

Athelstan, a King Lost in the Mists of Time

Summary

Despite enjoying great fame in the Middle Ages, King Athelstan is probably one of the most interesting and least known Kings of the Anglo-Saxon period, and although being the central figure in its developments, eventually the fame of his grandfather Alfred the Great would finally eclipse his reputation.

There are many tenth-century poems associated with Athelstan. Two of which in particular show how Athelstan's equals viewed him. Athelstan is God's warrior, whom He has set over the English to lead His people, supported by God to victory in war."

When the evidence is taken together, it shows Athelstan as not just a powerful warrior King, but generous particularly to the congregation of St. Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street.

Alfred encouraged his son, Edward the Elder, to continue his and the Durham Monk's devotion to St. Cuthbert, which was passed down to his son Athelstan, and continued under Athelstan's brother and successor Edmund.

Athelstan was one of the prolific relic-collectors of late Saxon England. The remarks in an Old English relic-list in Exeter, which received one-third of Athelstan's collection, tells how agents purchased "with the King's earthly treasure the most valuable treasures of all - holy relics".

Excluding the mention of his brother, successor and comrade at Brunanburh, Edmund the rescuer of the “Five Boroughs,” no King of Anglo-Saxon England was more celebrated in such heroic terms as Athelstan.

Athelstan captured the imagination of an age as the exemplar of the kind of Christian King and hero who had conquered the Danelaw and created England.

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If you mention King Athelstan to the average person in the street, the answer you would probably receive is ATHELSTAN WHO! and shamefully until I was invited to join this order I include myself in this. Yet to anyone who prepared to spend a little time in research quickly discovers that he is probably one of the most interesting and generous Kings of the Anglo-Saxon period

Athelstan reigned from 924 to 939 and during this 15 year period did more than any other King to united England, basing it upon the fundaments of his grandfather Alfred the Great. Athelstan is the heroic subject in a poetic entry of an Anglo-Saxon Chronicle from 937 known as The Battle of Brunanburh. In this talk I examine Athelstan of England as a Christian King, hero and for my region in particular, local benefactor.

Taking the throne in 871, Alfred, who reigned until 899, managed to withstand the Viking invaders until finally forcing them in to a truce in 878, resulting in England being separated into West Saxon governance in the Southwest and Viking “Danelaw” in the Northeast. Alfred then introduced a number of military and cultural reforms, which set the agenda for his son, Edward the Elder, and his descendants to extend across the whole of the country transforming Wessex into England, a process that was completed in the reign of King Edgar the Peaceable.

This achievement was foreshadowed, however, in 927 when Athelstan, first extended West Saxon rule over Northumbria, achieved the surrender of the Northern Kings, and ten years later sealed his supremacy, by claiming the imperial titles of “King of the Anglo-Saxons”, “Emperor of the Northumbrians”, “Ruler of the Pagans” and “Champion of the Britons”ⁱ.

At the end of the tenth century, during the reign of the ill-fated Aethelred IIⁱⁱ, Viking invaders again threatened England, a Chronicle lecturer, Aelfric of Eynsham, looked back across the previous century and ranked Athelstan as the key figure between Alfred the Great and Edgar the Peaceable who were “Kings victorious through God”ⁱⁱⁱ, with Athelstan carrying forward the work of Alfred making Edgar’s success possible.

An atmosphere of religious significance emphasised these events for the Christian Anglo-Saxons due to the paganism of the Viking invaders^{iv}. During the late ninth century, when Christian England faced eradication, values of Christian service and sacrifice took shape with heroic episodes being expressed in Old English poems such as Beowulf developing a new heroic ideal. In the tenth century, the new ethos of Christian heroism was employed to great effect by the West Saxon Kings in their creation of a unified Christian Kingdom of England. Athelstan was a central figure in these developments. The reason why his fame prospered and then diminished is beyond this talk. One possible explanation might be that history focused on Alfred, whose achievement was superior to Athelstan’s and made his fame possible. Another might be the suspicious circumstances by which he became King; Athelstan was the illegitimate son of Edward the Elder, and had younger legitimate half-brothers.

Those same historians who sent Alfred’s reputation on its way to be called “the Great” continued to have a fascination with Athelstan, most notably William of Malmesbury, whose account provided the major plot in the story of Athelstan, and with enduring legends surrounding him it would ultimately make him the subject of a Middle English romance. Eventually though the fame of his grandfather would finally eclipse Athelstan’s reputation.

Despite this, Athelstan was a more important figure in tenth-century than were any of his ancestors, particularly among his peers on the continent. This is evident by his two sisters marriage to the most powerful men on the continent^v, namely Hugh the Great of West Francia and to Otto the Great in East Francia both significant to tenth-century continental history.

Nevertheless, it was his success in regaining areas from Viking rule that made him so attractive to his allies. In this respect he was as an important a figure as was Alfred, and as such was recognised by the Chronicler in his celebration of the battle at Brunanburh where Athelstan proved his overlordship in the North against an alliance between Olaf Guthfrithson, the son of the Norse King whom Athelstan had driven out of York ten years before, and Constantine, King of the Scots, who was defeated twice by Athelstan in 927 and again in 934^{vi}.

There are certain similarities between The Battle of Brunanburh and the Old High German Ludwigslied, a short poem celebrating in militarist Christian terms the 881 victory won by the West Frankish King Louis III over the Vikings at the Battle of Saucourt^{vii}.

It is interesting that in the first lines of the poem the presence of Athelstan's half-brother and successor Edmund I is mentioned, fighting at his side. The Danes had long been subjected to heathen bondage by the Norsemen, until they were finally liberated by Edward's son, King Edmund, protector of warriors^{viii}.

The fame of King Athelstan as the hero of tenth-century English poems was due to him outshining his ancestors both by his piety and the brilliance of his triumphs. In a further story^{ix} about Alfred the Great, we find Alfred honouring the very young Athelstan, who could not have been more than 4, as Athelstan was born in 894 and Alfred died in 899, with arms and royal insignia, despite him being fostered in Mercia by his Aunt, Aethelflaed, and her husband Aethelred, who was a high-ranking royal official and prior magistrate. This action raised accusations of complacency by the King with the battle at Brunanburh looming.

There are three other tenth-century poems associated with Athelstan. Two of these poems in particular show how Athelstan's equals viewed him^x. One, the *Carta Dirige Gressus*, refers to the aftermath of the events of 927 when Athelstan expelled Olaf Sihtricson from York, entered into a pact with Constantine, King of the Scots, and gained the submission of the princes of the North. In one possibly corrupted, versions of the poem, it exults:

"Whom he now rules with this England [now] made whole: King Athelstan lives glorious through his deeds^{xi}!"

The other poem, the *Rex Pius Æðelstan*, comes from a similar historical context and is associated with the aftermath of Athelstan's 937 triumph at Brunanburh considering the first few lines:

“Holy King Athelstan, renowned through the whole world, whose esteem flourishes and whose honour endures everywhere, whom God set as King over the English, sustained by the foundation of the throne, and as leader of [His] earthly forces, plainly so that this King himself, mighty in war, might be able to conquer other fierce Kings, treading down their fierce necks.”^{xii} Athelstan is God’s warrior, whom He has set over the English to lead His people, supported by God to victory in war.”

In this an Old Testament flavour is imparted to Athelstan’s Kingship which becomes clear in a victory prayer traditionally associated with him.

“O Lord God Almighty King of Kings and Lord of Lords in Whose might every victory lies and every war is crushed, grant to me that Thy might may fortify my heart so that, relying on Thy strength and relying on my own hands and powers I may fight well and act manfully, so that my enemies may fall in my sight and may collapse just as Goliath collapsed before Thy servant David and just as the people of Pharaoh before Moses in the Red Sea; and just as the Philistines fell before the people of Israel; and [just as] Amalek collapsed before Moses and the Canaanites before Joshua, so let my enemies fall under my feet, and let them come against me by one path and let them flee from me by seven paths; and may God crush their arms and smash their swords and melt them in my sight just as wax melts before a fire, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the name of Our Lord Jesus has been invoked upon me; and let Thy name be magnified, O Lord, among my adversaries, O Lord God of Israel.”^{xiii}

Taken together, these show Athelstan as a powerful warrior King. The prayer is full of military imagery, taken from the Old Testament, assigning him as God's own warrior. They furthermore emphasise Athelstan's reputation as a great benefactor of the Church and offer a glimpse of a warrior King who actively supported scholarship carrying forward the work of Alfred making Edgar's reform of the English church possible. Such support as Athelstan practiced would inevitably carry political and military implications.

The manuscripts are more significant regarding the relationship between Athelstan and the military environment of the church. Athelstan was generous to the congregation of St. Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street^{xiv}. A Chronicle by monks residing in Durham after 995, included in the news for 934 that "King Athelstan went into Scotland and ravaged much of it,"^{xv} that he "came to the tomb of St. Cuthbert, commended himself and his expedition to his protection, and conferred on him many and diverse gifts befitting a King. He then subdued his enemies, laid waste Scotland and by his many gifts, Athelstan marshalled the Northumbrian Saint's aid against his enemies."^{xvi}

There is earlier evidence of a close relationship between Athelstan and the guardians of the St. Cuthbert's relics; such association in the unsettled conditions of the North would need to be set in military terms. One document dating from the mid-tenth century is largely motivated by such terms and could be the source of the tale of Athelstan's donation and dates back even further to the days of King Alfred.

On the eve of Alfred's victory at Edington in 878, it is said that St. Cuthbert appeared to him to give him the assurance of his victory by him having his and God's assistance^{xvii}. Alfred encouraged his son, Edward the Elder, to continue the Durham Monk's West Saxon tradition of devotion to St. Cuthbert. This was passed down to his son Athelstan, and continued under Athelstan's brother and successor Edmund.

There is other evidence of West Saxon devotion to St. Cuthbert independent of that of the Durham monks'. Among the gifts given to Chester-le-Street by Athelstan was a tenth-century West Saxon codex prepared especially for the occasion, containing Bede's eighth-century prose and verse "Lives of the sixth-century St. Cuthbert", with an illustrated page showing Athelstan presenting the book to St. Cuthbert.^{xviii}

Athelstan's spiritual strategy is also evident elsewhere; the shrines of St. John of Beverley and St. Wilfred at Ripon appear to be supported by him, as a ring preserved at Bury St. Edmunds has an inscription containing the names of St. John of Beverley and Athelstan^{xix}.

Crucial to the program of coordinating non-West Saxon Saint Cults to their cause were gifts of holy relics in addition to the books previously mentioned. The Welsh monk Asser stated that Alfred kept candles burning "in the presence of the holy relics of a number of God's chosen saints which he had with him everywhere"^{xx}. The possession of relics from throughout England is an indication of the extent of the West Saxon influence.

Athelstan was one of the prolific relic-collectors of late Saxon England. It was well known that he was a passionate collector of relics from far and wide. The remarks in an Old English relic-list in Exeter, which received one-third of Athelstan's collection, tells how agents purchased "with the King's earthly treasure the most valuable treasures of all - holy relics"^{xxi}.

Because of this Hugh the Great, the Count of Paris, sent gifts to Athelstan in 926 to solicit his sister's hand in marriage. Among the gifts were the sword of Constantine the Great, on the pommel of which was a iron nail, reputed to be one of the four prepared by the Jewish faction for our Lord's crucifixion, and the spear of Charles the Great, said to used by the centurion to drive into our Lord's side. Much discussion has taken place over the significance of these gifts, but more significant is the military associations of the relics^{xxii}.

Other relics included a banner associated with a martyred soldier, St. Maurice, killed for refusing to make pagan sacrifices in 287, and other relics from the Passion either used as a weapon (the Holy Lance) or used to sanctify a weapon (the Nails from the Crucifixion fixed into Constantine's sword)^{xxiii}.

We have now come full circle, by the early twelfth century, the tradition arose that Athelstan had profited from divine intervention at the Battle of Brunanburh^{xxiv}. It was said that during that battle Athelstan's sword fell from its scabbard and in the confusion, he invoked the aid of God and St. Aldhelm, who restored in his hand a sword.

Undoubtedly Athelstan first King of all England is the central to the course of the development of Christian heroism and Kingship during the Anglo-Saxon period, which was due to the inspiration of his Grandfather, Alfred the Great who to assist in defending against the pagan Vikings, also had ideas to rally his Christian Kingdom.

England's map was inevitably altered by the Viking invasion, and during the tenth century, Alfred's successors, most notably Athelstan, would lead the West Saxon conquest of the areas that had fallen into the hands of these pagan invaders, creating a situation which would effectively split the idea of Christian Kingship from the idea of Christian heroism.

Excluding the mention of his brother, successor and comrade at Brunanburh, Edmund the rescuer of the "Five Boroughs," no King of Anglo-Saxon England was more celebrated in such heroic terms as Athelstan.

To anyone who takes more than a casual glance through history, it is clear that Athelstan played a crucial part in English affairs. It was promoted by his piety and the use of religious bonds and symbolism to gain support for the West Saxon program of expansion. Athelstan captured the imagination of an age as the exemplar of the kind of Christian King and hero who had conquered the Danelaw and created England.

End Notes

ⁱ Sawyer, Peter H. 1978. From Roman Britain to Norman England. p.167.

ⁱⁱ "Aethelred the Unready" is, unfortunately, one of the better-known names from Anglo-Saxon, even medieval, history. The modern form of the nickname stems from a corruption which distorts the original meaning and irony of a pun that was, in any case, first attested in the thirteenth century. The literal *Æðel-ræd* is "noble council"; *un-ræd* can mean "no-council," "evil council," and even (perhaps most significant with regard to how Aethelred attained the throne, by the assassination of his brother, Edward the Martyr) "a treacherous plot" (Brooke, Christopher. 1961. From Alfred to Henry III, 871-1272. Vol. 2, A History of England. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson). On the other hand, Aethelred seems not to have been ready, either.

ⁱⁱⁱ Whitelock, Dorothy, trans. and ed. 1955. English Historical Documents, c. 500-1042. Vol. 1, English Historical Documents. Reprinted 1968. New York: Oxford University Press.

^{iv} Keynes, Simon, and Michael Lapidge, trans. and eds. 1983. Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources.

^v William of Malmesbury: 'Gesta Regum Anglorum' - The History of the English Kings. Vol. 1: Text and Translation. Oxford: Clarendon Press

^{vi} The location of Brunanburh is uncertain. Speculation has ranged from Scotland to southern England. Wood, Michael. 1980. "Brunanburh Revisited." *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 20:200-17, however, made a case for placing the site in the region of Brinsworth, about 40 miles south of York - on the frontier between Northumbria and southern England. In his television programme on King *Æthelstan* part of the series upon which is based his *In Search of the Dark Ages* Wood, Michael. 1987. Wood reportedly surveyed the field from helicopter

^{vii} Alois Wolf (1991), pp. 75-6 and 80-81

^{viii} Hill, John M. 2000. The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature

^{ix} In Search of the Dark Ages Wood, Michael. 1987

^x Wood, Michael. 1999. In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past

^{xi} Quos iam regit cum ista perfecta Saxonia: uiuit rex *Æbelstanus* per facta gloriosus!

Carta Dirige Gressus stanza 3 (ed. and trans. Lapidge1981:98). "Quos iam regit cum ista" apparently refers back to stanza 2, which identifies those over whom Athelstan rules - the queen, the prince, ealdormen and thanes.

^{xii} Rex pius *Æðelstan*, patulo famosus in orbo, cuius ubique uiget gloria lausque manet, quem Deus Angligenis solii fundamine nixum constituit regem terrigenisque ducem, scilicet ut ualeat reges rex ipse feroce*s* uincere bellipotens, colla superba terrens. Rex Pius *Æðelstan* lines 1-6 (ed. and trans. Lapidge1981:95-96)

^{xiii} Ed. Birch (1885, 2:332-3, docs. 656 and 657)

^{xiv} For Athelstan and St. Cuthbert, see Robinson (1923:51-5). In the chaotic conditions of late 9th-c. Viking-ravaged Northumbria, the guardians of St. Cuthbert's relics had finally in 875 abandoned the exposed Holy Isle of Lindisfarne (site of the first documented Viking raid back in 793). Seven years' wandering brought them to Chester-le-Street, where the congregation and relics found refuge for over a century, until the move to Durham. See Historia Regum s.a. 875, 883, 995; idem, Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae 2.6-13, 3.1; as well as the Historia de Sancto Cuthberto sec. 20 (all three of the latter are ed. Arnold 1882-1885, vols. 2, 1, and 1 respectively).

^{xv} "for *Æbelstan* cyning in on Scotland . . . and his micel oferhergade," ASC s.a. 933 ms. A, recte 934 (ed. Earle 1865:110, trans. Whitelock 1955:200)

^{xvi} "ad sepulcrum Sancti Cuthberti venit, illius patrocinio se suumque iter commendavit, multa ac diversa dona quæ regem decerent ei obtulit . . . Deinde hostes subegit, Scotiam . . . vastavit," Historia Regum s.a. 934 (ed. Arnold 1885, 2:93, trans. Whitelock 1955:252).

^{xvii} Historia de Sancto Cuthberto sec. 16 (ed., Arnold 1882 1:205; trans. Rollason 1989:149). The story is very similar to and probably derives from St. Columba's appearance to King Oswald of Northumbria before the seventh-century battle at Heavenfield by which Oswald won kingship in Northumbria - see Adomnán, Life of Columba 1.1 (ed. and trans. Anderson and Anderson 1991:14-15).

^{xviii} Cambridge, Corpus Christi College ms. 183. For the frontispiece, see Plate 6 in Wormald et al. (1983)

^{xix} Abbo, Life of Edmund Preface (ed. Winterbottom 1972:67).

^{xx} coram sanctis multorum electorum Dei reliquiis, quae semper eum ubique comitabantur," Asser, Life of Alfred, chap. 104 (ed. Stevenson 1904:90, trans. Keynes and Lapidge 1983:108); Rollason (1989:159). See also Deanesly (1961:337). On the specificity of the term haligdom for "relic-collection," see Rollason (1989:162-3)

^{xxi} Rollason (1989:159) quotes the relic-list prologue from M. Förster, ed., *Zur Geschichte des Reliquienkultus in Altengland* (Munich, 1943), pp. 63-5. The Athelstan Donation to Exeter is also translated by Swanton (1993:19-24); for editions see Swanton's introduction (1993:19). See also Robinson (1923:71-80, 159-90) for a general discussion of Athelstan and his relics and donations.

^{xxii} "ensem Constantini magni, in quo litteris aureis nomen antiqui possessoris legebatur; in capulo quoque super crassas auri laminas clavum ferreum affixum cerneret, unum ex quatuor quos Judaica factio Dominici corporis aptarat suppicio: lanceam Caroli magni, quam imperator invictissimus, contra Saracenos exercitum dicens, si quando in hostem vibrabat, nunquam nisi victor abibat; ferebatur eadem esse quæ, Dominico lateri centurionis manu impacta, pretiosi vulneris hiatu Paradisum miseris mortalibus aperuit: vexillum Mauricii beatissimi martyris, et Thebææ legionis principis, quo idem rex in bello Hispano quamlibet infestos et confertos inimicorum cuneos dirumpere, et in fugam solitus erat cogere" William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum sec.* 135 (ed. Stubbs 1887, 1:150, trans. Whitelock 1955:282). See Loomis (1950:210 ff.).

^{xxiii} Abingdon Sword-Hilt (Campbell 1982:156 fig. 144); see also Tyerman regarding its significance (1988:10)

^{xxiv} William's source for the following passage is unclear, because it precedes his description of the "very old book."