

The Vikings in England

Selections from Asser, *Life of Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*. Edited and translated by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge. London: Penguin, 1983. 73–87.

18. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 860 (the twelfth of King Alfred's life), [Alfred's father King] Æthelbald [died] and was buried at Sherborne, and Æthelberht, his brother, annexed to his control Kent, Surrey and also Sussex, as was right. In his days a great Viking army, arriving from the sea, aggressively attacked and laid waste the city of Winchester. When they were returning to the ships with immense booty, Osric, ealdorman¹ of Hampshire, with his men, and Ealdorman Æthelwulf, with the men of Berkshire, opposed them strenuously. Battle was joined in earnest; the Vikings were cut down everywhere and, when they could resist no longer, they took to flight like women, and the Christians were masters of the battlefield.

19. So after governing in peace, love and honour for five years, Æthelberht went the way of all flesh, to the great sorrow of his people; and he lies buried honourably beside his brother, at Sherborne.

20. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 864, the Vikings spent the winter on the Isle of Thanet, and concluded a firm treaty with the men of Kent. The men of Kent undertook to give them money to ensure that the treaty was kept. Meanwhile, however, the Vikings, like crafty foxes, secretly burst out of their camp by night, broke the treaty and, spurning the promise of money (for they knew they could get more money from stolen booty than from peace), laid waste the entire eastern district of Kent.

21. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 866 (the eighteenth of King Alfred's life), Æthelred, brother of King Æthelberht, took over the government of the kingdom of the West Saxons. In the same year, a great Viking fleet arrived in Britain from the Danube, and spent the winter in the kingdom of the East Saxons (which in English is called East Anglia), where almost the whole army was supplied with horses....

26. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 867 (the nineteenth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army went from East Anglia to the city of York (which is situated on the northern bank of the river Humber).

27. At that time a great dispute, fomented by the devil, had arisen among the Northumbrians, as always happens to a people which has incurred the wrath of God.

¹ a high-ranking Anglo-Saxon leader or "elder-man"; this term is usually rendered in Latin as *dux* (from *ducere*, "to lead" = duke).

The Northumbrians at that time (as I have said) had expelled from the kingdom their rightful king, called Osberht, and had established at the kingdom's summit a certain tyrant called Ælle, who did not belong to the royal line. But, when the Vikings arrived, by divine providence and with the support of the best men, for the good of all, the dispute had calmed down slightly; Osberht and Ælle combined forces and assembled an army, and went to the city of York. On their arrival, the Vikings immediately took to flight, and endeavoured to defend themselves within the fortifications of the city. When the Christians noticed their flight and panic, they too determined to pursue them within the fortifications of the city and to breach the wall; and this they did. For in those days the city did not yet have firm and secure walls. After the Christians had breached the wall as they had intended, and the majority of them had got into the city along with the Vikings, the Vikings, driven on by grief and necessity, attacked them fiercely, cut them to pieces, put them to flight, and overthrew them inside and outside. Virtually the entire force of Northumbrians was annihilated there, and the two kings were killed; but the remainder, who escaped, made peace with the Vikings....

30. In [868] the Viking army left Northumbria, came to Mercia and reached Nottingham (which is called *Tig Guocobauc* in Welsh, or *Speluncarum Domus* ['house of caves'] in Latin); and they spent the winter that year in the same place. Immediately upon their arrival there, Burgred, king of the Mercians, and all the leading men of that people sent messengers to Æthelred, king of the West Saxons, and to his brother Alfred, humbly requesting that they help them, so that they would be able to fight against the Viking army; they obtained this easily. For the brothers, promptly fulfilling their promise, gathered an immense army from every part of their kingdom, went to Mercia and arrived at Nottingham, single-mindedly seeking battle. But since the Vikings, protected by the defences of the stronghold, refused to give battle, and since the Christians were unable to breach the wall, peace was established between the Mercians and the Vikings, and the two brothers, Æthelred and Alfred, returned home with their forces.

31. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 869 (the twenty-first of King Alfred's life), the Viking army rode back to Northumbria and went to the city of York, and remained there for a whole year.

32. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 870 (the twenty-second of King Alfred's life), the Viking army mentioned above passed through Mercia to East Anglia, and spent the winter there at a place called Thetford.

33. In the same year, Edmund, king of the East Angles, fought fiercely against that army. But alas, he was killed there with a large number of his men, and the Vikings rejoiced triumphantly; the enemy were masters of the battlefield, and they subjected that entire province to their authority....

35. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 871 (the twenty-third of King Alfred's life), the Viking army of hateful memory left East Anglia, went to the kingdom of the West Saxons, and came to the royal estate called Reading (situated on the southern bank of the river Thames, in the district called Berkshire). On the third day after their arrival there, two of their earls, with a great part of the force, rode out for plunder, while the others constructed a rampart between the two rivers Thames and Kennet, on the right-hand [southern] side of the same royal estate. Æthelwulf, ealdorman of Berkshire, confronted them with his followers at a place called Englefield, and battle was joined there resolutely on both sides. When both sides had held out there for a long time, and when one of the Viking earls had been killed and a great part of the army overthrown, the others took to flight and the Christians won the victory and were masters of the battlefield.

36. Four days after these things had happened there, King Æthelred and his brother Alfred combined forces, assembled an army, and went to Reading. When they had reached the gate of the stronghold by hacking and cutting down all the Vikings whom they had found outside, the Vikings fought no less keenly; like wolves they burst out of all the gates and joined battle with all their might. Both sides fought there for a long time, and fought fiercely, but alas, the Christians eventually turned their backs, and the Vikings won the victory and were masters of the battlefield; and the Ealdorman Æthelwulf mentioned above fell there among others.

37. The Christians were aroused by the grief and shame of this, and four days later, with all their might and in a determined frame of mind, they advanced against the Viking army at a place called Ashdown (which means *mons fraxini* ['hill of the ash'] in Latin). But the Vikings, splitting up into two divisions, organized shield-walls of equal size (for they then had two kings and a large number of earls), assigning the core of the army to the two kings and the rest to all the earls. When the Christians saw this, they too split up the army into two divisions in exactly the same way, and established shield-walls no less keenly. But as I have heard from truthful authorities who saw it, Alfred and his men reached the battlefield sooner and in better order: for his brother, King Æthelred, was still in his tent at prayer, hearing Mass and declaring firmly that he would not leave that place alive before the priest had finished Mass, and that he would not forsake divine service for that of men; and he did what he said. The faith of the Christian king counted for much with the Lord, as shall be shown more clearly in what follows.

38. Now the Christians had decided that King Æthelred and his forces should engage the two Viking kings in battle, while his brother Alfred and his troops should submit to the fortunes of war against all the Viking earls. Matters were thus firmly arranged on both sides; but since the king was lingering still longer in prayer, and the Vikings were ready and had reached the battlefield more quickly, Alfred (then 'heir apparent') could

not oppose the enemy battle-lines any longer without either retreating from the battlefield or attacking the enemy forces before his brother's arrival on the scene. He finally deployed the Christian forces against the hostile armies, as he had previously intended (even though the king had not yet come), and acting courageously, like a wild boar, supported by divine counsel and strengthened by divine help, when he had closed up the shieldwall in proper order, he moved his army without delay against the enemy.

39. But it should be made clear at this point to those unaware of the fact, that the battlefield was not equally advantageous to both contending parties. The Vikings had taken the higher position first, and the Christians were deploying their battle-line from a lower position. A rather small and solitary thorn-tree (which I have seen for myself with my own eyes) grew there, around which the opposing armies clashed violently, with loud shouting from all, one side acting wrongfully and the other side set to fight for life, loved ones and country. When both sides had been fighting to and fro, resolutely and exceedingly ferociously, for quite a long time, the Vikings (by divine judgement) were unable to withstand the Christians' onslaught any longer; and when a great part of their forces had fallen, they took to ignominious flight. One of the two Viking kings and five earls were cut down in that place, and many thousands on the Viking side were slain there too -or rather, over the whole broad expanse of Ashdown, scattered everywhere, far and wide: so King Bagsecg was killed, and Earl Sidroc the Old, Earl Sidroc the Younger, Earl Osbern, Earl Fra:na, and Earl Harold; and the entire Viking army was put to flight, right on till nightfall and into the following day, until such time as they reached the stronghold from which they had come. The Christians followed them till nightfall, cutting them down on all sides.

40. A further fourteen days after these things had happened there, King Æthelred, together with his brother Alfred, combined their forces for a battle against the Vikings, and went to Basing. They clashed violently on all fronts, but after a long struggle the Vikings gained the victory and were masters of the battlefield. When the battle was over, another Viking army came from overseas and attached itself to the band.

41. After Easter [15 April] in the same year, King Æthelred went the way of all flesh, having vigorously and honourably ruled the kingdom in good repute, amid many difficulties, for five years; he was buried at Wimborne Minster and awaits the coming of the Lord, and the first resurrection with the just [cf. Revelation xx, 6, and Luke xiv, 14].

42. In the same year Alfred, who until that time (while his brothers were alive) had been 'heir apparent', took over the government of the whole kingdom as soon as his brother had died, with the approval of divine will and according to the unanimous wish of all the inhabitants of the kingdom. Indeed, he could easily have taken it over with the consent of all while his brother Æthelred was alive, had he considered himself worthy

to do so, for he surpassed all his brothers both in wisdom and in all good habits; and in particular because he was a great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles. When a month had passed after he had begun to reign, almost unwillingly (for indeed he did not think that he alone could ever withstand such great ferocity of the Vikings, unless strengthened by divine help, since he had already sustained great losses of many men while his brothers were alive), he fought most vigorously, with a few men who were easily outnumbered, against the entire Viking army at a hill called Wilton (which is situated on the southern bank of the river *Guilou* [Wylye], from which that whole district takes its name). When both sides had been fighting violently and resolutely on all fronts for much of the day, the Vikings realized of their own accord the complete danger they were in, and, unable to bear the onslaught of their enemies any longer, they turned tail and fled. But alas, scorning the small number of pursuers, they advanced again into battle, and seizing victory they were masters of the battlefield. Nor should it seem extraordinary to anyone that the Christians had a small number of men in the battle: for the Saxons were virtually annihilated to a man in this single year in eight battles against the Vikings (in which eight battles one Viking king and nine earls, with countless men, were killed), leaving aside the innumerable skirmishes by day and night which Alfred, and the individual ealdormen of that race, with their men, and also very many king's thegns,² had fought ceaselessly and intently against the Vikings. How many thousands of the Viking army were killed in these frequent skirmishes (quite apart from those who were slaughtered in the eight battles mentioned above) is not known, except to God alone.

43. Also in the same year, the Saxons made peace with the Vikings, on condition that they would leave them; and this the Vikings did.

44. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 872 (the twenty-fourth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army went to London and spent the winter there; and the Mercians made peace with them.

45. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 873 (the twenty-fifth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left London and moved on to the province of the Northumbrians, and they spent the winter there in the district known as Lindsey; and the Mercians again made peace with them.

46. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 874 (the twenty-sixth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Lindsey, went to Mercia, and spent the winter at a place called Repton. They forced Burgred, king of the Mercians, to abandon his kingdom against his wish, to go abroad and to set out for Rome, in the twenty-second year of his reign. He did not live long after he had arrived at Rome: he died there and was honourably buried in the

² At this time, a thegn ("thane") was man who had sworn an oath of loyalty to a lord.

church of St Mary, in the Saxon quarter,⁸² where he awaits the coming of the Lord, and the first resurrection with the just [cf. Revelation xx, 6, and Luke xiv, 14]. After his expulsion the Vikings reduced the whole kingdom of the Mercians to their authority; however, by a wretched arrangement they entrusted it to a certain foolish king's thegn, who was called Ceolwulf, on these terms of custody, that whenever they should wish to have it again, he should hand it over peacefully to them. He gave hostages to them under the terms of this arrangement, and he swore that in no way would he wish to countermand their intentions, but would be obedient in all respects.

47. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 875 (the twenty-seventh of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Repton and split up into two bands. One band, under Halfdan, set out for the province of the Northumbrians, and spent the winter there beside the river Tyne; it subdued the entire province of the Northumbrians, and also ravaged the Picts and the men of Strathclyde. The other band, under three Viking kings (Guthrum, Oscetel and Anwend), went to a place called Cambridge, and spent the winter there.

48. In the same year King Alfred fought a naval battle at sea against six Viking ships; he captured one of them, and the others escaped by flight.

49. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 876 (the twenty-eighth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Cambridge by night; they went to a fortified site called Wareham (a convent of nuns situated in the district called Durngueir in Welsh and Dorset in English, between the two rivers Frauu [Frome] and Tarrant, in a very secure position except on the west, where it is joined to the mainland). King Alfred firmly made a treaty with the army, the condition being that they should leave him; the army, without any dispute, gave him as many picked hostages as he alone chose, and they also took an oath, on all the relics in which the king placed the greatest trust after God Himself (and on which they had never before been willing to take an oath to any race), that they would immediately leave his kingdom. But one night, practising their usual treachery, after their own manner, and paying no heed to the hostages, the oath and the promise of faith, they broke the treaty, killed all the [hostages] they had, and turning away they went unexpectedly to another place, called Exeter in English (*Cairuuisic* in Welsh, or *civitas Exae* ['city of the Exe'] in Latin), situated on the eastern bank of the river *Uuisic* [Exe], near the southern sea which runs between Gaul and Britain. There they spent the winter.

50. In the same year Halfdan, king of one part of the Northumbrians, shared out the whole province between himself and his men, and together with his army cultivated the land....

52. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 878 (the thirtieth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Exeter and went to Chippenham, a royal estate situated in the left-hand [northern] part of Wiltshire, on the eastern bank of the river called *Abon* [Avon] in

Welsh; and they spent the winter there. By strength of arms they forced many men of that race to sail overseas, through both poverty and fear, and very nearly all the inhabitants of that region submitted to their authority.

53. At the same time King Alfred, with his small band of nobles and also with certain soldiers and thegns, was leading a restless life in great distress amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had nothing to live on except what he could forage by frequent raids, either secretly or even openly, from the Vikings as well as from the Christians who had submitted to the Vikings' authority.

54. In the same year the brother 99 of Ivar and Halfdan sailed with twenty-three ships from Dyfed (where he had spent the winter), after slaughtering many of the Christians there, and came to Devon; there, acting on an erroneous assumption, he met an unhappy death with 1,200 men, at the hands of the king's thegns and in front of the stronghold at Cynuit [Countisbury]. For many of the king's thegns, with their followers, had shut themselves up for safety inside this stronghold; and when the Vikings saw that the stronghold was unprepared and altogether unfortified (except for ramparts thrown up in our fashion), they made no attempt to storm it, since by the lie of the land that place is very secure from every direction except the east, as I myself have seen. Instead they began to besiege it, thinking that those men would soon give way, forced by hunger, thirst and the siege, since there is no water near the stronghold. But it did not turn out as they thought. For the Christians, long before they were liable to suffer want in any way, were divinely inspired and, judging it much better to gain either death or victory, burst out unexpectedly at dawn against the Vikings and, by virtue of their aggressiveness, from the very outset they overwhelmed the enemy in large part, together with their king, a few escaping by flight to the ships.

55. In the same year, after Easter [23 March], King Alfred, with a few men, made a fortress at a place called Athelney, and from it with the thegns of Somerset he struck out relentlessly and tirelessly against the Vikings. Presently, in the seventh week after Easter [4–10 May], he rode to Egbert's Stone, which is in the eastern part of Selwood Forest (*sylva magna* ['great wood'] in Latin, and *Coit Maur* in Welsh); and there all the inhabitants of Somerset and Wiltshire and all the inhabitants of Hampshire—those who had not sailed overseas for fear of the Vikings—joined up with him. When they saw the king, receiving him (not surprisingly) as if one restored to life after suffering such great tribulations, they were filled with immense joy. They made camp there for one night. At the break of the following dawn the king struck camp and came to a place called Hey, and made camp there for one night.

56. When the next morning dawned he moved his forces and came to a place called Edington, and fighting fiercely with a compact shield-wall against the entire Viking army, he persevered resolutely for a long time; at length he gained the victory through

God's will. He destroyed the Vikings with great slaughter, and pursued those who fled as far as the stronghold, hacking them down; he seized everything which he found outside the stronghold—men (whom he killed immediately), horses and cattle—and boldly made camp in front of the gates of the Viking stronghold with all his army. When he had been there for fourteen days the Vikings, thoroughly terrified by hunger, cold and fear, and in the end by despair, sought peace on this condition: the king should take as many chosen hostages as he wanted from them and give none to them; never before, indeed, had they made peace with anyone on such terms. When he had heard their embassy, the king (as is his wont) was moved to compassion and took as many chosen hostages from them as he wanted. When they had been handed over, the Vikings swore in addition that they would leave his kingdom immediately, and Guthrum, their king, promised to accept Christianity and to receive baptism at King Alfred's hand; all of which he and his men fulfilled as they had promised. For three weeks later Guthrum, the king of the Vikings, with thirty of the best men from his army, came to King Alfred at a place called Aller, near Athelney. King Alfred raised him from the holy font of baptism, receiving him as his adoptive son; the unbinding of the chrisom on the eighth day took place at a royal estate called Wedmore. Guthrum remained with the king for twelve nights after he had been baptized, and the king freely bestowed many excellent treasures on him and all his men.

57. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 879 (the thirty-first of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Chippenham, as promised, and went to Cirencester (called Cairceri in Welsh), which is in the southern part of the land of the Hwicce, and remained there for one year.

58. In the same year a great Viking army, sailing from foreign parts, came to the river Thames and made contact with the army further upstream, but nevertheless they spent the winter at a place called Fulham, near the river Thames....

60. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 880 (the thirty-second of King Alfred's life), the Viking army left Cirencester and went to East Anglia; they divided up the province and began to settle there.

61. In the same year the Viking army which had spent the winter at Fulham left the island of Britain, setting out again across the sea, and went to eastern Francia; and they stayed for one year at a place called Ghent.

62. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 881 (the thirty-third of King Alfred's life), the Viking army went further still into Francia. The Franks fought against them and, once the battle was over, the Vikings procured horses and became a mounted force.

63. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 882 (the thirty-fourth of King Alfred's life), the Viking army drew its ships much further upstream into Francia, along the river Meuse, and stayed there one year.

64. In the same year Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, launched a naval attack on the high seas against the Viking ships; he captured two of the ships, having killed everyone on board. The two commanders of the other two ships who, with all their crews, were very much exhausted by the fight and by their wounds, laid down their arms and on bended knee with submissive pleas gave themselves up to the king.

65. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 883 (the thirty-fifth of King Alfred's life), the Vikings drew their ships along the river Scheldt, and sailed upstream to a convent of nuns called Conde; they remained there one year.

66. In the year of the Lord's Incarnation [885] (the thirty-seventh of King Alfred's life), the Viking army split up into two bands: one band set out for eastern Francia, and the other, coming to Britain, entered Kent and besieged the city which in English is called Rochester, situated on the eastern bank of the river Medway. The Vikings immediately constructed a strong fortification for themselves in front of its entrance, but they were unable to capture the city because the citizens defended themselves courageously until King Alfred arrived, bringing them relief with a large army. Thereupon the Vikings, abandoning their fortress and leaving behind in it all the horses they had brought with them from Francia—not to mention the greater part of their prisoners—fled quickly to their ships at the king's sudden arrival. The English immediately seized the prisoners and horses left behind by the Vikings. For their part the Vikings were forced by this unavoidable turn of events to return that same summer once again to Francia.

67. In the same year Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, transferred his fleet and its complement of fighting men from Kent to East Anglia, in order to plunder that area. When they arrived at the mouth of the river Stour, thirteen Viking ships rigged for battle immediately advanced to meet them. A sea-battle was joined: there was savage fighting everywhere. All the Vikings were killed and all their ships (together with all their booty) were captured. As the victorious royal fleet was about to go home, the Vikings who lived in East Anglia assembled ships from everywhere and met it in the mouth of the same river; there was a naval encounter and the Vikings had the victory.