had produced literate scholars who left behind historical documents of vital value to the modern historian who seeks to reconstruct the history of the Anglo-Saxons.[7]

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[1] R. Naismith, *Medieval European Coinage 8: Britain and Ireland, c. 40-1066* (Cambridge, 2017), 169.
[2] B. Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1995), 194, 341.
[3] Asser, 97-8.
[4] Keyes and Lapidge, 165-6.
[5] Keynes and Lapidge, 28-9.
[6] M.R. Godden, 'Did King Alfred write anything?', *Medium Aevum* 76 (2007), 1-23.
[7] Asser, 90, 107, 110.

The Viking invasions did not stop, and in 897 Alfred died. The most important legacy of Alfred's reign was a renewed sense of 'England' which transcended the old heptarchic divisions of Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, and Sussex that went back to the sixth century. To be 'English' meant to be a member of a kinship group which extended across all these boundaries. In an ideological sense, it also meant to be a Christian, as distinct from a heathen Viking or heretical Briton. Though the idea of an 'English people' had already begun to take shape a century and half before Alfred, with the writings of Bede, it was the dire threat posed to civilised existence in Britain which had taken shape by the end of the eighth century that forged a belief in the cultural and racial unity of the peoples who identified as 'Angles'. A century and a half later, when the Normans invaded, this belief in common kindred solidified when England found itself ruled by a foreign nobility who spoke a foreign language and defined themselves in ethnic and racial terms, as distinct from the people over whom they governed. But 'England' as a political and cultural entity is as much an ideology as a reality. Until the Norman Conquest, England was never properly unified in a political, military, or hegemonic sense. It is due in large measure to the propaganda initiatives of Alfred the Great in the ninth century that a belief in an English nation was first pioneered, an idea which has never since ceased to bear an ideological tinge.