

FROM ALFRED TO HAROLD II: THE MILITARY FAILURE OF THE LATE ANGLO-SAXON STATE

Richard Abels

“IT WOULD be a serious error,” Warren Hollister acutely observed in the final chapter of his *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, “to attempt too radical a separation of military organization from military techniques, since the necessities of battle in large measure govern the structure of the army.”¹ The problem that Hollister faced was explaining why, despite possessing a highly sophisticated military system and effective army, the Anglo-Saxon state, nonetheless, was conquered “once and almost twice by the Danes and again by the Normans.”² His answer was that the English were defeated by Swein and Cnut because of “wretched overall leadership combined with widespread disloyalty,” and that Harold simply had the bad luck to fight two major battles back to back.³ Hollister needed these explanations in order to rescue the Anglo-Saxon military institutions that he had so carefully detailed in the previous chapters from the charge that they had become obsolete and ineffective by 1066. His second book, *The Military Organization of Norman England* (Oxford, 1962), showed how unfounded that charge was.

Most historians now acknowledge that Hastings was indeed a close-run affair, won more by luck and perhaps generalship than because of fundamental structural or tactical differences in the forces or disparities in their military technologies.⁴ An apparent paradox, however, still remains: the Anglo-Saxon state was most militarily effective under King Alfred *before*, in Hollister’s words, “it achieved maturity.” Some of the reasons that Hollister gave for the failures of

¹ C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 127.

² Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 145.

³ Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 147–52.

⁴ Richard Glover, “English Warfare in 1066,” *English Historical Review* 67 (1952): 1–18; Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 134–40. For recent assessments of Hastings, see Stephen Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066–1135* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), 27–28, 163–68; Ian Walker, *Harold, The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Thrupp, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 166–82; Matthew Strickland, “Military Technology and Conquest: The Anomaly of Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 19 (1997): 353–82. Cf. R. Allen Brown, *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* (London and New York: Constable, 1968), 43–51, 91–99, 116–17, 141–81; idem, “The Battle of Hastings,” *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* 3 (1980): 1–21.

Æthelred II and Harold II are undoubtedly correct. But there is more to the story than bad leadership and bad luck. The “maturity” Hollister perceived in Anglo-Saxon military institutions on the eve of the Conquest had more to do with logistical than with strategic or tactical capabilities. Indeed, in terms of defense of the kingdom, English military institutions eroded between the death of Alfred in 899 and the Battle of Hastings. Alfred, his son, and grandsons owed their success in war to a military system that was originally designed to defend territory and then subsequently adapted to consolidate conquests. Their success rendered this costly system unnecessary, and the political disturbances that marked the reign of Edward the Martyr led to a new emphasis upon the personal military following of magnates at the expense of “national” defense. As a consequence, when Viking fleets reappeared along the coasts of England in the 980s and 990s, Æthelred and his ealdormen found themselves ill equipped to deal with the threat. And although he and his successors attempted to improve English defenses, Harold II was not much better off when he faced the imminent invasions of King Harald and Duke William in the summer and autumn of 1066.

The eleven-hundredth anniversary of the death of King Alfred seems a proper time to reconsider English military responses to the Vikings. For Frank Stenton and Warren Hollister, the success of King Alfred and the failure of Æthelred II was most readily explained by the different qualities of leadership exhibited by these two kings. Simon Keynes’s “A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready” (1986), however, suggested a different explanation for their contrasting fortunes. In a *tour de force* of textual criticism, Keynes demonstrated how historical opinion about Alfred and Æthelred, has been colored by the biases and perspectives of the extant sources.⁵ There is more to the story, Keynes declared, than “a contrast between a brave man and a coward, or a strong king and weak one, or a good policy and a bad one, or indeed between success and failure.”⁶ Perhaps, but from a military standpoint, at least, the last is precisely the point. Alfred did succeed, and Æthelred did fail. Their contrasting fortunes are why students of the Anglo-Saxon era, including Keynes, have been drawn to this otherwise unlikely comparison.

Although Keynes’s reservations about the quality and limitations of the extant sources are well taken, the evidence, archaeological as well as literary, permits

⁵ Simon Keynes, “A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 36 (1986): 195–217. Keynes’s reconsideration of Æthelred II’s historical reputation began earlier with his article “The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready,” in *Æthelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978), 227–53. See also his *The Diplomas of King Æthelred “the Unready” 978–1016: A Study of their Use as Historical Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). See also Eric John, “War and Society in the Tenth Century: The Maldon Campaign,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 27 (1977): 173–95, who makes a similar point about the “defeatism” of the Chronicle account.

⁶ Keynes, “Tale of Two Kings,” 204.

one to draw some tentative conclusions about military policy and practice during the reigns of Alfred and Æthelred. The picture that emerges is, unsurprisingly, in shades of gray rather than black and white. Æthelred was not the indolent and helpless king of legend. His notoriety, well explored by Keynes, has led historians to ignore or dismiss his vigorous institutional and diplomatic responses to the crisis, and, just as importantly, to overlook the deficiencies of the military system that he inherited. Fairness to Æthelred, however, does not necessitate or warrant a devaluing of Alfred's reputation; the student of Alfred's military reforms cannot help but be impressed with the strategic vision underlying them and the vigor that went into their implementation. Nor does it exculpate Æthelred from responsibility for the loss of his kingdom. The ultimate success of Alfred and failure of Æthelred were due, in large measure, to the qualities of leadership possessed by each, as manifested in their generalship, political acumen, and military policies.

One popular explanation advanced for Alfred's victory and Æthelred's defeat is that the two kings faced quite different threats.⁷ On this view, the loosely knit bands of Danish thugs who ravaged England and Francia in the ninth century had little in common with the organized state armies led by Swein Forkbeard and his son Cnut the Great a century later. Even the *micel heres* that devastated Northumbria and Mercia in the late 860s and 870s were unlikely to have had as many as a thousand warriors in them.⁸ King Swein's armies were another matter entirely. Consisting of perhaps as many as 10,000 professional warriors, these later forces of conquest were the terrifying products of "a land effectively organized for war,"⁹ national levies recruited, trained, organized, and led by real kings (rather than mere "sea-kings"). Under Swein and Cnut "going Viking" had become a state venture. In other words, Alfred had it easy compared with what Æthelred had to face.

But is this "Whig" view of the Viking raids correct? Was there a radical change in the scale, organization, and objectives of Viking ventures over the course of the tenth century? The evidence for such a change is not compelling.¹⁰ If we go simply by the sources, Alfred in 892 and Æthelred in 1015

⁷ Keynes, "Tale of Two Kings," 205–207.

⁸ Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), 117–28; idem, *Kings and Vikings* (London: Methuen, 1982), 93–94.

⁹ Keynes, "Tale of Two Kings," 206. Even though Trelleborg and its companion fortresses can no longer be seen as training camps for a concerted Danish invasion of England, the image of these great fortresses and what they imply about the power of the Jelling dynasty of the late tenth century cast a mighty shadow over the imaginations of those who write about Swein's and Cnut's invasions. Else Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark* (London: British Museum, 1982), 147–55.

¹⁰ Jens Ulff-Møller, "The Vikings in England: A Reappraisal of Peter Sawyer's Minimization Theory," Tenth International Conference of the Haskins Society, October 1991.

each faced fleets of 200–250 ships,¹¹ carrying in the range of 3,000–12,000 combatants.¹² And if we jettison the sources as untrustworthy, we are left with nothing but speculation. In short, there is no reason to believe that Æthelred faced significantly larger Viking armies than had Alfred.¹³ Nor may we assume that the forces of Swein and Cnut were organized in a manner radically different from previous Viking armies. Niels Lund has argued cogently that Danish fleets of the early eleventh century were organized along traditional lines, as loosely knit gangs of warriors known as *liths*, rather than as royal, national levies (the *leding*).¹⁴ The leaders and “fellows” of these *liths* were motivated alike by the desire for plunder and tribute that would enhance their standing back home.¹⁵ That it is a mistake to see the invading Danish armies of 1013 and 1015 as “state” armies is underscored by the dubious role played in this period by Thorkell the Tall, whose transfers of loyalty made him the Danish Eadric Streona. It is clear from the sources that Thorkell acted as a free agent, and it is

¹¹ As Nicholas Brooks has pointed out, there is basic agreement among ninth-century Irish, English, and Frankish sources that the “great” Viking armies of the period consisted of 100–250 ships. Occasionally these sources even concur about the specific number of ships in particular armies. Large round figures obviously represent estimates, but the agreement of independent contemporary observers suggests that we ought to take seriously the possibility that the Vikings were ravaging England and Francia with fleets of 200 or so ships. Nicholas Brooks, “England in the Ninth Century: The Crucible of Defeat,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 29 (1979): 2–11. See also C. Patrick Wormald, “Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?” in R.T. Farrell, ed., *The Vikings* (London: Phillimore, 1982), 134–37. Cf. Carroll Gillmor, “War on the Rivers: Viking Numbers and Mobility on the Seine and Loire, 841–886,” *Viator* 19 (1988): 79–109, who argues for smaller numbers on the basis of logistical needs.

¹² For the Vikings of 892, see *ASC*, s.a. 892 A: 250 ships; B,C,D: 200 ships (these figures do not count Hasteinn’s eighty ships). Cf. *Annales Fuldenses*, ed. F. Kurze, MGH SS Rer. Ger. (Hannover, 1891), s.a. 882, which allows 200 ships to the fleet that a decade later was to set up shop at Appledore; *ASC*, s.a. 892.

For Cnut’s fleet see Alistair Campbell, ed., *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, Camden Third Series, vol. 72 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1949), bk. II, chs. 1, 4, pp. 17, 19: 239 ships. Though it would be unwise to rely on any detail provided by this notoriously ill-informed writer, one should note that, for him, at any rate, a fleet of this size constituted an enormous and magnificent armada.

The estimates for the complement of Viking warships vary considerably, from a low of twenty to more than fifty. Sawyer, *Age*, 126; Wormald, “Viking Studies,” 135; Carroll Gillmor, “War on the Rivers,” 81–85.

¹³ In 994, for instance, Swein Forkbeard, king of Denmark, and Olaf Tryggvason, soon to be king of Norway, raided the coast of southern England with only ninety-four ships. *ASC*, s.a. 994 C,D,E. Cf. *ASC*, s.a. 991 A, which gives Olaf a naval force of ninety-four ships, but on which see Janet Batley, “*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,” in Donald Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon A.D. 991* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 43–49.

¹⁴ Niels Lund, “The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: *leding* or *lith*?” *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986): 105–18. See also idem, “The Danish Perspective,” in Scragg, *Maldon*, 114–42.

¹⁵ Wormald, “Viking Studies,” 145–48; Lund, “The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut,” 105–106, 111–18. See also Timothy Reuter, “Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 35 (1985): 75–94.

certain that he was not unique in this among the Danes.¹⁶

Alfred's victory and Æthelred's defeat cannot be explained simply by changes in Danish military organization and the consequent differences in the forces arrayed against them. Rather, we must return to the kings themselves, to their military policies, and to the manner in which they implemented them. Alfred's greatness lay in his ability to innovate in order to survive. The military establishment that he inherited from his brothers and father may have been adequate for wars against the Mercians or the Welsh, but it fell short as a defense against Vikings.¹⁷ The towns of Wessex, as yet undefended, lay open to attack, a point dramatically underscored by the Viking sack of the kingdom's greatest trading depot, Hamwic, in 840. The closest things to strong-points in the kingdom were the royal villas or *tuns*, the defenses of which probably amounted to little more than ditches and palisades. The king's army consisted of his household retainers, numbering perhaps a hundred or so warriors, and the shire levies led by his ealdormen. The former, a "standing" force, may have been the "professional" core of the king's army, but its numbers were too few for it to conduct full-scale campaigns on its own. For that shire levies were needed. These territorial forces, consisting mainly of landowners and their followers, were raised on an ad hoc basis, a method of recruitment that severely limited their effectiveness against the Vikings. By the time the warriors could be gathered from the various localities, a highly mobile raiding party could have devastated a region and moved on. We know nothing about the king's naval forces, or whether the royal fleet mentioned in the Chronicle entries for 882 and 885 was an invention of Alfred's or an inheritance from his predecessors.

Given the state of his forces and the buffeting they took in the nine engagements the West Saxons fought in 871, Alfred's policy of paying Danegeld in the early years of his reign was sensible.¹⁸ It bought him time. It was not, however, until his victory over Guthrum at Edington in 878 that Alfred began to implement an ambitious program of military reform that was to revolutionize the West Saxon military establishment.¹⁹ The limitations of the military establishment that Alfred inherited became obvious in 876, when Alfred found himself chasing Guthrum's army from Wareham to Essex without the ability to intercept it or keep the Danes from seizing royal villas and making them into strongholds. Alfred's great victory at Edington after Easter in 878 was due to the king's ability to retain the loyalty of his nobility even after his near capture at Chippenham and to mobilize forces to surprise an enemy who, by then, probably

¹⁶ Lund, "Armies," 112–18.

¹⁷ Richard Abels, "English Tactics, Strategy and Military Organization in the Late Tenth Century," in Scragg, ed., *Maldon*, 142–43.

¹⁸ On Alfred's payments of tribute, see Abels, "King Alfred's Peace-Making Strategies with the Vikings," *The Haskins Society Journal* 3 (1991), 23–34; idem, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 140–43, 209, 244.

¹⁹ Richard Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1988), 58–78; idem, "English Tactics," 143–44.

thought that he had been rendered helpless. Alfred's response to Guthrum's submission reveals why he deserves the title "the great." When the Vikings returned in force in 892, they found a far different Wessex. In the interim Alfred had dotted his kingdom with fortified towns, created a mobile standing army with rotating contingents, and had built an impressive navy that was to become even more so in 896 with the addition of a fleet of "long-ships" that were larger, swifter, and more stable than the Viking warships of the period.²⁰ He had also devised a sophisticated defense-in-depth strategy in which the field armies and the boroughs would support one another, in offensive campaigns as well as in defense.

The cost of building, maintaining, and garrisoning thirty fortresses while simultaneously keeping a standing army in the field year round represented a considerable drain upon the resources of the West Saxon landholding class, especially in light of the devastation wrought by the Danish incursions and the tribute paid the enemy during the previous decade. It is little wonder that many nobles were reluctant to comply with what must have seemed outrageous and unheard of demands. But Alfred persisted, and, in the words of Asser, "by gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and (in the end, when his patience was exhausted) by sharply chastising those who were disobedient . . . he carefully and cleverly exploited and converted his bishops and ealdormen and nobles, and his thegns most dear to him, and reeves as well . . . to his own will and to the general advantage of the whole realm."²¹ One can get some rough sense of what Alfred was asking of his subjects by considering the demographic demands made by this military reform. The thirty West Saxon boroughs enumerated in the Burghal Hidage required, at least on paper, a standing force of 27,070 men.²² Given that the population of Wessex in 890 could hardly been much greater than 450,000 – the approximate population of this region in 1086 – the borough garrisons must have constituted at least 6 percent of the kingdom's total population.²³ Perhaps as many as one out of every five able-bodied free

²⁰ ASC, s.a. 893, 896. For a discussion of Alfred's navy, see Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 211, 289–90, 291. Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 109–13, and Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 305–307, point out the practical problems of Alfred's design. But cf. Edwin and Joyce Gifford, "Alfred's New Long-Ships," Alfred the Great: Eleventh-Centenary Conference, University of Southampton, Sept. 11, 1999.

²¹ Asser, *Life of Alfred*, ch. 91, in Keynes and Lapidge, 101–102. For an interesting discussion of the difficulties Alfred faced in ruling his kingdom, see Janet Nelson, "Wealth and Wisdom: The Politics of Alfred the Great," *Acta*, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies at Binghamton, N.Y., 11 (1986 for 1984), 31–52.

²² "The Burghal Hidage," ed. and trans. Alexander Rumble, in *The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 24–35, at 31, 35. For discussion of this figure, see David Hill, "The Nature of the Figures," in *Defence of Wessex*, 77–79, and Nicholas Brooks, "The West Saxon Hidage and the 'Appendix'," pp. 87–90.

²³ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 207. Cf. Brooks, "The Crucible of Defeat," 18–19.

adult males in Wessex was serving in these garrison forces – and this does not even take into account the warriors who served in Alfred’s standing army. To put this in historical perspective, the Prussian military at the height of the Napoleonic Wars absorbed only 4% of that nation’s population.²⁴

The Chronicle’s account of the campaigns of 892–95 reveals how well the system worked in practice. In 871 Halfdan’s forces had encamped at Reading and ravaged the heartland of Wessex throughout the winter and spring. Alfred and his brother King Æthelred could do little more than try to engage the Danes in battle and to intercept as best they could their raiding parties before buying them off with tribute. In 892 two separate invading forces several times larger than the *micel here* that Alfred had faced twenty years before made camps in the south and the north of Kent, threatening to split Alfred’s forces. They were then joined by opportunistic Scandinavian settlers from Northumbria and East Anglia. It is telling, then, that the military action during this crisis occurred mainly in Mercia and along the frontiers of Alfred’s kingdom. Only once did a Viking band penetrate into the countryside of Surrey, and that force was intercepted and destroyed at Farnham by the mounted *fyrð* under the command of the *ætheling* Edward.²⁵ The exception was in Devonshire, where Alfred himself led an army against a joint raiding force of Northumbrians and East Anglians. Even here Alfred’s success was predicated on the ability of the garrisons of his burhs to hold out until relieved by the mobile field force. Alfred’s arrival led to a stalemate, but time was on Alfred’s side. With the prospect of plunder fading, the Scandinavians forces abandoned the attack. Tellingly, when they tried to recoup some of their losses during their return voyage with a sudden raid on Chichester, they found that burh well defended. The garrison “killed many hundreds of them, and captured some of their ships”²⁶ The forces of Hasteinn found it no easier to penetrate the Thames border in Wessex.

Alfred’s military establishment was worth the money and manpower.²⁷ Not only did it prove the salvation of Wessex in the 890s, but in the hands of Alfred’s successors, it became a finely honed instrument of aggression. The result was the creation through conquest of a unified kingdom of England. The true fruit of Alfred’s success was the halcyon reign of his great-grandson Edgar the Peaceable (959–75) during which England experienced a generation of peace and prosperity. Ironically, the seeds of Æthelred’s defeat were planted at this time. For as the initial Viking threat receded the system of defenses created by Alfred and Edward was gradually replaced by one less costly and better suited for peacetime. The very success enjoyed by Alfred and the following two

²⁴ David Chandler, *Atlas of Military Strategy* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 23.

²⁵ Æthelweard, *Chronicon*, ed. A. Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 49–50.

²⁶ Æthelweard, *Chronicon*, 50.

²⁷ It is possible that Guthrum helped defray the costs through the payment of tribute after 878. Certainly, the economy of Wessex benefited greatly from the success of Alfred and his successors. See J.R. Maddicott, “Trade, Industry and the Wealth of King Alfred,” *Past and Present* 123 (1989): 3–51, esp. 14–16.

generations of West Saxon kings helps explain the disasters of Æthelred's reign.

The history of Anglo-Saxon military institutions during the mid-tenth century is difficult to reconstruct. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Alfredian burhs of Wessex were gradually transformed into market towns, their defenses slighted to allow better access. Some of the forts were abandoned entirely. The same process probably occurred in the Midlands with consolidation of West Saxon control over the Midlands in the 940s and 950s. This is not to suggest that Edgar's England was defenseless. Though John of Worcester's assertion that Edgar had a fleet of 3,600 ships deployed in three equal fleets is clearly an exaggeration, there can be little doubt that English naval power lay behind the Chronicler's boast: "there was no fleet so proud, nor raiding-army so strong, that fetched itself carrion among the English race, while the noble king governed the royal seat."²⁸ Edgar's hegemony over a maritime empire was symbolized by the ceremony in which Edgar piloted a boat rowed by eight British sub-kings on the Dee River during the king's formal consecration in 973. There is good reason to believe that it was during Edgar's reign that "ship sokes" were first established to provide the king with the warships he needed.²⁹

What remained of Alfred's military arrangements were abandoned during the turmoil that marked the reign of Edgar's son Edward the Martyr (975–78). To go by the evidence of the Bishop Oswald's leases, in particular the account of services owed given in S 1368, even in Edgar's reign the military quotas of bishops and abbots were being withdrawn from the contingents led by the shire reeves and ealdormen and placed under the command of *archiductores* appointed by these prelates.³⁰ This "privatization" of the military forces of the kingdom appears to have become generalized in the period following Edgar's death, as secular nobles obtained the same privilege to raise and lead troops as enjoyed by ecclesiastical lords.³¹ Late tenth- and early eleventh-century texts such as *Libellus Æthelwoldi*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and Byrhtferth's *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* depict a world in which powerful nobles expressed their status and advanced their interests by maintaining impressive military households and affinities.

When the Vikings suddenly returned in 980, they found a peaceful and wealthy England ripe for pillaging. It was certainly a well-administered, or at least a highly administered, kingdom, in which the central government had in place effective mechanisms for the maintenance of order and the raising of

²⁸ ASC s.a. 975 (D), trans. Michael Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Routledge, 1998), 121. Cf. John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk, vol. 2 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), s.a. 973, 975.

²⁹ P. Taylor, "The Endowment and Military Obligations of the See of London: A Reassessment of Three Sources," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 14 (1992): 299–302. See also the comment by Patrick Wormald on Oswaldslow. "Lordship and Justice in the Early English Kingdom: Oswaldslow Revisited," in W. Davies and P. Fouracre, *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 126.

³⁰ Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, 152–61, 273 n. 49.

³¹ I owe this suggestion to Professor Greg Rose (private communication, July 20, 1999).

revenues. But one must not mistake bureaucratic efficiency and ideological sophistication for military strength. It was in this aspect of governance that Æthelred's England fell short. Here a comparison with contemporary West Francia is illustrative. Francia, which had suffered so much from Viking raids during the previous century, was now to enjoy relative immunity from attack. The rise of the powerful Norman and Angevin states blocking access to the Seine and the Loire Rivers had seen to that.³² Indeed, whereas Viking raiders had in the previous century crisscrossed the Channel in pursuit of plunder, now they were more likely to use Norman ports for safe harborage to plan assaults on England.

Even before Æthelred II assumed the throne, Alfred's standing army had given way to ad hoc levies summoned to meet crises. Town defenses had been allowed to erode; the defensive ditches of some boroughs had even been filled in to facilitate commercial expansion.³³ Many towns, of course, continued to maintain their defenses, but without permanent garrisons acting in tandem with the field army they could do little more than offer refuge to the civilian population and they often failed to do even this. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells of town after town sacked and burnt (by my count twenty-one between 980 and 1011). London's successful resistance against the invaders in 994 was glorious precisely because it was so exceptional.³⁴ The very memory of Alfred's burghal system had forgotten. The Chronicler does not bemoan the disintegration of town defenses in describing the Viking attacks. It is almost as if they never had existed at all.

When the battle of Maldon was fought in August of 991, King Æthelred had no clearly defined strategy for dealing with the Vikings. This is not at all surprising, for at first the threat must have seemed modest. The raids of the 980s certainly caused local devastation, but they were sporadic and seemed a problem for local authorities rather than the king. Byrhtnoth's disaster at Maldon in 991 convinced Æthelred and his councilors of the gravity of the situation and of the wisdom of purchasing peace. The 10,000 pounds offered the raiders in 991 was only the first of many such payments that became increasingly expensive as the invading armies grew larger and hungrier.³⁵

³² For Count Fulk Nerra of Anjou's defensive measures against possible Viking naval incursions, see Bernard Bachrach, *Fulk Nerra: The Neo-Roman Consul, 987-1040* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 33.

³³ Jeremy Haslam, *Early Medieval Towns in Britain c. 700-1140* (Aylesbury, Bucks.: Shire Publications, 1985), 50.

³⁴ London seems to have had effective defenses, since it withstood attack in 994, 1009, 1013, and 1016 (despite an attempt at circumvallation).

³⁵ On the reliability of the Chronicle's escalating figures for the payment of Danegeld, see the recent exchange between John Gillingham and M.K. Lawson in *The English Historical Review: Gillingham*, "The Most Precious Jewel in the English Crown': Levels of Danegeld and Heregeld in the Early Eleventh Century," *EHR* 104 (1989): 373-84; Lawson, "Those Stories Look True': Levels of Taxation in the Reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut," *EHR* 104 (1989): 385-406; Gillingham, "Chronicles and Coins as Evidence for Levels of Tribute and Taxation in Late Tenth and Early Eleventh Century England," *EHR* 105 (1990): 939-50; Lawson, "Danegeld and Heregeld Once More," *EHR* 105 (1990): 951-61.

As with Alfred, Æthelred's payment of Danegeld was meant to buy time as well as peace. From the early 990s on, Æthelred used diplomacy and cash to divide his enemies and deprive them of foreign support. Unlike Alfred, whose wartime diplomacy focused on neighboring Mercia and Wales, Æthelred's foreign policy was conducted against the backdrop of Continental politics, reflecting how much more England – and Scandinavia – was now integrated into the medieval European state system. The dukes of Normandy, for example, were alternately threatened and courted, as the king tried to close their ports to his enemies.³⁶ Though Alfred was well informed about Viking activities on the continent and knew that the same bands were ravaging both kingdoms, he apparently did nothing to coordinate defenses with his West Frankish contemporaries, probably because his overall policy was to make Wessex a less-inviting target than Francia. This was not an option for Æthelred, which should serve as a reminder that the two kings lived in quite different political worlds.

King Æthelred also played a Norwegian card against the Danes.³⁷ In 994 he managed to separate the Norse chieftain Olaf Tryggvason from his erstwhile ally the Danish King Swein, even standing sponsor at the savage young chieftain's confirmation. In return for 22,000 pounds, gifts of friendship, and provisions for his men, Olaf agreed to aid Æthelred against his enemies.³⁸ That year Olaf, with Æthelred's blessings, departed England never to return. Although Olaf never served Æthelred as a mercenary captain, his activities in Norway drew Swein's attention and kept the Danish king occupied until the battle of Svold in AD 1000.³⁹ Fourteen years after Olaf Tryggvason's defeat, Æthelred helped another Norwegian Olaf, St. Olaf, obtain the throne, undoubtedly with an eye toward creating mischief for his enemies at home.⁴⁰ Æthelred's policy of turning marauders into allies bore its greatest fruit in 1012, when the Danish mercenary captain Thorkell the Tall, with a fleet of forty-five ships, took service with the king whose realm he had been pillaging for the previous four years. Although Æthelred's dealings with Thorkell proved to have mixed results, his general policy of divide and survive was on the whole sensible.

Archaeological excavations over the last two decades also warn us against accepting too readily the C,D,E-Chronicler's picture of a desperate and incapable

³⁶ James Campbell, "England, France, Flanders and Germany in the Reign of Ethelred II: Some Comparisons and Connections," in *Ethelred the Unready*, ed. Hill, 255–70, reprinted in James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 199–201; Elisabeth M.C. Van Houts, "The Political Relations between Normandy and England before 1066 According to the 'Gesta Normannorum Ducum,'" in *Les Mutations socio-culturelles au tournant des XIe–XIIe siècles*, ed. R. Foreville and C. Viola (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1984), 85–97.

³⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, "The Viking Policy of Ethelred the Unready," *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987): 284–95. Cf. Phyllis R. Brown's and Peter Sawyer's responses in the same issue of the journal.

³⁸ For the text of Æthelred's treaty with Olaf, see Keynes, "Historical Context," in Scragg, ed., *Maldon*, 103–107; *EHD*, I, no. 42.

³⁹ Lund, "The Danish Perspective," in Scragg, ed., *Maldon*, 138–40.

⁴⁰ Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1968), 375.

monarch. Apparently, Æthelred not only recognized the vulnerability of the boroughs but took steps to remedy this problem. Perhaps as early as the 990s he began an ambitious program of military construction. New boroughs were raised on the sites of iron-age hill-forts at South Cadbury in Somerset, Old Sarum in Wiltshire, and Cissbury in Sussex, and the defenses of existing boroughs were refurbished, as stone walls replaced timber revetments and palisades.⁴¹

The disasters of the 980s and 990s also led Æthelred to reevaluate and strengthen his naval and military forces. In 1008 he extended the ship-soke system throughout his kingdom, creating naval districts of 310 hides to facilitate the construction and manning of a great armada, and simultaneously ordered a helmet and a corselet to be provided from every eight hides “unremittingly over all England.”⁴² If we go by the hidage total of Domesday Book (about 70,000 hides for all of England south of the Tees), this would have meant a fleet of about 200 ships and an army of almost 9,000 fully armed warriors. Though the institution of the “ship sokes” in this annal has attracted the lion’s share of scholarly attention, the provision for the production of body armor is of equal military interest. Æthelred and his advisors apparently recognized that their troops were “outgunned” by the Vikings, and took the necessary steps to upgrade the equipment of their warriors. That this royal order was more than an exercise in paper-work is underscored by an interesting change in the composition of heriots before and after 1008. As Nicholas Brooks observed, mail coats and helmets are not normally found among the heriots of tenth-century wills; in heriots of wills issued after 1008, however, body armor appears as a matter of course.⁴³ One can only speculate where the king’s armory or armories were, and how and to whom his officers distributed the weapons stored there. What is certain, though, is that Æthelred used the powerful institutions of governance of late Saxon England to remedy the deficiencies in the military forces he had inherited.

In 1009 Æthelred ordered his new fleet to be stationed off Sandwich to guard against the return of the Vikings. But the naval preparations came to nothing. In the words of the Chronicler, “we had not the good fortune or honour that the naval force was of use to this country, any more than it had been on many

⁴¹ See C.A.R. Radford, “The Later Pre-Conquest Boroughs and their Defenses,” *Medieval Archaeology* 14 (1970): 81–103; M. Biddle, “Towns,” in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D.M. Wilson (London: Methuen, 1976), 140–41. On the excavations at Cadbury, see Leslie Alcock, “By South Cadbury is that Camelot . . .” *The Excavations of Cadbury Castle 1966–1970* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 194–201. There is evidence for the refurbishing of defenses during the late Saxon period at Wallingford, Cricklade, Amesbury, Malmesbury, Wareham, Christchurch, Lydford, and Daws Castle near Watchet. See Jeremy Haslam, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England* (Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore, 1984), 76, 109, 128, 137, 153, 188, 193, 258.

⁴² *ASC*, s.a. 1008.

⁴³ Nicholas Brooks, “Arms and Status in Late-Saxon England,” in *Ethelred the Unready*, ed. Hill, 85–90; idem, “Weapons and Armour,” in *Maldon*, ed. Scragg, 215–17. One must be cautious, however, about relying too heavily upon this evidence, considering how few Old English wills have survived.

previous occasions.”⁴⁴ In the end, the new boroughs and ship-sokes no more saved England from conquest than did the vast sums the king paid his conquerors. As impressive as Æthelred’s military measures were, they were not enough to deter or defeat the armies of Swein Forkbeard and his son Cnut the Great. And while it is true that Æthelred had a much larger territory to defend than Alfred – one more analogous to Charles the Bald’s sprawling kingdom⁴⁵ – his measures failed to ensure the security of even the core of his kingdom, Wessex. (And one must also consider that if Æthelred’s realm was larger, so were the resources he had to defend it.) If this failure was due in part to the strength of the Scandinavian forces, it was also owed to the lack of an overall coherent defensive strategy. Alfred’s system was a synergy; Æthelred’s was just the opposite. The individual parts of his military system were more impressive than the whole.

Nor can one ignore the role played in the defeat by the treachery and incompetence of the men whom Æthelred appointed to lead his armies. About this, at any rate, the Chronicler was right. Alfred’s success was predicated upon his ability to bind the West Saxon (and Mercian) nobility to him. Certainly, not all were willing to bow to his demands, and we know of at least one ealdorman who forfeited his possessions because he betrayed his oath of loyalty.⁴⁶ Still, when the West Saxon nobility could have abandoned the fugitive Alfred in the winter and spring of 878, they did not. Whether or not Alfred’s plight was exaggerated by the Chronicler to point up more clearly the analogy with David taking refuge in his cave, it is clear that Alfred was in desperate straits. By contrast, Æthelred lost the support of even the West Saxon thegnage in 1013, this in spite of his successful resistance to Swein’s siege of London. There can be no more dramatic a commentary on the pitiful ending of Æthelred II’s reign than the activities of his eldest son Edmund Ironside in 1015 and early 1016. Edmund’s defiance of his father’s judicial judgments and his independent conduct of military campaigns are as much evidence of a monarchy in disarray as Alfred’s joint military actions with his son Edward reflect the stability of that king’s rule.

Æthelred had institutional authority far surpassing that enjoyed by Alfred. Alfred “cajoled and persuaded.” Æthelred had the power to do much more. In terms of kingship, Æthelred’s failure cannot be explained as the result of institutional weakness. Royal rule in late tenth- and early eleventh-century England could be, in the words of one recent commentator, “arbitrary, bordering on tyranny” (though, in practice, the powers of the king usually would have been circumscribed “by the problem of enforcement and the consequent need to rule

⁴⁴ *ASC*, s.a. 1009.

⁴⁵ Including Northumbria, Æthelred’s kingdom was approximately four times the size of Alfred’s – 50,000 square miles compared to 12,000.

⁴⁶ Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968), no. 362. It is only because of the chance mention in a later charter than we know of the treachery and forfeiture of Ealdorman Wulfhere, and one can only speculate how loyal Alfred’s nobility would look to us if the C,D,E-Chronicler had been recording his reign.

as the nobility expected”⁴⁷). The decade spanning 1006 and 1016, however, was hardly business as usual. It has become fashionable to minimize the tensions and treasons in Æthelred’s court and the king’s sometimes brutal responses.⁴⁸ Still, one cannot ignore entirely the litany of executed and exiled ealdormen and thegns that appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. True, we cannot assess the merits of the judicial punishments handed out to them; nor can we know whether the Chronicler was exaggerating the disloyalty of Eadric Streona and his ilk. But we can render our judgment of Æthelred on the basis of the pledge he was forced to make before his nobility would allow him to return in 1014, that he would rule more justly than he had. Anglo-Saxon kings governed through a “tightly knit aristocracy bound to one another and to the king through ties of kinship, marriage, lordship and close association.”⁴⁹ In this personal network lay the true unity of the kingdom. Æthelred’s inability to inspire confidence in these men and to command their loyalty was the true key to his ultimate failure.

As the Chronicler observed, quoting a contemporary aphorism, “When the leader gives way, the whole army will be much hindered.”⁵⁰ One could say with equal justice that if a king gave way, his whole kingdom would suffer. One cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Crown in the unity of “England” in the late tenth and the early eleventh centuries. It was royal courts, royal administration, royal *fyrds*, and loyalty to one’s *cynehlaford*, one’s “royal lord”, that bound together not only the great nobility of the court but the local landholders of what had been Mercia, Wessex, East Anglia, and Northumbria. What unity there was resided in the person of Æthelred. As Archbishop Wulfstan was to enjoin in the law codes he drafted in the dark days of 1008 and the even darker ones of 1014, “And let us loyally support one royal lord, and all of us together defend our lives and our land.”⁵¹

We cannot recover Æthelred’s personality and character from the diplomas, law codes, and chronicle accounts of his reign. That he was neither irresolute nor a coward seems evident even from the unflattering portrayal of the king in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. However else one wishes to characterize it, the St. Brice’s Day massacre was a decisive act. Nor can one fault Æthelred’s resolution following the death of Swein in 1014, when he returned from exile to drive Cnut out of England.⁵² Even the manner in which Æthelred abandoned his kingdom to Swein in 1013, surely the nadir of his reign, reflects well on the

⁴⁷ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 145.

⁴⁸ In addition to Keynes, “Tale of Two Kings,” see Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, 59–63.

⁴⁹ Robin Fleming, *Kings and Lords in Conquest England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23. Cf. Stafford, *Unity and Conquest*, 37–40, 156–61.

⁵⁰ *ASC*, s.a. 1003.

⁵¹ V *Æthelred* 35; VIII *Æthelred* 44 § 1; IX *Æthelred* 1. On the development of the concept of *cynehlaford*, see Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, 94–95.

⁵² *ASC*, s.a. 1002, 1014.

personal courage of the king; rather than flee to Normandy with his wife after the submission of the Londoners, he stayed with the fleet in the Thames, arranged for safe passage of his children to Normandy, and then, defying Swein to attack, sailed to the Isle of Wight, where he held court and celebrated Christmas before crossing to the Continent.⁵³

But personal courage alone does not make a military leader. For whatever reason, Æthelred was a reluctant warrior-king who preferred to entrust his armies to others rather than lead them himself.⁵⁴ In ordinary times this probably would have mattered little (as Edward the Confessor's reign attests), but given the series of defeats suffered by his generals and the regional tensions that were emerging in the kingdom under the punishment inflicted by the Vikings, Æthelred's lack of martial spirit or prowess sealed the fate of his kingdom. In 1016, when the presence of the king was most necessary, Æthelred was most conspicuously absent. The king's eldest son, Edmund, could not compensate for his father's reluctance to take the field; he was still only an *ætheling*, and one whose loyalty to the king was perhaps suspect. The two armies Edmund assembled in the winter of 1016 dissolved, the first because "the Mercians would not join with the West Saxons and the Danes" in the absence of the king, and the second because Æthelred, fearing treachery, abandoned the host to return to the safety of London.⁵⁵ Edmund ended up waging war on his own.

Æthelred's military problems stemmed, in part, from the inadequacies of the military system that he had inherited from his father. This, however, is not the whole story. The failure was also Æthelred's. Personal royal leadership was as critical and irreplaceable in the age of Æthelred as it had been in the age of Alfred. Despite a flurry of activity that culminated in a full-scale military reform in 1008, the king and his advisors were, in the final analysis, unable to devise and implement an effective military policy that could correct these deficiencies. Just as critically, Æthelred himself was unable to inspire the loyalty and confidence among the nobility that was a *sine qua non* for successful military resistance. In contrast, King Alfred had survived the debacle of Chippenham in the winter of 878 because of his force of character. Despite his flight into the Somerset marshes he was still capable of rallying his nobles so that they flocked

⁵³ *ASC*, s.a. 1013.

⁵⁴ He seems to have participated in only two campaigns, the first in 1000 to ravage Strathclyde, and the second in 1014, to devastate Lindsey: *ASC*, s.a. 1000, 1014. He was also with the fleet at Sandwich in 1009, but if we are to believe the Chronicler, that naval campaign was abandoned before it began.

Æthelred's lack of interest in military glory should be seen as a personal trait rather than a consequence of the growth of the realm and of royal administration. Not only does he contrast in this respect with his predecessors, notably Alfred, Edward the Elder, and Athelstan, but with his successors as well, Edmund Ironside, Cnut, and, of course, Harold Godwinson. Keynes plausibly suggests that Ælfric of Eynsham's remarks in *Wyrðwriteras* on how the kings of Israel entrusted their armies to ealdormen was meant to reflect (and perhaps justify) Æthelred's military policy. *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, 206–207.

⁵⁵ John of Worcester, *Chronicle*, ed. Darlington, 483 (s.a. 1016); *ASC*, s.a. 1016.

to him at Egbert's Stone when he emerged to fight Guthrum in the spring. Alfred was perhaps not a great general in the sense of his tactical abilities. But he had courage and political acumen, as well as strategic genius.

King Harold Godwinson was also a warrior-king. Hastings, as Morillo and others have pointed out, was a hard-fought battle the outcome of which was uncertain for most of the day.⁵⁶ But it was not merely the bad fortune of having to fight in succession two invading armies that doomed Harold. He, like Æthelred, possessed a military system that was seriously flawed. It was capable of considerable logistical achievement, not the least of which was the ability to keep an army and fleet together throughout most of the summer of 1066.⁵⁷ But it is also clear that Harold, like Æthelred, depended on ad hoc levies that served for a specified term. When the sixty days were up, Harold's army disintegrated, as his *fjrd* soldiers returned to their homes. Unlike Alfred, Harold could not rely on a permanent standing army with rotating contingents. This proved no problem if he were to fight an offensive campaign against the Welsh, as he did successfully in 1064. It proved fatal in 1066 when Harold found himself confronting invasions in two widely separated geographical areas.

Nor had Æthelred's renovations and burh building borne fruit. When William landed at Pevensey and marched his army to Hastings, one of Alfred's burhs, there was no reported resistance. Indeed, William set his men to *restoring* the defenses at Hastings. Domesday Book records only one shire custom mandating fortification work in 1066, that of Cheshire.⁵⁸ It may not be a coincidence that the only "castles" that existed in England were also in the Welsh marches. Historians have been wont to observe that these castles were erected by Norman followers of King Edward. What is equally interesting is their location. The Welsh marches were a war zone marked by sporadic raiding. Anchored by Chester and supported by the Welsh military colonists in Archenfield, these castles provided both refuge against raids and staging grounds for attacks into Wales. That the rest of England lacked castles and fortresses may have had less to do with the absence of pre-Conquest Norman settlers than with the peaceful conditions that prevailed throughout the country during the reign of Edward the Confessor, even in the north after Siward's successful expedition into Scotland in 1054.⁵⁹ In a number of respects, Harold's military system was much like that

⁵⁶ Stephen Morillo, "Hastings: An Unusual Battle," in *The Battle of Hastings*, ed. Stephen Morillo, Warfare in History (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1996), 218–27.

⁵⁷ Richard Abels, "English Logistics and Military Administration, 871–1066: The Impact of the Viking Wars," *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1–1300*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen, Publications from the National Museum Studies in Archaeology and History, Vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 1997), 257–65.

⁵⁸ DB i. 262b. Cf. DB i. 154 (Oxford), where those who dwelled in mural houses had the obligation to do host service and wall-work in lieu of all other royal customs.

⁵⁹ The archaeological evidence from the excavation of the cemeteries of St. Andrews, Fishergate, in York is suggestive here. Nineteen skeletons showed blade injuries consistent with battle. The dating of the burials makes it tempting to see these as men who fell in the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and it is therefore especially interesting that few of these men

inherited by Alfred, though on a far grander scale reflecting the increased size and wealth of the kingdom.

Because of the absence of fortifications in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, English warfare doctrine seems to have developed differently from on the Continent. Whereas Continental generals, William included, took to heart Vegetius' injunction to avoid battle and concentrate instead on ravaging, so as to deprive the enemy of supplies while securing food for one's own troops,⁶⁰ English commanders in the eleventh century both ravaged *and* sought battle. Harold's military career had emphasized seeking the enemy. He sought William in 1066 and found him.

The apparent paradox that England possessed an extraordinarily sophisticated military-recruitment and logistical system in the first half of the eleventh century and yet fell prey to two invaders may not be paradoxical after all. The military reorganization of England undertaken by King Alfred after Edington proved effective in preserving his kingdom. It was also extended by his son, daughter, and grandsons to conquer and consolidate West Saxon control of the Danelaw. But Alfred's expensive system of interconnected burhs complemented by a mobile standing army and a small fleet gradually eroded over the course of the tenth century. It was, in part, rendered unnecessary by its success. But it was also a victim of the political chaos that followed the death of Edgar in 975 and of a gradual process of privatizing the *fyrð*. Perhaps the greatest irony is that England fell victim to its very success. The state that arose on the foundations laid by Alfred proved better at raising revenues and supplies for invaders than in defending itself against them. In Francia, on the other hand, small, well-defended principalities dotted with castles arose capable of defending themselves against their neighbors and other invaders. The very failure of Charles the Bald and his successors to create an integrated military system that could preserve the integrity of the West Frankish kingdom meant that when the Vikings did return at the end of the tenth century, it was to England they came.

As Warren Hollister posited nearly four decades ago, the military institutions of late Anglo-Saxon England were as sophisticated and effective as those of any contemporary medieval state. They were comparable at the very least to the military resources possessed by its conqueror, Duke William of Normandy. But it is a quite different matter to compare them to the extraordinary military system devised by Alfred and perfected by his immediate successors, a military system that had been abandoned almost a hundred years before Harold ascended the throne.

showed evidence of previous blade injuries. See G. Stroud and R.L. Kemp, *Cemeteries of St Andrew, Fishergate*, Published for the York Archaeological Trust by the Council for British Archaeology (York, 1993), 232–41.

⁶⁰ John Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 141–58.