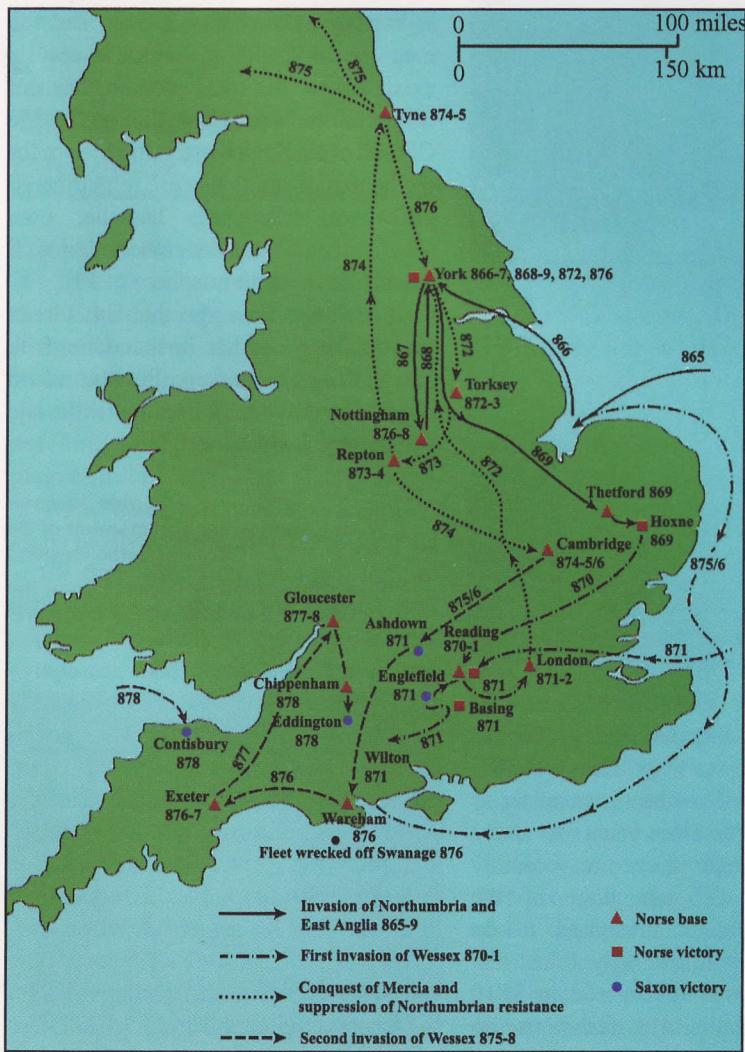


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# The Wars of Alfred the Great

Alfred the Great was a brilliant military leader and organiser. Throughout the 870s, Wessex was beset with a sustained series of Viking raids, which cost among other things Alfred's brother, King Aethelred. After assuming the throne and carrying on the fight, Alfred negotiated a peace and used the time purchased by his tribute to turn Wessex into a heavily armed citadel. When the Vikings returned in 892, Alfred held them in place with his fortified burghs and drove them off with his mobile field army. By the time of his death in 899, Alfred ruled much of England, and had secured his Wessex throne against the Vikings...



The campaigns of the Great Heathen Army 865-879.

## Heathen Raiders from Across the Sea

The first recorded Viking raid upon England occurred in the year 793. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports:

Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine, and after that in the same year the raiding of the heathen miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.<sup>1</sup>

For the first half of the ninth century, the Vikings sporadically raided the English coast. While costly, these raids were never more than a nuisance. But in 865 a great wave of Viking marauders arrived in England, settling first in Kent before plundering their way north. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls them the 'great heathen army'. They ravaged East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria, sacking cities like York, killing kings and nobility, and taking everything of value. Having exhausted the resources of northern and eastern England, the Vikings looked west to Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons.

An evocation of the Saxon shield wall.



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## Armies and Weapons in the Struggle for England

To defend Wessex, Aethelred and Alfred had the *fyrd*. The *fyrd* was an Anglo-Saxon militia led by ealdormen and thegns. The latter were the rich land owners and nobility who were rewarded with the king's favour in exchange for military service. They were often armed with swords and outfitted with mail *byrnies* and conical helmets. The *fyrd*'s rank and file was lower-class freeholders and commoners. These men carried a simple spear, which could be thrust or thrown, and a small, round wooden shield, covered in leather and ringed by a metal band. In combat, they would lock shields and form a wall. In theory the shield wall would stand firm in defence or press forward in attack.<sup>2</sup>

The Vikings, who did not start using their infamous two handed battle axe

until the tenth century, used similar arms and equipment. They were also organized along similar lines. Raiding parties would form around kings who promised great glory and plunder. The kings delegated much authority to jarls; nobility and prominent men in command of raiding parties or sections of raiding parties. The Vikings were accomplished sailors who used their longboats for strategic mobility (though they surely would never have called it that). They could be brutal and recreationally cruel. Contemporaries often substitute the word Dane for Viking, though they hailed from all over Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup>

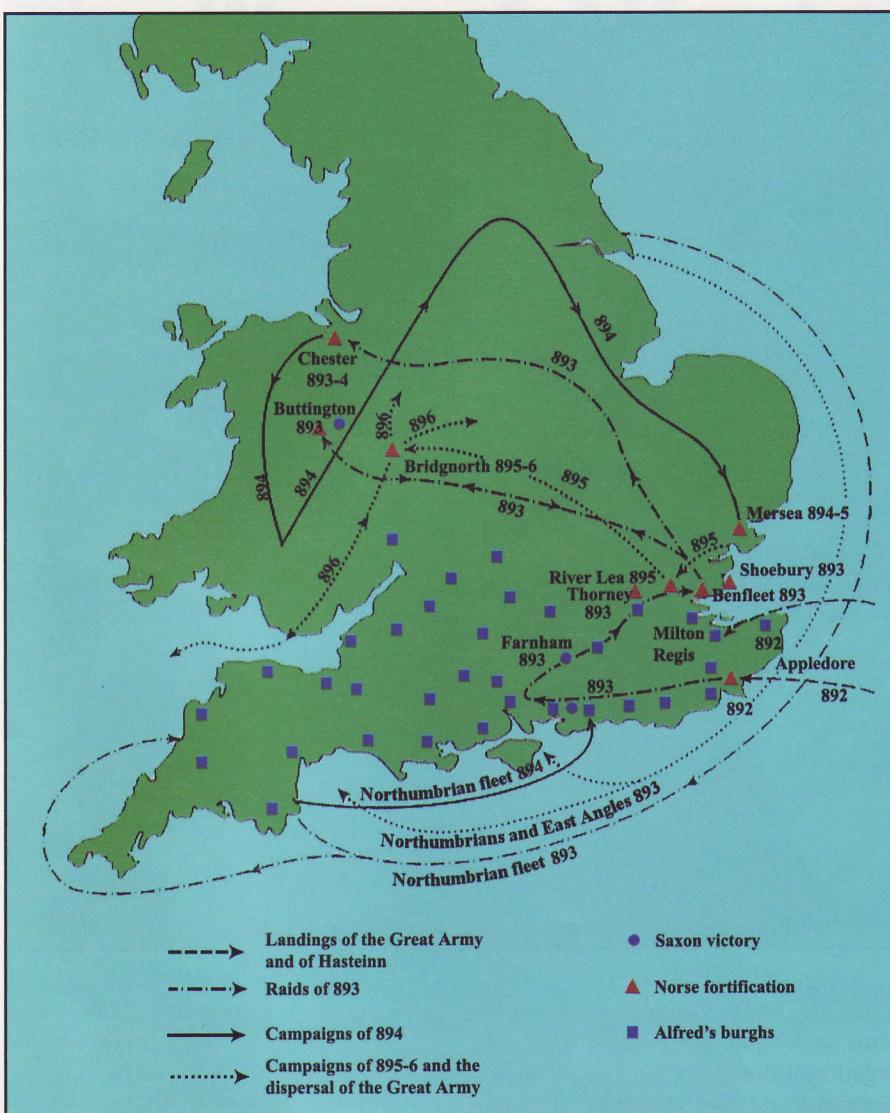
## The Vikings come to Wessex

In late 870 the 'great heathen army' invaded Wessex. Led by the Viking kings Bagsecg and Halfdan, the army

crossed the Thames and made camp at Reading, about thirty miles up the Thames from London. The Vikings fortified the camp and sent raiding parties against the countryside. In the New Year the local *fyrd*, commanded by an ealdorman named Aethelwulf, was heavily defeated at Englefield. A few days later, King Aethelred and Alfred arrived with the rest of the West Saxon *fyrd* and united with Aethelwulf's remaining forces. The combined army marched on Reading. Here a bloody battle was fought and the West Saxons inflicted great slaughter upon the Vikings who then retreated to their fortified camp. But when Aethelred and his men reached the gates the Vikings stormed out in a furious charge 'like wolves' says Asser, Alfred's biographer, and routed the West Saxons. Aethelwulf was killed, but Aethelred and Alfred escaped.<sup>4</sup>

Four days after the battle of

### Alfred's final campaigns, 892-896.



Reading, Aethelred and Alfred attacked Bagsecg's forces at Ashdown, about fifteen miles northwest of their Reading base. Bagsecg held the high ground and deployed his troops in two sections along a ridge; one division he commanded with Halfdan, while the other was led by their *jarl* lieutenants. Aethelred and Alfred agreed to split their forces in two. Aethelred would attack Bagsecg and Halfdan; Alfred would deal with the *jarls*. Alfred led his men into battle first, but Aethelred did not follow. Apparently he refused to attack before he finished his prayers, so Alfred found himself confronting the entire Viking army on his own. Alfred ordered his men to close ranks and charge. Alfred personally led the assault, Asser tells us

'like a wild boar', and held the Vikings in check until Aethelred's forces arrived and fell upon the Viking flank and rear, driving them from the field. Not only had the Vikings fled; King Bagsecg and five *jarls* were killed. Alfred and his brother won a great victory for Wessex.

### Alfred Takes the Throne

Yet after Reading, the West Saxons knew only setbacks. A few weeks later another battle was fought at the royal estate of Basing, ten miles south of Reading. After what Asser calls 'a violent clash on all fronts' the Vikings prevailed. In late March another battle was fought at the royal estate of Meretun. The West

Saxons fought savagely and pushed back the Vikings. But the Vikings regrouped and counterattacked and overwhelmed the Anglo-Saxons. Worse, a great fleet arrived. Under the command of the Viking kings Guthrum, Oscetel, and Anwend, the fleet embarked from the continent as word filtered back that Wessex was ripe for plunder and lightly defended. Wessex was to suffer another blow when, after Easter, Aethelred died. At the age of twenty two, with Wessex under furious attack, Alfred 'with the approval of divine will and according to the unanimous wish of all the inhabitants of the kingdom,' (or so Asser tells us), assumed the throne.

A month after taking the throne, Alfred led his forces into battle at Wilton, about seventy-five miles south of Reading. The battle lasted all day, with neither side gaining a clear advantage. Finally, the Vikings withdrew from the field and Alfred pursued with a small band. Seeing that Alfred lacked the manpower to overwhelm them, the Vikings counterattacked and defeated Alfred's force. The Vikings continued to inflict deprivations upon the countryside. But Alfred would not go quietly. In all, the year 871 saw no less than nine battles between the West Saxons and the Vikings. According to Asser:

...the Saxons were virtually annihilated to a man in this single year...leaving aside the innumerable skirmishes by day and night which Alfred...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.'

### Alfred Sues for Peace

Even so, the Vikings proved to be too much for Wessex and by the end of the year Alfred's resources were exhausted. Alfred was forced to make peace with the Viking invaders and paid them to

abandon their base at Reading and leave Wessex altogether. After Alfred bought them off, the Vikings spent 872-875 ravaging Mercia and Northumbria, after which they returned to Wessex and camped at Wareham. Remembering the chaos brought about by the last Viking raid, Alfred was in no mood to fight and negotiated terms with the Vikings whereby he paid them tribute in return for leaving Wessex alone.

## Viking Treachery

In December of 876 the Vikings broke their word - Asser calls it 'their usual treachery' - marched into Devonshire, and occupied the fortress of Exeter. Alfred rallied the *fyrd* and surrounded the fortress. With their fleet largely destroyed in a violent storm off Devon, thereby cutting them off, the Vikings agreed to terms and left Wessex for Mercia. But the Vikings would be back. This agreement only bought time.

In 878 Guthrum led an army into Wessex and seized the royal estate of Chippenham, northwest of Wiltshire on the River Avon, where Alfred held court. Alfred was unprepared for Guthrum's attack. At the same time, a Viking fleet of twenty-three ships, led by a brother of Halfdan, raided along the coast of Devon and besieged the fortress of Countisbury. Rather than be starved into submission, the local *fyrd* burst from their fortifications, caught the Vikings unaware, and defeated them. Nevertheless, it must have been a drain on the already weak resources of Wessex, for the Viking raids from Chippenham were unusually fierce; so much so that many of the West Saxons fled their lands or pledged allegiance to Guthrum. No longer could Wessex resist the heathen onslaught and most of the countryside fell into Viking hands.

## Alfred Fights On

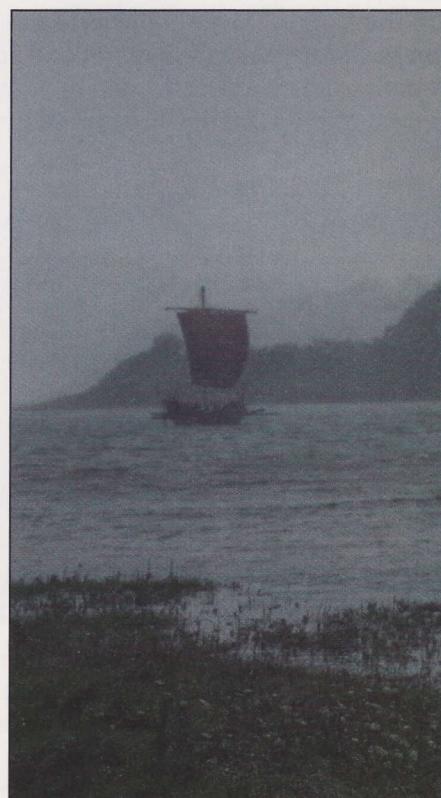
But Alfred was unwilling to concede. In March 878 Alfred fled his estates

with a small band to the marshlands of Somerset and made a camp on the Isle of Athelney near Taunton. From here Alfred continued to resist, sallying out of the marshes to wage a partisan war against the Vikings. Word spread throughout Wessex that West Saxon resistance was not at an end. In early June Alfred led his men out of the marsh with the objective of raising the *fyrd* and bringing about a pitched battle against Guthrum. Alfred marched to Egbert's Stone on Wiltshire's southern border; here he issued a call to arms. In all Alfred seems to have gathered one thousand men. Learning of Alfred's sortie out of the marsh, Guthrum hunkered down amidst his fortifications at Edington. Ready for war, Alfred marched to Guthrum's camp and offered battle. The Vikings sallied out from their fortifications and a fierce battle erupted. This time, West Saxon manhood prevailed over the Great Army; the Vikings fled the field and Alfred pursued, inflicting great suffering upon the Vikings as he went. What was left of the Viking force took refuge inside their fort which Alfred besieged for two weeks, eventually bringing about their surrender. Alfred's victory resulted in a diplomatic coup. He converted Guthrum to Christianity and signed a treaty of friendship. Guthrum left Wessex, promising to plunder it no more, and settled in western Mercia on more or less friendly terms with Alfred.

## Alfred Consolidates His Power

Alfred was not fool enough to count on the good intentions of the Vikings; he had to find a way to stop them militarily, but how? While it is true that he experimented with naval forces against the Vikings he eventually decided that the main effort must come on land. To solidify his land based defence, Alfred took possession of London. It is unclear how this came about, though military action is one possibility. With this move, Alfred gained control of English Mercia and from there could

dominate the Thames. As a result, Alfred concluded a more advantageous treaty with Guthrum. In return for ceding Essex, East Anglia, and the Eastern Midlands to Guthrum, the latter recognised Alfred's undisputed control over Cornwall and everything south of the Thames. Alfred also exerted some control of the western Midlands and English Mercia from Wales to Watling Street, and north to the River Mersey. In describing Alfred's growing power, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claims that 'all the English race turned to him...'. The new territorial arrangement gave Alfred a stable kingdom with defined borders that could be defended. At this time, the Vikings were ravaging the Franks, but this could not last forever and, sooner or later, the Vikings would once again turn their attention to Alfred's kingdom. When they did, Alfred intended to be ready for them.



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**One of ours, or one of theirs?  
– a fearsome question for ninth-century Saxons.**

Alfred's final campaigns, 886-896



© Hamoïs.

**On the Continent Viking armies built substantial fortified bases, yet in Britain apparently did not find it so necessary – why? A reconstruction of Trelleborg in its heyday.**

### Alfred Readies for Another Invasion

During the long interval between sustained Viking attacks, Alfred reorganised his defences and prepared Wessex for the inevitable Viking return. To hold off Viking attacks, Alfred established a string of fortified strongpoints called burghs. Burghs were established along the southern coast and the border with Mercia. Several burghs were also constructed along key waterways and roadways. In some cases, burghs were built on top of old Roman bases; in others they were fresh constructions of wooden palisades, earthen ramparts, and ditches. Burghs were designed to slow down and blunt Viking raids and to serve as refuges in case of attack.

Of course, the burghs could not hold out indefinitely. One of their

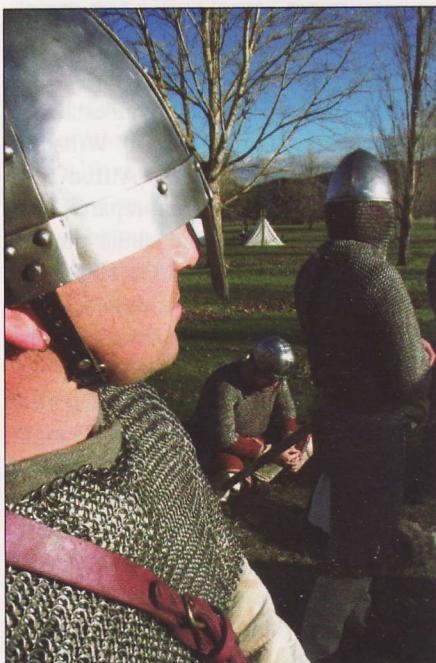
main purposes was to pin down Viking raiding parties until Alfred's reformed *fyrd* arrived. Alfred reformed the *fyrd* in several ways. First, he divided the militia in half. One half was designated to garrison the burghs, the other to serve in his mobile field army. The mobile field army was to march to the relief of besieged burghs and battle the Vikings. Second, to facilitate quick marches to trouble spots, Alfred required men to keep horses on hand and sixty days' rations. Alfred's reforms ensured that he had a force ready to move out and march quickly to the area of battle.

### The Vikings Return

Wessex was as ready as Alfred could make it when in 892, fleeing the famine and pestilence among the West Franks, a large fleet appeared at the mouth of the River Andred. Not long after their arrival, a Viking king named Hasten

arrived at the mouth of the Thames with a fleet of eighty ships. Hasten quickly constructed a fortified base at Milton while the other raiding party operated out of Appledore. The bases were in supporting distance of one another and in position to dominate the Thames.

The English rallied to Alfred, and the Northumbrians and East Anglians swore allegiance to him. Now he was more than just King of the West Saxons; he was King of the Anglo-Saxons. With his new allies, Alfred mobilised the *fyrd*. He positioned his mobile field force between the two Viking camps so that the armies could not unite without fighting him first. The *Chronicle* speaks of constant skirmishing: '... [Alfred's troops] went through the forest in gangs and mounted groups, on whichever edge was without an army and also from the strongholds...' Alfred's forces must have been fearsome, his skirmishers exacting a heavy toll, because the



Picture: Ian Rogers

### The wait is harder than the battle.

Viking armies did not sally from their camps en masse more than twice, once before the *fyrd* had been mobilised and once when they were trying to carry their booty to the fleet in Essex. Here, Alfred struck: he sent his son, Edward,

with a strong force to intercept the Viking army - a vulnerable target as it was laden with booty. Edward overtook the Vikings at Farnham and routed them. The survivors took refuge on an islet, which Edward besieged.

### Alfred Prevails

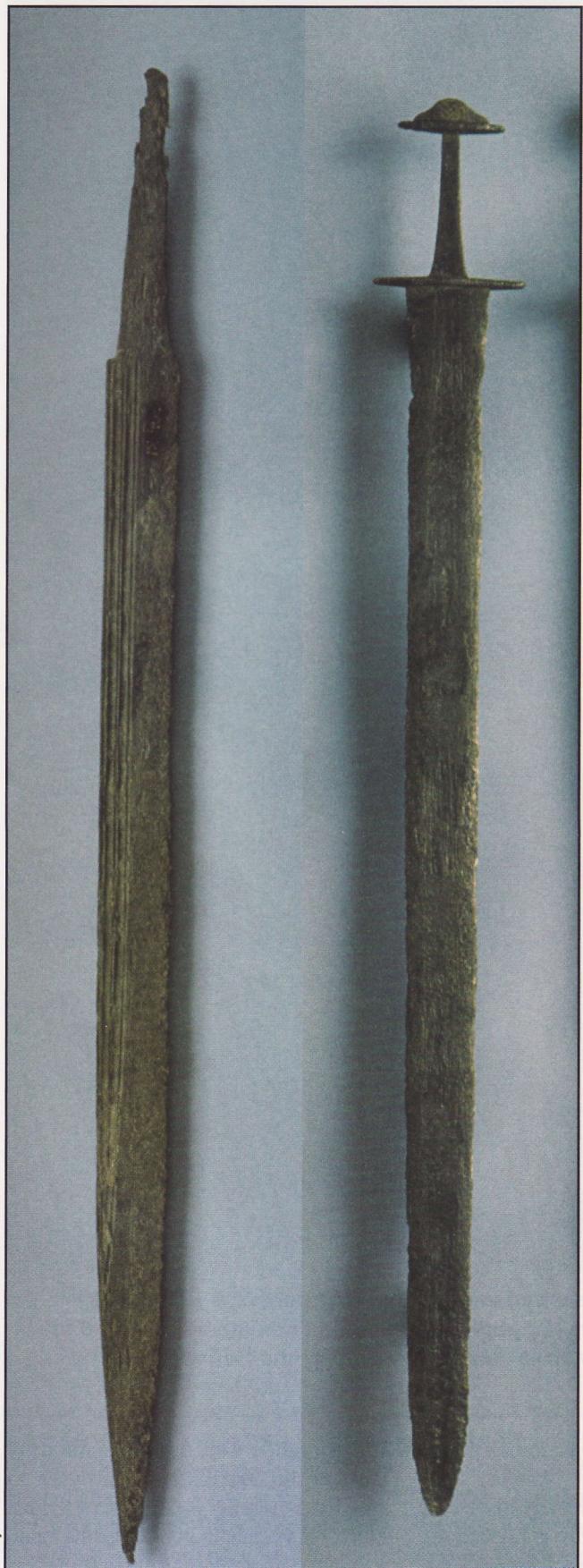
Alfred was marching with his force to join the siege when word reached him that a fleet of one hundred ships threatened Exeter while a smaller fleet of forty ships menaced Devonshire. Alfred at once led most of his army to Exeter. En route he gathered reinforcements at London. With his combined army he marched on Benfleet where Hasten had made camp, housing the majority of his army while he was personally out on a raid. Alfred and his men stormed the base, routed the garrison and put it to the torch, then marching back to London with Viking treasure, women, and children. Among Alfred's prisoners were Hasten's wife and two sons whom he returned to the Dane. Alfred's gesture of goodwill was not reciprocated by Hasten, who returned to Benfleet, built another camp, and once more took to raiding the countryside. While Hasten was plundering, Alfred again struck his base and destroyed it. Then Alfred marched on Exeter and drove off the besieging army. Meanwhile, Viking forces gathered at Shoebury in Essex where they built a base and received reinforcements from bases in East Anglia and Northumbria. From here, the Vikings moved up the Thames and the Severn threatening Somerset. Earls loyal to Alfred, including his son-in-law, gathered their forces to engage the Vikings along the Thames and Severn. They marched against the raiding army, overtook it, and besieged it at Buttington on the Severn shore. The Vikings, short of food, sallied out from their fortifications and attacked the Anglo-Saxons. The Vikings were defeated 'and very great slaughter was made of the Vikings,' the *Chronicle* tells us. The surviving Vikings retreated to Benfleet.



**The Saxons and Norse had very similar cultures, and were both immigrants to Britain. Doubtless that made coexistence easier once English rule was restored. The excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial.**

In early 894 Viking reinforcements arrived from East Anglia and Northumbria, and marched north and west and built a camp at Wirral or Chester, an old Roman fort near the

Welsh border. The Anglo-Saxon army pursued the Vikings and laid siege to this base. Viking parties were ridden down and slaughtered and the land around them ravaged. Although the fort



**Far left:** The weapon which seems to have given the Saxons their name – the seax. Yet 300 years settled in England's fields and forests seems to have gentled them a little by the time the Vikings arrived.

**Left:** Pagan Viking burial practices mean that we know more about the qualities of their beloved swords than possibly any other class of medieval artefact. A tool exquisitely suited to its purpose, and often a work of decorative art as well. © Royal Armouries.

was not stormed, the Vikings were driven out and forced into Wales. This band returned to East Anglia and Northumbria. But again they sallied out and built a base on the island of Mersea near the mouth of the Thames. Meanwhile, the Viking army that attacked Exeter marched north for a time, plundering into Sussex in the Chichester region but the *Chronicle* notes ‘...the garrison put them to flight and killed many hundred of them, and took some of their ships.’

### Alfred's Final Battles

In 895 the Viking band at Mersea ran out their boats, went up the Thames and built a fortified base at Lea, twenty miles above London. The local *fyrd* attacked but was unable to dislodge the Vikings. So that summer, Alfred arrived to supervise operations personally. He made sure that crops were harvested in order to deny them to the Vikings. Then he fortified the river above and below the Viking position, taking away their mobility. The Vikings abandoned their base and marched overland, arriving at Bridgenorth on the Severn, where they camped. Alfred contained the Vikings in the area. Tiring of Alfred and his Anglo-Saxons, the raiding army retreated into East Anglia and Northumbria, and the next year, set out for the Seine. Thus ended the crisis. As the *Chronicle* records, ‘The raiding-army, by the grace of God, had not altogether utterly crushed the English race; but they were a great deal more crushed in those three years...’. In the year 897, Viking bands out of East Anglia and Northumbria would raid the south Wessex coast, but they did not venture inland. Alfred died in 899.

### Alfred's Achievement

Alfred's victory was remarkable. He fought the Vikings, lost, retreated, counterattacked, and was ultimately victorious. He was personally brave. Moreover, he was forward - thinking; his vision united much of England. He founded a military establishment that lasted until (and almost turned back) William the Bastard. Alfred was the greatest Anglo-Saxon warrior king.

**William Stroock**

## The text of the peace treaty between King Alfred and King Guthrum

This is the peace that King Alfred and King Guthrum, and the *Witan* of all the English nation, and all the people that are in East Anglia, have all ordained and with oaths confirmed, for themselves and for their descendants, as well for born as for unborn, who reck of God's mercy or of ours.

1. Concerning our land boundaries – up on the Thames, and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the Ouse unto Watling Street.

2. If a man be slain, we estimate all equally dear, English and Danish, at 8 half marks of pure gold; except the *ceorl* who resides on rented land and their (the Danes') freedmen; they also are equally dear, or at 200. shillings.

3. And if a king's *thegn* be accused of manslaying, if he dares to clear himself on oath, let him do that with 12 king's *thegns*. If any one accuse that man who is of less degree than the king's *thegn*, let him clear himself with 11 of his equals and with one king's *thegn*. And so in every suit which may be more than

4 mancuses. (equivalent to thirty pence) And if he

darenot, let him pay for it threefold, as it may be valued.

4. And that every man know his warrantor in acquiring slaves and horses and oxen.

5. And we all ordained on that day that the oaths were sworn, that neither bondman nor freeman might go to the host without leave, no more than any of them to us. But if it happen that from necessity any of them will have traffic with us or we with them, with cattle and with goods, that is to be allowed in this wise – that hostages be given in pledge of peace, and as evidence whereby it may be known that the party has a clean back.

*Adapted from Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein, eds., Source Problems in English History, Harper and Brothers, New York: 1915.*

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### Further Reading

For further reading, Mr. Stroock recommends contemporary sources on Alfred such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser's *Life of Alfred*. A good modern work is Richard Abels' *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. In *The Viking Art of War*, Paddy Griffith gives a good treatment of Alfred's antagonists.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Swanton, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. (New York: Routledge, 1996)
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Abels. *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. (London: Longman, 1998)
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- <sup>4</sup> Simon Keynes; Michael Lapidge eds. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*. (London: Penguin Books, 1983)
- <sup>5</sup> Treaty with Guthrum Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein, eds., *Source Problems in English History*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1915).