

## **The Chevalier Ramsay Lecture 2009:**

### **ATHELSTAN'S ENGLAND**

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Britain in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by a complex and developing mutually dependent culture equally as sophisticated as we have today. With a population estimated at 1-2million, the country was largely self sufficient in food, although hunger and famine were still a terrible reality, and was further characterised by a growing rural prosperity, the adoption of common laws, language and currency. By the end of the century many of our modern English villages existed, and bore a semblance of their modern names, and about 10% of the population lived in the growing number of towns which were becoming sustainable as centres of commerce.

It was this relative affluence combined with the fragmentation of the country into independent kingdoms that had attracted the malevolent interest of the Danes and others. Conversely, it also meant that the ransom which much later came to be known as Danegeld could actually be met by the populous. There had been a progressive reduction in the number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms between the sixth and ninth centuries, and by the end of Alfred's reign in 899 the West Saxon kings ruled what had previously been Wessex, Sussex and Kent. Cornwall was under West Saxon dominance, and several kings of the more southerly Welsh kingdoms recognised Alfred as their overlord, as did western Mercia. But this was a kingdom of the West Saxons, not of 'the English' as a whole.

Life was hard and simple but short - most adults died in their forties - and based on the principle of service to one's overlord – a boy of 12 was considered old enough to pledge his allegiance to his King, as it was required: "In the first place, all shall swear in the name of the Lord, before whom every holy thing is holy, that they will be faithful to the king". It later fell to the king's shire reeve, every year, to visit each community to administer the oath of allegiance, later known as the "frank pledge", a sign of England's increasingly organised government. The frank pledge made plain

the duty of all to report transgressors – even family members – and transformed “obeying the rules” into a matter of personal loyalty.

Socially the country was broadly divided into three main groupings: those who worked, those who fought and administered justice, and those who prayed. Life was characterised by faith in God and the Saints, as protectors of the people, although some historians have compared the near-tribal nature of society of the time to a modern-day gang culture of mutual support, protection and cohesion within a close knit group against other close knit groups. Society was decidedly patriarchal, but women were in some ways better off than they would be in later times. A woman could own property in her own right. She could and did rule a kingdom if her husband died. She could not be married without her consent and any personal goods, including lands, which she brought into a marriage remained her own property. Women were not just seen as items to be bartered, even though as we know Athelstan himself regarded his own sisters as political tools useful to form alliances, marrying them off to the political powers of the day. Aethelflaed, daughter of Alfred, had raised and educated Athelstan in the ways of military leadership as warrior queen of the Mercians. She had been an inspiration and mentor for his vision of a strong, united country, shaping his political thinking and likely seeking to promulgate further her own father’s aspirations for English unity. This period of his life also made him a familiar figure in Mercian society and doubtless smoothed his future acceptance by them as king.

Despite the widespread use of marriage as a means to alliance, it is of interest to note that Athelstan himself never married, and it has been postulated that this may have been by agreement, his own accession being confirmed on the understanding that he would raise his half brothers Edmund and Eadred to succeed him with no offspring of his own to cloud the picture. His legitimacy as heir to Edward the Elder was subject to question. It may simply have been that Athelstan saw no need to marry, with accepted heirs already in place and a surfeit of sisters to marry off to the nobility of Europe, to seal necessary political alliances. It has also been proposed that if he produced no legitimate sons, some of the disquiet surrounding his own succession would be dispelled. We can but speculate, but Athelstan’s passing saw one of the few uncontested English successions between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.

Historical records for this period are generally sparse and much of what we believe we know has been inferred by combining and interpreting the various sources and from a general extrapolation of the customs of the time. There had been little formal recording and the vast majority of the population were illiterate. Stories, facts and legends were passed down by word of mouth and frequently in verse. Alfred had realised this, and his commissioning of what we now know as the Anglo Saxon Chronicle provides much information of the period. In fact, the bulk of the surviving documents from the Anglo-Saxon period are written in the dialect of Wessex, Alfred's kingdom. However for the 15 years of Athelstan's reign the details the Anglo Saxon Chronicle provides are few and what entries survive are retrospective. Entire years are described in single short sentences which provide little insight. Take the year 932 for example, summed up simply with: "Bishop Frithstan passed away". How then can we begin to answer the many questions surrounding Athelstan's reign and his particular influence in uniting Britain?

The lack of good quality, verifiable material has long been a great frustration for medieval historians. One of the most useful traditional sources of information was thought to be William of Malmesbury, a monk living approximately 160 years after Athelstan's reign, although his precise date of birth is unknown. In the 1120s he set about writing a history of England, and in the process left us with the only detailed narrative on Athelstan and which until modern times was considered a key source for the period, even describing the physical features of the king "of shoulder length blond hair and no taller than other men". In more recent times his writings have been the subject of controversy, as the original sources quoted for them by William are now untraceable and he himself admitted to re-casting the information in a more modern 12<sup>th</sup> century dialect. Nonetheless much of what he wrote does stand closer inspection and verification from the few other sources, and so trust in his writings as a whole has increased in recent years.

Edward the Elder, Athelstan's father, died in July 924, and the circumstances of Athelstan's accession at this time are far from clear. Edward's eldest legitimate son Aelfweard died a mere 15 days after his father. The conflicting documentation has led some modern historians to assert that he had succeeded his father in preference to his older half-brother Athelstan, while others have suggested that Athelstan was the only heir to his father. A further theory is that Aelfweard succeeded his father in

Wessex and Athelstan in Mercia, the latter only acquiring Wessex following his brother's death shortly thereafter. In any event, it is thought highly unlikely that Aelfweard was ever crowned. Arriving at a definitive assessment of events occurring over a mere two weeks more than 1000 years ago is now extremely difficult but the time delay between the death of Edward and the crowning of Athelstan (some 14 months) may be an indication that transfer of power to Athelstan was not without serious issues, and there is at least one reported attempt at his murder beforehand.

Athelstan was crowned on 4 September 925. When he came to the throne the idea of a united Britain had already become established, conceivable and even desirable. There is evidence that some years previously his grandfather Alfred had come to see himself as more than King of Wessex and in some sense as a king of all Englishmen, "rex Anglorum", but in his day the Northumbrians, East Anglians and at least some Mercians had come to terms with the Vikings. Alfred's successors in due course gained control of these areas, but it was in essence an annexing of lands never ruled by West Saxon kings before.

Although the king as a leader could become a powerful individual, the office of kingship was not yet as powerful or authoritative as it was later to become. One of the tools Athelstan used to emphasise his authority and legitimacy was to associate himself closely to the new Christian church: Benedictine Monks had brought the Word of God to England only some 300 years earlier, and to be Christian was to be modern. Records of his coronation are preserved in documentation held at the National Library in Paris, which describes his consecration (not coronation) as "King of the Anglo Saxons", not yet King of England. The practice of having a church leader anoint and crown the king was part of this move to join God and king in peoples' minds, presenting his kingship as ordained by God and bolstering the image of the Christian defender of the Christian people: a diverse population made up of West Saxons, Mercians, East Anglians, Danes, Norsemen and Northumbrians. He proclaimed a higher power which invested him with the authority necessary to rule these many diverse groups. This can be seen in the language used in his official documents. In one of his surviving Charters, he writes: "I Athelstan, king of the English, elevated by the right hand of the Almighty, which is Christ, to the throne of the whole kingdom of Britain."

Athelstan might even have considered his rule in some way imperial: the style *basileus* is also found in his charters. *Basileus* signifies "sovereign" or "king". It was used as a title by Byzantine emperors, but also has a history of use for persons of authority in ancient Greece. According to William of Malmesbury, many relics including the Sword of Constantine (Emperor of Rome) and the Lance of Charlemagne (first Holy Roman Emperor) were acquired by Athelstan, associating him with these past great rulers in Christendom. By donating many of these relics to the Church, Athelstan cultivated a close mutually supportive relationship with the only organization in England which attracted the devotion of ordinary people across the borders of the kingdoms. The manuscripts and relics collected and donated by Athelstan shed light on his patronage of the cult of St Cuthbert's in Northumbria, to whom he gave two lavish manuscripts, one of which contains an early portrait of Athelstan, presenting a copy of Bede's Lives of St Cuthbert.

Proving legitimacy was one thing. Holding on to power and defending his people was another. No king would survive long without the support of a loyal army or without alliances carefully chosen and nurtured. As a military leader the king had to marshal the aristocracy of the land, who had drawn on their bondsmen and others in the lands they controlled - that land usually being a gift from the king who expected military support in return (and in proportion). A number charters exist that tell us where he went and with whom, and to whom land was granted. These charters make it possible to trace his regular travels around the kingdom, which was of itself a major logistical endeavour. The king's party could easily comprise over one thousand members. In an England mercifully free of the modern trappings of telecommunications and motorways, the essential requirement of being seen by the people was a major part Athelstan's strategy for a united country.

Like those of his predecessors, Athelstan's court was in regular contact with continental Europe. Political alliances to achieve his aims of consolidation, military support and political stability were high on Athelstan's agenda and his half-sisters became valuable assets in political marriages in Europe as well as England: Eadgifu was married to Charles the Simple, King of the Franks, Eadhild to Hugh, Duke of the Franks, Edith to the future Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor, another possibly to the Duke of Burgundy. Each has their own story too lengthy to elaborate on here.

Suffice to say that Athelstan was held in high regard on continental Europe, and marriage into and protection by his family seen as particularly advantageous. Alan II, Duke of Brittany and Haakon, son of Harald of Norway, were both fostered in Athelstan's court, as was Louis, the exiled son of Charles the Simple.

Only a year after his crowning Athelstan arranged the political marriage of another of his sisters to the Viking King of Northumbria, Sihtric, who immediately acknowledged him as over-king and adopted Christianity. This gave Athelstan an authority over the country as a whole without conflict, but it did not last. Within the year Sihtric may have abandoned his new faith and repudiated his wife, but he died suddenly in 927. His kinsman, Gothfrith, also known as Gofraid, described in the *Annals of Ulster* as "a most cruel king of the Norsemen" sailed from Dublin to take power in York, but Athelstan, fearing the emergence of a new axis of power in the north, moved decisively and quickly to seize much of Northumbria and thereby achieved direct rule of the whole of England for the first time. Gothfrith is reported as captured by Athelstan at York, but eventually repatriated to Ireland where he died in 934.

Athelstan defeated an attempt to reverse the conquest of Northumbria by a combined Scottish-Viking army at the Battle of Brunanburh. However, after his death the unified England came under repeated attack. His successors Edmund and then Eadred each lost control of Northumbria before regaining it again. Nevertheless, by the time of Eadred's successor Edgar, the unification of England had been permanently established.

Six major law codes were issued by Athelstan during his reign, and these reveal aspects of his administration, although not without modern controversy. Some historians attribute this relative keenness for legislation as indicating a relatively lawless society running out of control. The Anglo Saxon historian Patrick Wormald (Oxford), now deceased, has also argued that written law had little practical use in Anglo-Saxon England, and asserts that there is little homogeneity to the codes, and that the sporadic nature of them indicate little sign of a coherent system based on written law. Simon Keynes (Cambridge) has counter-argued that there is a pattern to the laws of Athelstan's reign, and that the laws are evidence 'not of any casual attitude towards the publication or recording of the law, but quite the reverse'. In fact the growing status of Britain as a centre for commerce, concentrated in the Burghs, meant that meaningful regulation was essential, both of business practice and

coinage, the means of payment. Athelstan introduced one centrally controlled coinage over the country and defined the precise number & location of the mints. Here was a king who understood the importance of a coherent business infrastructure.

A much respected and recently departed East Anglian Freemason, RWBro Geoffrey Dicker, is attributed as asserting that the way to successfully lead any organization is to find out which way it is going and get in front of it. To interpret the influence of Athelstan in English history in such a manner is overly simplistic, but in his reign and actions we see the continuance of the country down a path of developing national identity begun likely by his grandfather if not even earlier. To pursue this path successfully, his obvious qualities of shrewd political thinking and willingness to take decisive action were vital, but the assent and co-operation of the indigenous peoples, and their recognition that their mutual interests were best served by unity under a strong king made the ultimate success of the endeavour inevitable.

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