Map 1: Anglo-Saxon Burhs and Travel Routes

Legend and map labels:

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Warwick (914)
Worcester
Buckingham (914)
Alfred-Guthrum frontier c.880
Cricklade
Oxford
Malmesbury
Wallingford
London
Axbridge
Sashas
R. Thames
Bath
Chisbury
Reading
Southwark
Rochester
Canterbury
Watchet
Lyng
Langport
Eashing
Pilton
Wilton
Winchester
Eorpenburnan(?)
Athelney
Shaftesbury
Portchester
Lewes
Exeter
Southampton
Burpham
Lydford
Bridport
Twyneham
Chichester
Hastings
Wareham
Halwell

■   Winchester burh / Roman foundation
•   Wilton burh / non-Roman foundation
□   Towns and forts not mentioned in the burghal hidage
—— Navigable stretches of river
---- Roman road
··········· Trackway
Winchester Burhs assessed at more than 1500 hides
Wilton Burhs assessed at between 1000 and 1500 hides
Pilton Burhs assessed at under 1000 hides
—·—· Alfred-Guthrum frontier c.880

Note: Oxford, Worcester, Warwick and Buckingham were in Mercia.
Edward the Elder fortified Buckingham and Warwick in 914.

0 ___ 50 miles
0 ___ 75 km

Evolving English Strategies during the Viking Wars

Richard Abels

The history of middle and late Saxon England was shaped by the Viking invasions and the military responses of English kings, in particular, those of the two kings who have become respectively bywords for success and failure: Alfred the Great and Æthelred II "Unræd." Thirty years have passed since Simon Keynes in an influential article ruled direct comparisons of the two "out of court," and warned against the temptation "to ask […] why [Æthelred] failed where Alfred had succeeded." Keynes makes a cogent argument against judging "one king in the light of the other," aptly pointing out the disparate quality of the sources that have survived for the two men's reigns.[1] Alfred is unique among Anglo-Saxon rulers in the quantity and quality of the sources we have for his reign, much of which originated in his court, whereas Æthelred was less fortunate in the chronicler of his reign, who wrote in the wake of defeat and under the shadow of his declining posthumous reputation.[2] But I disagree with Keynes that the military challenge each faced, and their responses to those threats, are not comparable.

The thesis of this paper will not surprise those familiar with my previous work, namely that Alfred's success was based on his ability to plan strategically on a grand scale, and that Æthelred II's failure was due, at least in part, to his and his advisors' inability to develop a coherent strategy against a similar threat. Alfred developed and expanded the military institutions he inherited into a new civil defense system that represented a defense-in-depth strategy tailored to meet the particular threat offered by the Great Heathen Army. The threat that Æthelred II faced between 980 and 1016 was in many respects similar, as were some of the main elements in his strategic responses. He too refurbished and constructed burhs and forts, strove to improve the effectiveness of royal armies, and ordered the construction of a royal fleet. As did Alfred, Æthelred II and his advisors understood the Viking threat as a divine punishment for sins, and, like

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[1] Simon Keynes, "A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 36 (1986), 195–217 at 217.

[2] See Simon Keynes, "The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready," in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 59 (1978), pp. 227–53; Richard Abels, "Alfred and his Biographers: Images and Imagination," and Simon Keynes, "Rereading King Æthelred the Unready," in *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250. Essays in Honour of Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia Crick, and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 61–75 and 77–98.

Alfred, attempted to appease God by a program of spiritual reform. The strategic responses of both kings, moreover, evolved along with the changing threat posed by the Viking invaders. But in the end, Æthelred II failed. His responses were piecemeal and ad hoc and, ultimately, ineffective. He lacked the strategic vision of his great, great grandfather, and that cost him his kingdom.

Over the last two decades, John Gillingham's "Vegetian Strategy" thesis has become accepted as the reigning orthodoxy about military strategy in the Middle Ages. In a series of important articles, Gillingham took on the received opinion, best represented by Sir Charles Oman, that strategic thought and planning had all but disappeared from Western Europe between the eleventh and the mid-fourteenth century. A key piece of evidence cited by Oman was the paucity of battles during these centuries, a paradox given the warrior ethos of the knights who dominated the warfare of the time – explained by Oman as a consequence of the lack of strategic planning and the inability of armies to locate each other in the absence of reconnaissance. Gillingham, using largely the same historical sources as Oman, demonstrated that military commanders from the mid-eleventh through early fourteenth centuries did in fact follow a well-defined strategic doctrine, which he characterized as "Vegetian," since it reproduced some of the general precepts set forth by the late Roman military manualist Vegetius whose *Epitoma rei militaris* (or *De re militari*) was among the most widely copied works in the Middle Ages. The key point they took from Vegetius, according to Gillingham, was that good generals should starve the enemy into submission rather than risk battle. The reason this strategy was followed was that it made military sense given the highly militarized landscape of Western Europe in the High Middle Ages and the inherent risk of battle that could turn suddenly on the death of a king or count leading from the front. Consequently, the warfare practiced by Duke William the Bastard (later King William the Conqueror), Richard the Lionheart, William Marshal, and other experienced military commanders of the High Middle Ages featured ravaging and sieges; battles were only risked when a commander believed he enjoyed a decisive advantage and the disadvantaged opponent was unable to escape.[3]

This was *not* the type of warfare fought in pre-Viking England. The primary military activity featured in the endemic small wars between neighboring tribal kingdoms in the seventh and eighth centuries was battle. For the period A.D. 600–835, there are a total of fifty-eight references to individual wars and major

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[3] John Gillingham, "Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages," in *War and Government in the Middle Ages*, ed. John Gillingham and J. C. Holt (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 78–91; idem, "William the Bastard at War," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill, Christopher Holdsworth, and Janet Nelson (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 41–58; and idem, "War and Chivalry in the History of William the Marshal," *Thirteenth Century England* 2 (1991), 1–13. Cf. Clifford J. Rogers, "The Vegetian Science of Warfare in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval Military History* [henceforth *JMMH*] 1 (2002), 1–19; Stephen Morillo, "Battle Seeking: The Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Strategy," ibid., 21–41; and Gillingham's response, "'Up with Orthodoxy'": In Defense of Vegetian Warfare," *JMMH* 2 (2003), 148–59.

military conflicts in Bede, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [*ASC*], the *Annales Cambriae*, and twelfth-century Latin chronicle sources. In thirty-seven, the text refers explicitly to battles. These battles, moreover, were often decisive, due to the deaths of commanders. In more than half of these battles – twenty of thirty-seven – one or more king, ætheling, or commanding ealdorman is recorded as having been killed. Ravaging is mentioned in only eleven of the fifty-eight general references to warfare, mostly as a prelude to battle. Even less common, however, are sieges, which are mentioned only twice, both occurring in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*.[4] The sources, other than Bede, are at the earliest ninth-century, and it is possible that siege warfare became less common as Roman town defenses decayed. Military strategy in pre-Viking England thus defied the maxims of Vegetius. Invaders might ravage enemy territory to weaken the enemy and enrich themselves, but both sides actively sought a decisive engagement.

Strategy in pre-Viking England was shaped by the relative lack of fortified towns and strongpoints, and by the goals kings sought to achieve through warfare: territorial expansion, the imposition of overlordship/tribute, and the acquisition of booty. The three were related. Warfare was an opportunity for a king or chieftain to exhibit his leadership and to gain the material wealth necessary to reward his followers. Success led to more success, since the military power of kings grew alongside their wealth and reputation, as they attracted more and more warriors eager to serve them in hope of reward. To the battles' victors literally went the spoils. As the poet of the Old English *Judith* sang, "The dwellers in the land [the Hebrews] now had a chance to spoil the most hateful ones, their ancient foes now lifeless, of bloody booty, beautiful ornaments, shields and broad swords, brown helmets, precious treasures."[5] The Staffordshire Hoard discovered near Lichfield in 2009 proves that this is no mere literary trope. The date of the Hoard is still uncertain, but it seems likely that it was deposited in the mid-seventh to early eighth century. It contains over 3,500 gold and silver objects, most of which have been identified as fragments of ornamental fittings stripped from swords, helmets, and shields. Unlike contemporary Anglo-Saxon burial deposits, we find here no brooches, hairpins, buckles, or domestic items. And unlike later hoards, there are, unfortunately, no coins. What we do have are "as many as eighty-four sword and dagger pommel caps, seventy-one hilt collars, two or three gold crosses, a number of twisted-

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[4]   Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [hereafter *HE*], 3.16: Bede writes that Penda, after "cruelly devastating the kingdom of the Northumbrians far and wide," beseiged the royal Bernician stronghold of Bamburgh. When the Mercians "could not capture it by assault or siege," Bede reports that they attempted to set the city ablaze, but that it was saved by a sacred wind supposedly sent in response to a plea from the saintly Aidan; *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 263. Cf. *HE*, 3.1, where Bede explains how Cædwalla king of the Britons killed King Osric of Northumbria. Osric was "rashly" besieging him in a fortified town, perhaps referring to York, when Cædwalla suddenly rushed out of the town with his forces and destroyed him and his army ("in oppido municipio temerarie obsedisset").

[5]   R. K. Gordon, trans., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1970), p. 295.

metal rings, what is probably a shield decoration, and at least one cheek-piece from a helmet. Tellingly, several of the items have bent pins still sticking out of them, which means they were ripped from their original mounts."[6] The logical inference is that this is battle spoil collected by a Mercian king, ealdorman, or other magnate.[7]

Given the laconic entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it is impossible to discuss in more than general terms the military strategic planning of Anglo-Saxon kings before Alfred. From Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* it would seem that the element of surprise was a critical factor, and that the king who could raise the largest force most expeditiously would emerge as the victor.[8] That pre-Viking English kings were capable of strategic planning on a grand scale is attested by archaeological evidence, in particular the great dykes that ran along the Mercian–Welsh border. Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke remain monuments in the landscape not only to the power and authority of late eighth- and early ninth-century Mercian rulers but to their strategic planning. The construction of Offa's Dyke alone required a minimum of 9 million and perhaps as many as 18 million man hours, representing the labor of tens of thousands of conscripted peasants.[9] Once interpreted as a frontier marker, Offa's Dyke is now thought to have been a defensive military barrier, which is more likely given the labor and expense that went into its construction. Excavations, field work, and surveys conducted by the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Manchester under the supervision of David Hill and Margaret Worthington reveal that Offa's Dyke proper only ran from Rushock Hill north of the Herefordshire plain to near Mold in Flintshire, some 103 km. This was approximately the border between Mercia and the Welsh kingdom of Powys in the mid-eighth century. Hill and Worthington posit a connection between Offa's

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[6]   Alex Burghardt, *The Times Literary Supplement* [*TLS*], 14 Oct. 2009. Illustrations and maps for this paper are posted on my website: http://www.usna.edu/Users/history/abels/index.htm

[7]   Among the few non-military objects in the hoard are two or three bent gold crosses. The defeated enemy was Christian. This is attested not only by the crosses, which appear to have been processional ones, but by an inscription quoting a few lines from Numbers 10:35 found on a strip of gold that may have run across the crest of a helmet (like the inscription on the Coppergate helmet): "surge d[omi]ne [et] dispentur inimici tui et fugent qui oderunt te a facie tua" ("rise up, o Lord, and may thy enemies be scattered and those who hate thee be driven from thy face"). The casual reduction of Christian religious objects into scraps of gold suggests that the victor may have been pagan. It is tempting to think that this hoard belonged to Bede's notorious slayer of Christian kings, King Penda of Mercia, or to one of his ealdormen.

[8]   See, e.g., *HE*, 2.12. When the East Anglian king Rædwald decided to help Edwin gain the Northumbrian throne, he quickly raised a large army: "Not giving King Æthelfrith time to summon and assemble his whole army, Rædwald met him with a much greater force and slew him." *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 181.

[9]   David Hill, "Offa's and Wat's Dyke: Some Aspects of Recent Work 1972–1976," *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 79 (1977), 21–33; idem, "The Construction of Offa's Dyke," *The Antiquaries Journal* 65 (1985), 140–42. My calculations assume that a worker could excavate one cubic yard of earth per hour from a five foot deep trench in ordinary soil. This is based upon Capt. William Beach's *Manual of Military Field Engineering for the Use of Officers of the Line*, 3rd ed. (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1897), p. 73.

Dyke and "Eliseg's Pillar," erected in the mid-ninth century by the Powys king Cyngan ap Cadell: "Concenn son of Catell […] built this stone for his great grandfather Eliseg […] who annexed the inheritance of Powys […] from the power of the English both by his sword and by fire." The *Annales Cambriae* reports that Offa fought a battle against the Welsh at Hereford in 760, and this might be where Eliseg freed his kingdom from Mercian domination. At the time of the dyke's construction, however, the Mercians apparently enjoyed control over this frontier area, since Offa's engineers were able to choose the location of the dyke so as to provide the best view possible into Powys. As the University of Manchester project discovered no traces of associated forts and no planned gateways, Worthington and Hill reasonably concluded that it was unlikely that the dyke was continuously manned. Strategically, the dyke would not have been intended as a preclusive barrier but as a defense against raiding, in particular cattle raiding.[10]

At least until the autumn of 865, the objectives of Vikings who raided England differed little from the goals of warring English and Welsh kings. Like those kings, they sought wealth though the use or threat of force. Viking chieftains, however, did so not as territorial kings with the intention of establishing lasting control over a region, but as pirates. This meant that the "strategy" they followed was designed to obtain as much portable wealth as possible with a minimum of risk. Using shallow-draft boats, they rowed up river until they found a convenient bank located near their designated targets on which to encamp, built field fortifications or improved existing defenses to a seized estate to protect their boats and loot, either seized or bought horses from the locals, raided the locality, and then moved on. They relied on speed and discipline. Their main targets were monasteries and churches, crammed with wealth and poorly if at all defended. If necessary, Viking bands would engage in battle if intercepted by an English army, but, unlike English kings in the wars they fought with their neighbors, Viking leaders did not seek battle, since battle was not necessary, and perhaps even detrimental, to the achievement of their goals.

Those goals are materially represented by the contents of the hoards they buried for safe keeping. The Cuerdale Hoard discovered in 1840 on the banks of the river Ribble, near Preston, Lancashire, is one example. It contains about 7,500 silver coins and 1,000 other silver objects buried in lead lined chest, in A.D. 903–05. The hoard's coins and objects are from widely distant regions (various parts of England, Francia, Italy, Ireland, Pictland), reflecting perhaps the areas plundered by the treasure's owner. The differences between the Cuerdale and Staffordshire hoards are illustrative: the former is mainly a collection of coins and hack silver; the latter has a wealth of gold objects and, with few exceptions, all the pieces are weapons and armor fittings. The contents of the two hoards

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10 David Hill and Margaret Worthington, *Offa's Dyke: History and Guide* (Stroud, 2003); Ryan Lavelle, *Fortifications in Wessex c. 800–1066* (Oxford, 2003), p. 11.

are both plunder, but the Cuerdale Hoard is the wealth obtained from sacking monasteries and towns whereas the Staffordshire Hoard is battlefield booty.

Though Vikings' objectives were familiar to equally predatory Anglo-Saxon kings, the manner in which they waged war was new and disconcerting. While Anglo-Saxon commanders sought battle, Vikings avoided it. Their *modus operandi* involved seizing a defensible site, often a royal estate, and fortifying it further with ditches, ramparts, and palisades. From that base they would ride through the countryside, plundering as they went. If confronted by a superior military force, they would retreat to their camp. As slight as were its makeshift defenses, they nonetheless proved effective against an enemy unfamiliar with siege warfare and saddled with a logistical system designed only for short, decisive campaigns. A besieged Viking army would try to out-wait the enemy, knowing that once the besieging force exhausted its supplies, it would either have to leave or offer a profitable peace. Or, if the besiegers grew careless, the Vikings might burst out suddenly from behind their defenses in a furious counter-attack or sneak away under cover of night. Anglo-Saxon commanders often found themselves outmaneuvered or stalemated.

Between 835, when sustained Viking raiding began in England, and 865, when "a great heathen raiding-army" (*ASC*: *micel hæðen here*] overwintered in East Anglia, Viking raiding fleets became larger and operated opportunistically on both sides of the Channel, though usually not at the same time. At first royal reeves and ealdormen dealt with the raiders. As the fleets grew in size, however, local forces became inadequate to meet the threat. From 836 on, kings responded to larger Viking incursions by raising armies from several shires with the intention of intercepting the raiding bands before they could do too much damage and force them to fight a battle. Then, in the autumn and winter of 865, the very nature of the threat changed. The ambitions of the leaders of the Great Heathen Army took on a territorial dimension.[11] Between 865 and 878 every English kingdom with the exception of Wessex came under the political control of the Danes, either directly as in East Anglia, or intermediately through the establishment of native client kings, as in Mercia. If that failed, they contented themselves with extorting payment for what proved to be temporary peace.[12]

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[11] The word in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [hereafter *ASC*] translated as "army" is *here*. Michael Swanton translates it more precisely as "raiding-army" to distinguish it from *fyrd*. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (New York, 1998), pp. xxxiii–xxxiv. On the composition and threat of this force, see Richard Abels, "Alfred the Great, the *micel* hæðen h*ere* and the Viking Threat," in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter, Studies in Early Medieval Britain 3 (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 265–79.

[12] On the difficulties of making peace with Vikings, see Niels Lund, "Peace and Non-Peace in the Viking Age," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Conference: Larkollen, Norway, 1985*, ed. J. E. Knirk (Oslo, 1987), pp. 255–69; Richard Abels, "King Alfred's Peace-Making Strategies with the Vikings," *The Haskins Society Journal* 3 (1992), 23–34; idem, "Paying the Danegeld: Anglo-Saxon Peacemaking with Vikings," in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 173–92; Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 315–34.

The goal of conquest and consolidation of territory required changes in strategy. The leaders of the Great Heathen Army continued to use rivers for transport, secure winter quarters, and obtain horses and supplies. But now they would seize, fortify, and make base in royal *tuns* with the intention of using them as long-term operating bases. A greater emphasis was placed on logistical planning, since the Danes needed to secure supplies for an entire winter rather than a few weeks. They relied on speed and surprise for "surgical strikes" intended to decapitate the targeted kingdom. From Danish traders and locals they obtained intelligence about the whereabouts of enemy kings/leaders, in order to launch surprise attacks, often in winter, before English kings or ealdormen could mobilize forces. The aim was to kill or expel these kings. Rather than engage in long-drawn-out wars with local magnates, they were, at least initially, content to set up disaffected Anglo-Saxon æthelings as client kings.

In the first seven years of his reign, Alfred alternated between fighting the Danes, as he did in several battles in 871, and paying them off. 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 by Guthrum the previous Christmas, and to mobilize forces to surprise an enemy who, by then, probably thought that he had been rendered helpless. But if Edington highlighted Alfred's ability to inspire and lead troops, the events preceding the engagement, in particular Guthrum's seizure of Chippenham, and with it the kingdom, illustrated just as dramatically the limitations of the military system Alfred had inherited. The West Saxon military establishment had been shaped by the kind of warfare that prevailed among the kingdoms of early England. The logistical inadequacies of the existing West Saxon military system were further exacerbated by the manner in which armies were raised. Assembling levies of local landowners and their followers was time-consuming; Viking raiders could ravage an entire region before the king's army appeared in the field. 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 strongpoints in the kingdom were the royal villas or *tun*s, 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 little about the king's naval forces, or whether the royal fleet mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries for 882 and 885 was an invention of Alfred's or an inheritance from his predecessors.

Alfred's near disaster in 878 impressed upon him the need to reorganize the military resources of his kingdom in order to counter the specific threat

posed by the Great Heathen Army. And this he did. Thirteen years later, when the Vikings returned in force, they found the kingdom defended by a standing, mobile field army, and a network of garrisoned fortresses that commanded its navigable rivers and Roman roads. Alfred had analyzed the problem and found a solution. If under the existing system he could not assemble forces quickly enough to intercept mobile Viking raiders, the obvious answer was to have a standing field force. If this necessitated transforming the West Saxon royal army from a sporadic levy of king's men and their retinues into a mounted standing army, so be it. If his kingdom lacked strong points to impede the progress of an enemy army, he would build them. If Wessex lacked ships to confront the Vikings at sea, Alfred would build a fleet of "longships" larger, swifter, and more stable than the Viking warships of the period.[13]

Characteristically, Alfred's innovations were firmly rooted in traditional West Saxon practice, drawing as they did upon the so-called "common burdens" of bridge work, fortress repair, and service on the king's campaigns that all holders of bookland and royal loanland owed the Crown. To counter the mobility of the Danish invaders, Alfred reinterpreted fyrd service to mean two months of service in the field, with each soldier required to come not only armed but with a horse and, possibly, with supplies sufficient to last him for his tour of duty. The concept of fortresses was not original to Alfred. Decades earlier Pope Leo IV had ordered the construction of the fortified Leonine City to protect Rome from Saracen raids, and in the 860s Emperor Charles the Bald had spanned the Loire and the Seine with a number of fortified bridges.[14] The Danes themselves routinely fortified their camps. Many if not most royal residences in Wessex would have had palisades and defensible gates, as evidenced by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s story of King Cynewulf's death at the hands of a rebel ætheling Cyneheard who took the king by surprise while he was visiting his mistress at the royal vill of Merantune (*ASC*, *s.a.* 757, referring to an event of 786). Whether or not pre-Alfredian Wessex had burhs, Mercia certainly had; at least one historian believes that these Mercian burhs formed a system of

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[13] *ASC*, *s.aa*. 893, 896. For a discussion of Alfred's navy, *Alfred the Great. Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 211, 289–90, 291. Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford 1995), 109–13, and Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1988), pp. 194–207, 305–07, point out the practical problems of Alfred's design. But cf. Edwin and Joyce Gifford, "Alfred's New Longships," in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 281–89. Ole Crumlin-Pedersen has suggested that Alfred's design served as the model for the Viking longship: "Viking and Anglo-Saxon Longships," Forty-Second International Conference on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, 10 May 2007.

[14] In terms of physical characteristics and methods of construction, the closest Continental analogues are the Carolingian and Ottonian *Burgen* of the German marches, though these tended to be quite a bit smaller than Alfred's burhs. The similarities, however, may be due less to cultural transmission and conscious imitation than to a shared environment and similar threats. See Edward J. Schoenfeld, "Anglo-Saxon *Burhs* and Continental *Burgen*: Early Medieval Fortifications in Constitutional Perspective," *The Haskins Society Journal* 6 (1995), 49–66 at 59–60, 65–66.

fortifications in the eighth century, although the archaeological evidence for this is slight.[15] What was unique about Alfred's scheme was its sheer scale, the strategic disposition and purpose of the burhs, and the administration through which he manned and maintained them. Alfred's intention was not merely to fortify a few towns. He planned the construction of a *network* of burhs, and for this he could find no model in Britain, except perhaps the ancient Roman forts of the "Saxon Shore."[16]

The strategic vision that underlay Alfred's building program was as foreign to previous Anglo-Saxon strategic thinking as was the threat of the Vikings. Even if one dates the Burghal Hidage to Edward the Elder's reign rather than that of his father, there can be little doubt that this document provides details of Alfred's civil defense system. Alfred did not merely build fortresses; he created a *unified system* of West Saxon civil defense based upon an integrated network of permanently garrisoned forts and fortified towns that were designed to operate in tandem with one another and with Alfred's mobile field force, the fyrd. Whether or not Alfred planned it, his reforms created an integrated *defense-in-depth* system.[17] Defense-in-depth strategy assumes that an invader will enter the defender's territory but establishes conditions that make it difficult for the invading force either to take land or profit from raiding. This is exactly how Alfred's system operated in practice. Well-garrisoned burhs along the primary travel routes presented a major obstacle for Viking invaders. (See Map 1.) Even if a Viking force avoided the English field army and successfully raided the interior, the booty-laden marauders would face burghal garrisons as they attempted to return to their ships or strongholds.

The most expensive element in Alfred's strategic system was the thirty fortified centers of varying sizes he ordered either built or refurbished. These func-

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[15] Stephen Bassett, "Divide and Rule? The Military Infrastructure of Eighth- and Ninth-Century Mercia," *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007), 53–85. In this article Bassett surveys the archaeological evidence for pre-Alfredian Middle Saxon defenses at the Mercian burhs of Tamworth, Winchcombe, and Hereford. Based on the *ASC* entry for 868, Nottingham probably also had defenses. The same is true of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, and Stamford, which together with Nottingham were called the "Five Boroughs" of the Danelaw, by the early tenth century, although their defenses may have been Danish in origin. Bassett's argument for an eighth-century Mercian burghal system is highly speculative, however. Certainly there is no evidence for a Mercian defensive network like that outlined in the Burghal Hidage in the reign of King Burgred.

[16] The best general discussion of the use and development of Anglo-Saxon fortifications is now Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars*, pp. 209–63.

[17] Edward Luttwak was the first to characterize a premodern grand strategy as "defense-in-depth." He contended that early fourth-century Roman emperors adopted a defense-in-depth strategy based on the construction of multiple layers of fortifications and a mobile field force: E. N. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century AD to the Third* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 125–90. Cf. the critiques by J. C. Mann, "Power, Force and the Frontiers of the Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979), 175–83, and Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 372–418. As a general caveat, given the limitations of the extant sources, assuming that one can ascertain strategic and tactical planning from the outcomes of medieval campaigns and battles risks succumbing to the "post hoc, propter hoc" fallacy.

tioned both as refuges for the local population – no place in Wessex was more than twenty miles from a burh – and, more importantly, as impediments to Viking movement. Despite their apparent use of stone-throwing siege machines during the Great Heathen Army's unsuccessful eleventh-month-long siege of Paris in 885–86, Danish raiding-armies in England showed no familiarity with siegecraft. (Nor, for that matter, did the English.) Burhs defended by ditch-and-earthen rampart defenses, even without stone walls, seemed nearly impregnable to ninth-century raiders. Alfred and his planners situated the burhs so as to command all the major navigable rivers, estuaries, Roman roads, and trackways crossing or leading into his kingdom.[18] A Viking fleet rowing up the Thames would encounter no fewer than five burhs in succession.[19] Raiders sailing along the southern coastline of Wessex or the northern shores of Devonshire or Somerset would find few places where they could beach their ships without a fight. An extensive network of roads and trackways connected the burhs, making it possible for the garrisons to support one another and to work in tandem with the field force, while an integrated beacon system permitted the defenders in these burhs to be apprised of and respond to enemy movements well in advance. If, as seems likely, Alfred used the burhs to store his food rent, his field forces would never be more than a day's march from food and supplies.[20]

New light has been shed upon the development of Alfred's burghal system by a team of archaeologists at University College London headed by John Baker and Stuart Brookes, who over the last few years have been exploring civil defense in Viking-era England. Integrating archaeological, toponymic, geographical/topographical, and documentary evidence for civil defense systems in early England, Baker and Brookes add to our understanding about how Alfred's burhs and the West Saxon beacon system were interrelated and how both fitted in with the

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[18] David Hill, "Gazetteer of Burghal Hidage Sites," in *The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications*, ed. David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble, (Manchester, 1996) pp. 189–228, provides an excellent overview. For the military perspective, see Richard P. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 68–71, 236 nn. 67, 68; idem, "English Logistics and Military Administration, 871–1066: The Impact of the Viking Wars," in *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1–1300*, ed. A. N. Jørgensen and B. L. Clausen (Copenhagen, 1997), pp. 257–65 at 260–61. On the siting of the burhs and their archaeology, see David Hinton, *Alfred's Kingdom: Wessex and the South, 800–1500* (London, 1977), pp. 29–58.

[19] Assuming, of course, that Oxford was one of Alfred's burhs. Oxford lay within Mercia and belonged to Ealdorman Æthelred until his death in 911, when Edward the Elder assumed control over both it and London (*ASC s.a.*). See Jeremy Haslam, "The Origin of the Two Burhs of Oxford," *Oxoniensia* 75 (2010), 25–34. Coins were struck in Alfred's name at Oxford, perhaps as early as the 880s. See M. A. S. Blackburn, "The London Mint during the Reign of King Alfred," and Simon Keynes, "King Alfred and the Mercians," in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances: The History and Coinage of Southern England, AD 840–900*, ed. M. A. S. Blackburn and David Dumville (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–46. Cf. C. S. S. Lyon, "Historical Problems of Anglo-Saxon Coinage (4), the Viking Age," *British Numismatic Journal* 39 (1970), 193–204 at 196–97.

[20] Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1995), p. 121.

military topography of Wessex.[21] Pointing out, for example, that the Thames was probably not navigable beyond Oxford – if that far – they conclude that the burhs in the Thames River valley, with the exception of Sashes, were sited not to impede attacks up the Thames but to deter invasion from the north. The Thames in western Wessex formed a natural barrier to invasion, but it was a permeable frontier that could be crossed at fords or bridges. The need to block these crossing-points and to control network hubs for Roman roads explains the siting of the burhs of Cricklade, Southwark, Wallingford, and Oxford.[22] The reason that a burh was built at Cricklade was not to protect against Vikings coming up the Thames, but to control the main Roman road connecting Cirencester to Silchester where that road crossed the river, which was one of the major routes into Wessex from Mercia. Wallingford, possibly a double burh, and Oxford, which lay on the river's north bank, were similarly well placed to police the Icknield Way and the several river crossings that lay between them. The vulnerability of this area to attack is underscored by the seven *herepaths* – military roads – that lie in that area. Wallingford's strategic importance is attested by 2,400 hides allocated to its defense. Sashes is the one clear exception: an island fort that lay up-river of London, Sashes impeded Viking fleets coming from the mouth of the Thames. That the burghal system on the Thames looks toward the north is an argument for the implementation of that system of fortifications at a time when invasion from Mercia was still a threat. One might date this to the period between Alfred's victory at Edington in the spring of 878 and the "renovation" of London in 886 and establishment of Alfred's son-in-law Ealdorman Æthelred as ruler of Mercia.[23]

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[21] John Baker and Stuart Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon Civil Defence in the Viking Ages* (Leiden 2013), pp. 269–333. Baker and Brookes reject the characterization of the Burghal Hidage as a record of an Alfredian defense system. They argue that the burhs listed in it were built at different times, some earlier than Alfred's reign and others later, to meet specific strategic needs (at pp. 327–33), and that the document is both post-Alfredian in origin and just a snapshot in time of civil defense. The last I accept; the rest I believe to be mistaken. For a persuasive critique of their arguments, see Jeremy Haslam, "The *Burghal Hidage* and the West Saxon Burhs: A Reappraisal", *Anglo-Saxon England* 45, 2017 (forthcoming).

[22] Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, ch. 5.

[23] Jeremy Haslam in a series of articles has argued strenuously for the dating of the entire Alfredian burghal system outlined in the Burghal Hidage (and the Burghal Hidage itself) to 878–79: Jeremy Haslam, "King Alfred and the Vikings – Strategies and Tactics, 878–886," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 13 (2005), 121–53; "Origin of the Two Burhs"; "King Alfred, Mercia and London, 874–886: A Reassessment," *Studies in History and Archaeology* 17 (2011), 120–46. (These articles are posted on his website at http://jeremyhaslam.wordpress.com/, accessed 11 August 2017.) Haslam summarizes his thesis as follows: "Following his defeat of Guthrum's army at Edington in 878, King Alfred put in place the system of forts and fortresses in Wessex and eastern Mercia which is listed in the contemporary Burghal Hidage document, which system reflected a policy both for the defence of the West Saxons as well as a strategic offensive against the Viking presence in Mercia and in London. The construction of this burghal system was arguably one of the principal factors which forced Guthrum to retreat from Mercia and London to East Anglia in late 879, their respective spheres of influence being redefined by a new boundary to the east of London which was set out in the contemporary

Alfred intended his burhs to work in tandem with the fyrd and with each other. To do this effectively required a signaling system to warn the garrisons of the burhs of the approach of an enemy along any of the routeways, and a road system that would allow for the quick mobilization and movement of troops. Roman roads and ancient trackways were mainly used for the latter, but there is also evidence that they were supplemented by military pathways (*herepaths*), as seen above. A West Saxon beacon system interconnected with the burhs can be reconstructed by plotting out on a map OE placenames that combine words for "hill" or "look-out" with those relating to observation or fire.[24] The UCL team and mathematician Keith Briggs with his student Jake Shemming independently examined these sites for intervisibility.[25] The results indicate that the beacons in Wessex (but, interestingly, not in Kent) formed a single coherent system in which Cricklade played a critical role as a nodal point connecting Malmesbury to Chisbury or Wallingford. The location of the burhs of the upper and middle Thames at fords and Roman road river crossings and a beacon network designed to warn against incursions from Mercia suggest that, at least initially, Alfred thought in terms of a preclusive strategy rather than defense-in-depth. This stretch of the burghal system was meant to keep Guthrum or any other Danish chieftain from stealthily crossing the Thames and surprising Alfred as he had been surprised at Chippenham.

The defensive system that Alfred created in the 880s and 890s was designed to defend against the simultaneous attacks of a number of different *here*s, precisely as happened in 892–95, and limit their ability to raid. *Heres* could enter his kingdom, but if they did, they were unlikely to make it back to their ships with their booty. As a result, Alfred was able to fight Vikings simultaneously in the eastern, northern, and western frontiers of his kingdom. These new Viking raiders discovered that English towns were no longer easy prey. It was dangerous to leave a garrisoned burh intact, but it was equally dangerous to attempt to take one. Possessing neither siege engines nor doctrine, they could not storm burhs protected by ditches, earthworks strengthened by wooden revet-

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Treaty between Alfred and Guthrum." "King Alfred, Mercia and London," p. 120. Although Haslam demonstrates that it is physically possible for the thirty burhs of the Burghal Hidage to have been built in a single year, his thesis has not achieved wide acceptance. Many question whether Alfred would have had the power and wherewithal to launch so ambitious and labor-intensive effort so soon after Edington. Based on their research, Baker and Brookes (*Beyond the Burghal Hidage*) believe that the burghal system as depicted in the Burghal Hidage only gradually took shape. Guthrum's sojourn at Cirencester in 878–79, however, provides an attractive historical context for Baker and Brookes's findings about the northern orientation of Alfred's civil defense system in the Middle Thames.

[24] Word elements indicating that the site was a vantage point include *dūn*, *hyll*, *beorg*, *hlæw*, and *hnoð*, all meaning "hill" or "mound", and *hōh*, meaning "promontory." Word elements meaning "watch" or "look-out" include *weard* and *tōt*. Those for fire include *ād*. See Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, pp. 184–89.

[25] Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, pp. 192–99, 312–27. The findings of Keith Briggs and Jake Shemming for an Anglo-Saxon communication network are posted online at http://keithbriggs.info/AS_networks.html.

ments, and palisades. If they attempted to starve a town into submission, the hunter was likely to become the hunted, as the fyrd and garrisons from neighboring burhs would come to the relief of the besieged. Alfred's system, in short, had worked precisely as he conceived it would. The very geography of his last war attested to its effectiveness. In 871, 876, and 878, the Great Heathen Army had attacked and ravaged the very heartland of Wessex. In 892–94, an even larger army, with allies in Northumbria and East Anglia, had to content itself with raiding along the frontiers of Wessex and Mercia. Only once had Viking raiders penetrated the countrysides of Surrey or Hampshire, and those marauders had paid for their daring at Farnham. When the men of Somerset and Wiltshire fought, it was well beyond the borders of their shires. Alfred had proved to his enemies and his friends alike the wisdom of his demands "with regard to the building of fortresses and the other things for the common profit of the whole kingdom."[26]

In the 880s, at the same time as he was "cajoling and threatening" his nobles into building and manning the burhs, Alfred undertook an equally ambitious effort to revive learning. It entailed the recruitment of clerical scholars from Mercia, Wales, and abroad to enhance the tenor of the court and of the episcopacy; the establishment of a court school to educate his own children and those of his nobles; an attempt to require literacy in those who held offices of authority; a series of translations into the vernacular of Latin works the king deemed "most necessary for all men to know"; the compilation of a chronicle detailing the rise of Alfred's kingdom and house; and the issuance of a law code that presented the West Saxons as a new people of Israel and their king as a just and divinely-inspired lawgiver. This enterprise was to Alfred's mind as essential for the defense of his realm as the building of the burhs. "The temptation we must resist," Simon Keynes wisely admonishes, "is to stand back and admire a multiplicity of "different" Alfreds: the soldier, the law-maker, the statesman, the educator, and the scholar […] The genuine Alfred of the late ninth century was […] the integrated Alfred, for whom all these things were inseparable aspects of his determination to discharge the responsibilities of his high office for the good of his subjects and in the service of God."[27] Burhs, fyrds, and ships were the material expressions of civil defense; wisdom and piety were its spiritual dimensions. As Alfred observed in the preface to his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, kings who fail to obey their divine duty to promote learning can expect earthly punishment to befall their people.[28] Conversely, the pursuit of wisdom, he assured the readers of his *Boethius*, is the surest path to power. The portrayal of the West Saxon resistance to the Vikings by Asser and the authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

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[26] *Alfred the Great*, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 101–02 (Asser, ch. 91).

[27] Simon Keynes, "The Power of the Written Word: Alfredian England 871–899," in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 175–97 at 197.

[28] Alfred, *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's* Pastoral Care, ed. and trans. Henry Sweet, 2 vols., EETS Original Series 45 and 50 (London, 1871–72), 1: Preface, pp. 2–3.

was more than mere rhetoric or "propaganda." It reflected Alfred's own belief in a doctrine of divine rewards and punishments rooted in a vision of a hierarchical Christian world-order in which God is the Lord to whom kings owe obedience and through whom they derive their authority over their followers.

If measured by effectiveness, Alfred's military establishment was worth the money and manpower expended upon it. Not only did it prove the salvation of Wessex in the 890s, but in the hands of Alfred's children and grandchildren it became a finely-honed instrument of aggression. Whether or not Alfred conceived of the burhs he ordered built as "islands of royal authority," there can be little doubt that Edward and Æthelflæd did. There burhs were less intended as elements of a civil defense system than as anchors for the consolidation of conquest. 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).

As I have argued elsewhere, the consequence of peace was the abandonment of the more costly elements of Alfredian civil defense.[29] When the Vikings returned in 980 to begin a new age of raiding and invasion, they found a peaceful and wealthy England ripe for pillaging. It was certainly a well-administered, or at least highly administered, kingdom, in which the central government had in place effective mechanisms for the maintenance of internal order and the raising of revenues. But one should not mistake bureaucratic efficiency and ideological sophistication for military strength. The civil defense systems that Æthelred II and Alfred inherited had much in common. Both relied on ad hoc levies summoned to meet crises, and while Æthelred's England may have had many more defended towns, these burhs lacked the permanent military garrisons that had made them into something more than passive refuges. At least in this sense, Æthelred was unready to meet the new Viking threat.

One popular explanation advanced for Alfred's victory and Æthelred's defeat is that the two kings faced quite different threats.[30] 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. 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.[31] If we go simply by the sources, Alfred in 892 and Æthelred in 1015 each faced fleets of 200–250

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[29] Richard Abels, "From Alfred to Harold II: The Military Failure of the Late Anglo-Saxon State" in *The Normans and their Adversaries at War*, ed. R. Abels and B. Bachrach (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 15–30.

[30] Keynes, "Tale of Two Kings," pp. 205–07.

[31] Jens Ulff-Moller, "The Vikings in England: A Reappraisal of Peter Sawyer's Minimization Theory," unpublished paper given at the Tenth International Conference of the Haskins Society, October 1991.

ships,[32] carrying in the range of 3,000–12,000 combatants.[33] 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.[34] 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 *lith*s, rather than as royal, national levies (the *leding*).[35] The leaders and "fellows" of these *lith*s were motivated alike by the desire for plunder and tribute that would enhance their standing back home.[36] 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 certain that he was not unique in this among the Danes.[37]

Alfred's victory and Æthelred's defeat cannot be explained simply by changes in Danish military organization and the consequent differences in the forces

[32] 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 ravaging England and Francia had fleets of 200 or so ships: Nicholas Brooks, "England in the Ninth Century: The Crucible of Defeat," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 29 (1979), 1–20 at 2–11. See also C. Patrick Wormald, "Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?" in *The Vikings*, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), pp. 134–7. 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.

[33] 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 80 ships.) Cf. *Annales Fuldenses*, ed. F. Kurze, MGH SSrerGer, Hanover, 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 *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, Camden Third Series 72, ed. Alistair Campbell (London, 1949), 2.1, 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: Peter Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (London, 1971), pp. 126–27; Wormald, "Viking Studies," p. 135; Gillmor, "War on the Rivers," pp. 81–85.

[34] 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-three ships, but on which see Janet M. Bately, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *The Battle of Maldon, 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford, 1991), pp. 37–50 at 43–49.

[35] Niels Lund, "The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: *ledung* or *lith*?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986), 105–18. See also idem, "The Danish Perspective," in *Maldon*, ed. Scragg, pp. 114–42.

[36] Wormald, "Viking Studies," pp. 145–48; Lund, "The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut," pp. 105–06, 111–18. See also Timothy Reuter, "Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 35 (1985), 75–94.

[37] Lund, "Armies," pp. 112–18.

arrayed against them. Rather, we must return to the kings themselves, to their strategic planning and vision, and to the manner in which they implemented them. The Viking threat changed dramatically in magnitude and intent between 980 and 1016, and Æthelred and his advisors tried as best they could to match their strategic response to that changing threat. 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 and shire fyrds rather than the king. The king did act, however, to deprive the raiders of their safe haven in Normandy. By 990, relations between England and Normandy had become sufficiently hostile to be noticed by Pope John XV (985–96). As a result of Pope John's intervention, Æthelred and Duke Richard agreed to terms, and a treaty was signed, by their representatives, in Rouen, on 1 March 991.

Between 991 and 1005, the raiding fleets grew larger, as did the devastation, beginning with the ninety-four ship fleet led by Olaf Trygvasson from Norway and King Swein Forkbeard from Denmark that ravaged along the southeast coast in the summer of 991 and defeated Ealdorman Byrhtnoth and the Essex fyrd at Maldon. England enjoyed two years of peace after Olaf contracted a treaty with Æthelred in 994 and departed for Norway, but a new fleet ravaged England in 997–99, wintered in Normandy in 1000/1 and resumed raids in 1002. King Swein returned (possibly in response to the St. Brice's day massacre) with a fleet in 1003 and pillaged freely until, compelled by a great famine throughout England, he left in 1005.

As Alfred had done a century before, King Æthelred and his advisors took steps to deal with the growing threat. They began by addressing the vulnerability of the boroughs. Perhaps as early as the 990s the king began an ambitious program of military construction. New burhs 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 burhs were refurbished, as stone walls replaced timber revetments and palisades.[38] Æthelred and his advisors, however, lacked Alfred's strategic vision. The construction was conducted in a piecemeal fashion, exemplified by the new hill-forts, each apparently built as a consequence of a threat to or the sacking of an existing mint.

The haphazard character of Æthelred's civil defense program is also suggested by the siting of Kent's beacons. Unlike the later Armada beacon system, the views-

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[38] 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, 1976), pp. 99–150 at 140–41. On the excavations at Cadbury, see Leslie Alcock, *"By South Cadbury is that Camelot…": The Excavations of Cadbury Castle 1966–1970* (London, 1972), pp.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 *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England*, ed. Jeremy Haslam (Chichester, 1984), pp. 76, 109, 128, 137, 153, 188, 193, 258.

heds of Kent's Anglo-Saxon beacons look landward and over navigable rivers rather than toward the coast. Baker and Brookes found that Kent's beacons, in contrast to the Alfredian beacon system of the Thames River valley, "operated in three discrete groups centring on the Medway, Wantsum and eastern Weald, with no apparent point of intervisibility between these networks."[39] These findings are certainly curious given the seaborne character of the Viking threat to Kent in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. They may indicate no more than that Kent's beacon system, which looked north and west, was set up at an earlier time when coastal attacks represented less of a threat. On the other hand, Æthelred understood the importance of coastal defense and was responsible for refurbishing the defenses of Dover, including building there the look-out/beacon of St. Mary-in-Castro. That he did not set up an intervisible network of beacons in Kent is indicative of his deficiency in strategic vision, as is his failure to develop an overall strategy of response in which the newly refurbished burhs could play a role beyond that of local refuges. There was no plan to establish permanent garrisons in the burhs or to use them as bases to mobilize troops for defense. In short, Æthelred's civil defense projects failed to result in an Æthelredrian burghal system to match Alfred's, and, as a consequence, this ambitious and expensive military construction program as a whole fell considerably short of the sum of its parts.

Confronting a disciplined and mobile predatory enemy, Alfred had responded first by attempting to defeat them in battle, and, when victory proved elusive, had adopted Charles the Bald's strategy of purchasing peace. Only when that failed did he undertake his ambitious program of fortress construction and reconstituting the fyrd into a standing army. Without his victory at Edington, Alfred probably would not have had the prestige or leverage with the West Saxon nobility to impose upon them his draconian new interpretation of the common burdens. Æthelred did not have an Edington. He did not even enjoy the reputation of a warrior king. Unlike his predecessors (and successors), King Æthelred preferred to appoint generals than lead his troops on campaign, and for the first two decades of his reign had placed the defense of his realm solely in the hands of his ealdormen and reeves. Even if he had thought of returning the fyrd to the professional standing army it had been a century earlier, the king probably did not possess the political capital to persuade or coerce his nobles into compliance. So Æthelred resorted instead to tribute-paying, diplomacy, and, finally, the employment of Vikings as mercenaries.

Ealdorman Byrhtnoth's disaster at Maldon in 991 convinced Æthelred and his counselors of the gravity of the situation and of the wisdom of purchasing peace. The ten thousand pounds offered to the raiders in 991, however, proved to be only the first of many such payments that became increasingly expensive as the invading armies grew larger and hungrier.[40] From the early 990s,

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[39] Baker and Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage*, ch. 6.

[40] On the reliability of the *Chronicle*'s escalating figures for the payment of Danegeld, see the 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 Here-

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, which he finally accomplished by marrying Emma, sister of Duke Richard, in 1002.[41] 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 attempted to divide his enemies by hiring Vikings to fight other Vikings. As with the payment of tribute, this was a well-established method for dealing with raiders, one that the West Frankish King Charles the Bald had used in the 860s. In 994 Æthelred 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.[42] In return for twenty-two thousand pounds, gifts of friendship, and provisions for his men, Olaf agreed to aid Æthelred against his enemies.[43] That year Olaf, with Æthelred's blessing, 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 A.D. 1000.[44] But from the treaty's provisions regulating feuds and trading between Danes and

geld 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.

[41] James Campbell, "England, France, Flanders and Germany in the Reign of Ethelred II: Some Comparisons and Connections," in *Ethelred the Unready*, ed. Hill, pp. 255–70, repr. in James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp. 199–201; Elisabeth M. C. van Houts, "The Political Relations between Normand and England before 1066 according to the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*," in *Les Mutations socio-culterelles au tournant des XIᵉ–XIIᵉ siècles*, ed. R. Foreville and C. Viola (Paris, 1984), pp. 85–97.

[42] 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.

[43] For the text of Æthelred's treaty with Olaf, see Simon Keynes, "The Historical Context," in *Maldon*, ed. Scragg, pp. 103–07; *English Historical Documents*, I, no. 42.

[44] Lund, "The Danish Perspective," pp. 138–40. 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: Gwyn Jones, *The Vikings* (New York, 1968), p. 375.

Englishmen, it would seem that at least part of the fleet remained in England, serving Æthelred as a mercenary army to deter future raiders. Æthelred endowed some of the fleet's leaders – notably the Danish chieftain Pallig – with estates in return for pledges of loyalty, in an attempt to embed them into the existing political and social structures. This may not have proved a good bargain as matters turned out. In 997 a Viking fleet, perhaps including some of those who were supposed to be in Æthelred's service, ravaged the West Country. Four years later, when a new Viking fleet appeared off the coast of Devonshire, Pallig joined the raiders with as many ships as he could assemble, "in spite of all the pledges he had given" and the gifts of land and gold and silver he had received from the king.[45] Æthelred's response was to purchase another peace with the Vikings, for twenty-four thousand pounds. On St. Brice's day in 1002, Æthelred made a bold attempt to eliminate the problem of untrustworthy Danish mercenaries in one fell swoop by ordering (in the words of a royal charter of 1004) a "most just extermination" of "all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockles amongst the wheat."[46]

The St. Brice's day massacre was the act of a king confident that he could handle the existing Viking threat without mercenaries, especially since some of them had proved unreliable. If that is what King Æthelred believed, he was wrong. The level of Viking activity intensified once more with the arrival of a "great fleet" under the command of Tostig in the autumn of 1006. Æthelred and his advisors responded as Alfred had a century before, acting to improve England's military forces. The basic strategy that the king adopted was preclusive, centering on the construction of a massive royal fleet to intercept raiders at sea. In 1008 he ordered the kingdom to be divided into naval districts of 300 or 310 hides, to facilitate the construction and maintaining of a great armada. At the same time, he ordered that a helmet and corselet be supplied from every eight hides "unremittingly over all England" (*ASC*, *s.a.* 1008). If we go by the hidage total of Domesday Book, this would have meant a fleet of about two hundred ships and armor for nine thousand warriors. This is in itself testimony to the effectiveness of English institutions of governance in the early eleventh century. (It also suggests that many soldiers in the English fyrds had been less well armored and armed than their Viking enemies.) 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

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[45] For Pallig, see *ASC*, *s.a.* 1001. Simon Keynes suggests that Pallig received his "great gifts, in estates and gold and silver" in connection with this treaty: S. D. Keynes, "The Vikings in England: c. 790–1016," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford, 1997), pp. 42–82 at 77.

[46] See Ann Williams, *Æthelred the Unready, The Ill-Counselled King* (London, 2003), pp. 52–55. The charter is Sawyer no. 127, "Electronic Sawyer: Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters," http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/127/html (accessed 11 August 2017), translated in *EHD*, 1, ed. Whitelock, no. 127, renewing title-deeds to St. Frideswide's, Oxford. St. Frideswide's lost its charters in a fire set by the burgesses, intent on killing the Danes who had taken refuge in the church.

used the powerful institutions of governance of late Saxon England to remedy the deficiencies in his military forces.

In 1009 King 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. Internal disputes led to a noble accused of treason "enticing" the crews of twenty ships to raid the southern coast of England, while the thegn charged with capturing him lost an additional eighty ships to a sudden storm. King Æthelred and his ealdormen decided to leave the fleet; the surviving ships were brought back to London. In the words of the chronicler, "we had neither the luck nor the honour that the ship-army was useful to this country, any more than it often was before."[47]

The disheartening dispersal of the national fleet was followed by the unimpeded arrival of Thorkell's great fleet in August 1009. Æthelred, probably after consulting Archbishop Wulfstan II and his other clerical advisors, concluded that the new *micel here* was God's punishment for the sins of the English people. Echoing Carolingian practice, Æthelred responded with an impressive program for national repentance, prayer, and alms-giving.[48] At Elmham and Bath in 1009 the king issued legislation drafted by Archbishop Wulfstan (*V–VI Æthelred* and *VII Æthelred*) that began with the admonition that "one God shall be loved and honoured above all, and all men shall show obedience to their king in accordance with best traditions of their ancestors and cooperate with him in defending the realm." The legislation decrees that every adult Christian give alms, fast, and pray, and prescribes the litanies that the clergy were to chant to obtain the divine favor necessary for victory.[49] Associated with this legislation is the litany preserved in the eleventh-century Winchester Troper: "that you may see fit to preserve King Æthelred and the army of the English." These litanies "contra paganos" generally concluded with the three-fold invocation of the Lamb of God calling upon Christ to "grant us peace." Simon Keynes reasonably associates the issuance of Æthelred's *agnus dei* coin type in 1009 with the legislation and the enforced litanies.[50]

Æthelred's program of repentance, prayer, and alms-giving proved no more effective than the ship-sokes. Even with helmets and coats of mail, English fyrdmen proved no match for Thorkell's tested Vikings. After defeating Ulfcytel of East Anglia in battle at Ringmere in May 1010, Thorkell's Danes spent the next six months ravaging East Anglia, the East Midlands, and Wessex without significant resistance, before returning to their base in Kent. According to the writer of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, King Æthelred summoned his witan for advice about how the country should be defended, but whatever policy the king adopted would be discarded within a few weeks for another. The chronicler

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[47] *ASC*, *s.a.* 1009.
[48] What follows is based on Simon Keynes, "An Abbot, an Archbishop and the Viking Raids of 1006–7 and 1009–12," *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007), 151–220.
[49] Ibid., pp. 177–201).
[50] Ibid.

attributed the inability of the English to deal with Thorkell to the king's and his counselors' poor timing and inconstancy of purpose: "All these misfortunes befell us through lack of decision, in that they were not offered tax [C: nor fought against] in time; but when they had done great evil, then a truce and peace was made with them. And nonetheless for all this truce and peace and tax, they travelled about everywhere in bands and raided and roped up and killed our wretched people."[51]

Incapable of mounting any effective military resistance to Thorkell, Æthelred decided to hire him instead, and somehow managed to persuade the Viking captain that it would be more profitable to eat from the king's table than to steal food from it. Thorkell agreed that he and his forty-five ships would defend Æthelred's realm in return for being fed and clothed. To fulfill his end of the bargain Æthelred instituted a regular tax, the much-hated impost known as the *heregeld*.[52] The new policy also failed, as Thorkell was either unable or unwilling to oppose King Swein when he invaded in the following year.

King Æthelred II's third and final strategy, one adopted and followed with greater constancy by his son Edmund Ironside, was a return to battle-seeking. After Swein's death in February 1014, the magnates of England, lay and clerical, invited Æthelred to return from Normandy to be their king once again. At the same time, the Danish fleet and the chief men of Lindsey chose Swein's son Cnut to be their king. Emboldened by the sworn support of the nobility and needing to demonstrate his worthiness to be king, Æthelred at the head of a large army marched north to confront Cnut in Lindsey. Cnut set sail for Denmark, putting ashore at Sandwich long enough to mutilate the hostages that the people of London had given to his father, while Æthelred contented himself with ravaging Lindsey as brutally as any Viking *here*.

In the autumn of 1015, Cnut returned with a fleet of 160 ships to raid the south of England. The ætheling Edmund Ironside, who had established an independent power base in the Danelaw, without the blessing of his father, responded by raising an army in the north, intending to join up with the forces of the Mercian ealdorman Eadric Streona and confront Cnut with their full power. Edmund, however, grew suspicious of Eadric's intentions, and returned north without engaging Cnut. In midwinter Cnut, now with the open support of Eadric Streona, began a systematic campaign of conquest. His strategy was simple: he would ravage a territory until the demoralized local leaders submitted to his authority, and then move on to the next shire. The obvious strategic response was to raise an army, force Cnut into battle, and destroy his forces. King Æthelred, never comfortable with military command and in failing health, chose, however, not to take the field. His son attempted to fill the vacuum. The first army that Edmund raised in the name of his father dispersed when it became clear that the king had no intention of joining it. A second "national army" disintegrated when

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[51] *ASC*, *s.a.* 1011 E, trans. Swanton.
[52] *ASC*, *s.a.* 1012.

King Æthelred abandoned it because of rumors that he was to be betrayed. It was not until King Æthelred's death on 23 April and Edmund's election as his successor that the English were finally able to mount a forceful resistance. As Cnut continued to ravage across Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria, King Edmund raised a large army. He pursued Cnut and brought him to battle, inconclusively, at Penselwood in Somerset and then at Sherston in Wiltshire. A third battle at "Assandun" (probably modern Ashingdon) in Essex proved decisive. Edmund lost the battle when Ealdorman Eadric Streona of Mercia, who had ostensibly returned to Edmund's side, treacherously fled the battlefield with all his forces. Edmund was forced to sign a treaty with Cnut, conceding to him all of England except Wessex. When Edmund died about a month later, Cnut became king of all England, bringing to an end the Viking Wars.

The parallels between the threats of 865–96 and 980–1016 were greater than often recognized. Both represented military threats that began with raiding parties numbering perhaps a few hundred men and ended with "great armies" of several thousand or more bent on conquest and consolidation. In both cases, existing English strategic doctrine and military institutions were incapable of countering the new threat represented by Vikings, and in both cases the leaders of those states attempted both to reconstruct and reorganize their militaries in order to counter the evolving threats, and to appease God's apparent wrath by correcting spiritual deficiencies. Both Alfred and Æthelred recognized the inadequacies of the systems they inherited, and both understood the importance of strategic planning. Nonetheless, the former succeeded and the latter failed. There are many reasons for this, but one critical factor was certainly the strategic vision of Alfred that led to the creation of an effective and coherent civil defense system and the lack of such a vision on the part of Æthelred and his advisors. If Alfred's strategic responses to the military threat posed by the Great Heathen Army were synergistic, Æthelred's were the opposite. The individual actions he took were impressive; taken together, however, they were ineffective. Probably the best judgment on Æthelred's strategic planning remains that of the writer of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

> When the enemy was in the east, then the army was in the west; and when they were in the south, then our army was in the north. Then all the councillors were ordered to the king, and it then had to be decided how this country should be defended. But whatever was then decided, it did not stand for even a month. In the end there was no head man who wanted to gather an army, but each fled as best as he could; nor in the end would one shire help another.[53]

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[53] *ASC*, *s.a.* 1009 E, trans. Swanton.