Emily A. Winkler

King Alfred in Anglo-Norman Histories: Disorder and the Danish Wars

Abstract

This paper asks how and why Anglo-Norman writers in England (c. 1120–1150) narrated the Danish wars of the late ninth century and King Alfred's role as a military general. It examines their accounts of defensive maneuvers in which Alfred was engaged against the Danes, both before and during his reign, in particular the key points at which these chroniclers deviated visibly from their sources. Several of these literary changes have been seen as points of clarification or as embellishments, but they actually effect material changes in historical perspective. Unlike later encomiasts of Alfred, these chroniclers wrote about Alfred's experiences of warfare without drawing significantly on hindsight or evaluating his actions in light of their ultimate outcomes. Instead, they elaborated on moments of disorder and crisis. By amending the narrator's temporal location in the narrative, and choosing a vantage point closer to the events and people they described, they sought to adopt the participants' lack of foreknowledge of the future.

Anglo-Norman historians portrayed disorder during the Danish wars less as a step towards greatness or as a conquest of circumstance, and more as something suffered by many, often in a deeply unsatisfactory way. Not authors of a 'great man' history, they highlighted the critical contributions of Alfred's allies, as well as Alfred's mistakes, uncertainties and challenges as a ruler. Their narratives illuminate ways in which these chroniclers sought to realize the experience of disorder by mirroring it in narrative form.

"Disorder," wrote R. H. Hodgkin of early medieval society, "was normal." This pithy sentence in his two-volume 'A History of the Anglo-Saxons' sought to establish a context for evaluating the quality of a particular moment of chaos: the disorder caused in Anglo-Saxon lands by Danish invasions, before and during the reign of King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871–899). What set these invasions apart from mainstream disorder was their chronic and demoralizing nature for the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Nevertheless, he argued, the king's legislation, with its bent towards responding to disaster, is bound to imply unconvincing and unrealistic "pictures of disorder". Ultimately, he concluded that it is important not to

overstate the sense of anarchy during Alfred's period of rule, for his government functioned throughout, despite many a setback.[1]

It is well established that King Alfred was a brilliant strategist and educated ruler, and that even if many factors were involved in defeating the chaos of those years, Alfred's leadership was a major reason why Anglo-Saxon culture and kingdoms survived in the long term. Yet in England in the first part of the twelfth century, several Anglo-Norman historians of the Anglo-Saxon past dwelt on and developed this very picture of disorder in the Danish wars – to a greater degree than the sources contemporary to these events – even as they (however unknowingly) laid the groundwork for Alfred's reputation for greatness.

In his masterwork of Anglo-Saxon history, Hodgkin attempted to view the late ninth-century Danish wars in a larger context of disorder by comparing normal and abnormal disorder in society. His remarks still raise interesting questions, not only about how we as historians should view this era (the extent of its disasters is still debated), but also about how we ought to read the medieval narratives of this disorder. What makes a narrative of disorder exaggerated? Even if we can put it in context relative to a *general* experience of disorder, to what extent would this be meaningful for the *personal* experience of disorder – that is, for the leaders and fighters embroiled in a particular chaos?

This paper asks how and why Anglo-Norman writers in England (circa 1120–1150) narrated the Danish wars and Alfred's role as a military general – the role for which he received fewer accolades than for his contributions to administration and learning. It examines their accounts of defensive maneuvers in which Alfred was engaged against the Danes, both before and during his reign, in particular the key points at which these chroniclers deviate visibly from their sources. Several of these literary changes have hitherto been seen as points of clarification or as embellishments, but they actually effect material changes in historical perspective. What is interesting is that these chroniclers wrote about Alfred's experiences of warfare with an intriguing lack of hindsight, concentrating on the moments of disorder and crisis, rather than writing monumental eulogies, sketching a portrait of a ruler, or writing a retrospective on Alfred, as later writers have done. Essentially, they amended the narrator's temporal location in the narrative, choosing a vantage point closer to the events and people they describe, in attempting to share the participants' lack of foreknowledge of the future. Unlike encomiasts, who go into the past with ultimate greatness already in mind, they preferred to tell Alfred's story without evaluating his early actions in light of their ultimate outcomes.

[1] Robert H. HODGKIN, A History of the Anglo-Saxons, 2 vols., vol. 2, London 1952, 599–600.

The papers gathered in this volume investigate the literary methods of representing order and disorder in texts of power and rule. Keen as the Anglo-Norman chroniclers were to offer morals and models to readers and royals alike, they were not only evaluating and assessing Alfred against an ideal of rulership: they were telling a story of what he and his comrades lived through during the Danish wars. They recounted what Alfred did not do well, how he felt in his struggles, what he was powerless to change, and what he was only able to do with the help and aid of others. Whereas a portrait is painted to create a lasting image,[2] a narrative unfolds anew every time it is read.[3] These historians praised Alfred; but the story they told of him at war also grappled directly with – and showed him and his allies grappling with – disorder.

The Anglo-Norman narratives explore this disorder less as a step towards greatness or as a conquest of circumstance, but rather as something suffered by many, often in a deeply unsatisfactory way. This literary look also reveals the importance of Alfred's allies to the Anglo-Norman historians – something that does not emerge as clearly if we view these writers' accounts primarily as a step in a longer continuum of reputation-building.

I begin by taking a brief look at the story of Alfred's reputation, examining where the Anglo-Norman historians fit into the continuum. After an overview of several key events of the Danish wars and the Anglo-Norman writers' main sources for these events (versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's 'Life of King Alfred'), I then examine the significant features of five writers' stories of Alfred at war: in England, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, John of Worcester, Geffrei Gaimar; and, in Normandy, Orderic Vitalis.[4] I conclude by considering the implications of these findings for the evolution of Alfred's story, for writing of the careers of kings, and for reading chronicles of disorder.

1. Reception and Reputation

[2] E. g. for William of Malmesbury's portraits of kings, see Sigbjørn O. SØNNESYN, William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History, Woodbridge 2012.

[3] David CARR, Time, Narrative, and History, Bloomington, IN 1986, 45–72, especially 51.

[4] For an introduction to these writers, see Elisabeth VAN HOUTS, Historical Writing, in: Christopher HARPER-BILL/Elisabeth VAN HOUTS (eds.), A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World, Woodbridge 2003, 103–122; Antonia GRANSDEN, Historical Writing in England, c. 550 to c. 1307, 2 vols., vol. 1, London 1974; Emily A. WINKLER, Royal Responsibility in Anglo-Norman Historical Writing, Oxford 2017; Rodney THOMSON, William of Malmesbury, Woodbridge 2003; Rodney THOMSON/Emily DOLMANS/Emily A. WINKLER (eds.), Discovering William of Malmesbury, Woodbridge 2017; Martin BRETT, John of Worcester and His Contemporaries, in: Ralph H. C. DAVIS/John M. WALLACE-HADRILL (eds.), The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern, Oxford 1981, 101–126; Marjorie CHIBNALL, The World of Orderic Vitalis: Norman Monks and Norman Knights, Woodbridge 1996; Charles C. ROZIER et al. (eds.), Orderic Vitalis: Life, Works and Interpretations, Woodbridge 2016.

The idea of Alfred's eminent standing among kings in the Anglo-Saxon world remained particularly strong in the century after his death, especially (as Simon Keynes has shown) during the Danish invasions of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.[5] It is easy to see how he was perceived as a role model during this era, living proof that the Danes might be defeated again. In late twelfth-century England, Richard of Devizes saw Alfred as an educator and civilizing force for his people,[6] but it was not until Matthew Paris wrote his vast historical chronicle in the thirteenth century that Alfred was actually accorded the epithet 'great', although writers like Geffrei Gaimar (discussed below) called him 'good'.[7]

The genesis of Alfred's reputation for greatness paused in the intervening period, others have remarked, especially in the works of Anglo-Norman writers. It has been pointed out that the records for Alfred's life, in particular the few copies of Asser's 'Life of King Alfred', were fewer in number than those of Charlemagne, who (by comparison) was widely considered great almost immediately.[8] John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury at a minimum, however, knew Asser: John copied it almost verbatim; William was familiar with it and other legends about Alfred's life.[9] Still, Alfred and his reign do not appear to have generated widespread interest at court. No cult of King Alfred sprang up to provide saintly support for contemporary rulers, or to compete with the cults of the saintly Edmund of the East Angles and Edward the Confessor.[10] The Anglo-Norman historians of the era did not credit the former king of Wessex with what Simon Keynes calls "state-formation"[11] of England, nor with being the greatest king of the English. Although they admired his generalship, and his

[5] See e. g. the account of Æthelweard, The Chronicle of Æthelweard, ed. Alistair CAMPBELL, London 1962, 50; Simon KEYNES, Alfred the Great and the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons, in: Nicole GUENTHER DISCENZA/Paul E. SZARMACH (eds.), A Companion to Alfred the Great, Leiden 2015, 13–46, here 14.

[6] Richard of Devizes, Annales monasterii de Wintonia (A.D. 519–1277), in: Annales monastici, ed. Henry R. LUARD, 5 vols., vol .2, London 1865, 3–125; John GILLINGHAM, Richard of Devizes and 'a Rising Tide of Nonsense': How Cerdic Met King Arthur, in: Martin BRETT/David A. WOODMAN (eds.), The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past, Farnham 2015, 141–158, here 151–153.

[7] For the significance of Alfred's reign in later medieval works by Matthew Paris and Peter of Poitiers, see Andrea WORM, England's Place within Salvation History: An Extended Version of Peter of Poitiers' 'Compendium Historiae' in London, British Library, Cotton MS Faustina B VII, in: Laura CLEAVER/Andrea WORM (eds.), Writing History in the Anglo-Norman World: Manuscripts, Makers and Readers, c. 1066–1250, Woodbridge 2018, 29–52, here 43–52.

[8] James CAMPBELL, Placing King Alfred, in: Timothy REUTER (ed.), Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences, Aldershot 2003, 3–23, here 19–21; for Anglo-Norman writers' admiration of Charlemagne, see Wendy Marie HOOFNAGLE, The Continuity of the Conquest: Charlemagne and Anglo-Norman Imperialism, University Park, PA 2016.

[9] William probably knew a version of the 'Life of King Alfred': Rodney THOMSON/Michael WINTERBOTTOM, William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum. General Introduction and Commentary, 2 vols., vol. 2, Oxford 1999, 92–94; THOMSON 2003, 69.

[10] Barbara YORKE, Alfredism: The Use and Abuse of King Alfred's Reputation in Later Centuries, in: Timothy REUTER (ed.), Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences, Aldershot 2003, 361–380, here 361–363. Yorke argues that later medieval writers reserved highest praise for saintly kings, at 362.

[11] Simon KEYNES, The Cult of King Alfred the Great, in: Anglo-Saxon England 28 (1999), 225–356, here 231; see also 229–230.

strategies and stubborn survival during a long period of invasion, his military victories were not great enough to make him their military hero,[12] a subject to which we will return.

Anglo-Norman chroniclers writing in England in the first half of the twelfth century reserved highest praise for Alfred's learning, management and administration. As Patrick Wormald has persuasively suggested, they were accurate in their view of Alfred's literary endeavours, the impressiveness of which merited their high regard.[13] William of Malmesbury saw many virtues in Alfred as a king.[14] In Geffrei Gaimar's view, Alfred did not work alone, even in the realm of his achievements in letters: he collaborated in a literary alliance, the making of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In some ways Gaimar's view is unsurprising – he wrote his vernacular poem not for a royal patron, but for a noble audience – yet, as we will see, Gaimar and his contemporaries also highlighted the agency of others in deeds we have come to know as Alfred's. Gaimar first presented the massive historical project as the idea, the initiative, and the execution (*Engleis l'alerent asemblant*)[15] of the monks and regular canons who decided to put the Chronicle together. They did so, Gaimar claims, because the wars meant that no one knew enough about their realm's history or rulers. Alfred, he observes, was the chronicle's owner;[16] only in his later eulogy for Alfred does he credit Alfred with ordering it to be made.[17] It is not clear whether Gaimar ultimately prioritizes the initiative of Alfred or the chronicles' creators,[18] but it is evident that he sees it as a collaborative project of learning to redress general ignorance.

Clearly, there was much good to say about Alfred. Writers of the Anglo-Norman era have thus been seen as building the foundations for a later reputation of greatness,[19] or as essentially amplifying the records of Asser and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.[20] It still tends to be assumed that early twelfth-century writers were among Alfred's 'encomiasts',[21] echoing and embellishing praise if not departing on new discourses about Alfred as historians in later

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[12] YORKE 2003, 362.
[13] Patrick WORMALD, Living with Alfred, in: Haskins Society Journal 15 (2006b), 1–39.
[14] SØNNESYN 2012, chaps. 5 and 6.
[15] Geffrei Gaimar, Estoire Des Engleis: History of the English, ed. Ian SHORT, Oxford 2009, l. 2330, 128.
[16] Ibid., ll. 2313–2336, 126–129.
[17] Ibid., ll. 3445–3450, 188–189.
[18] But cf. John GILLINGHAM, Kingship, Chivalry and Love. Political and Cultural Values in the Earliest History Written in French: Geoffrey Gaimar's 'Estoire Des Engleis', in C. Warren HOLLISTER (ed.), Anglo-Norman Political Culture and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Proceedings of the Borchard Conference on Anglo-Norman History, 1995, Woodbridge 1997, 33–58, here 46, for the view that Gaimar saw Alfred as "the brain behind the chronicle".
[19] KEYNES 1999, 229.
[20] Eric G. STANLEY, The Glorification of Alfred King of Wessex (from the Publication of Sir John Spelman's 'Life', 1678 and 1709, to the Publication of Reinhold Pauli's, 1851), in: Poetica 12 (1981), 103–133, here 105; John W. E. CONYBEARE, Alfred in the Chroniclers, Cambridge 1914.
[21] WORMALD 2006b, 2.

centuries did.[22] This, nevertheless, is not the whole story. What did interest them? What did the story mean to them? And what do their literary approaches to retelling the Alfred story suggest about how they read his battles?

In addition to tracing Alfred's posthumous reputation, it is important to examine how and why early twelfth-century writers qualified their stories of Alfred's military endeavours, alongside examining their comments that prompted later encomia. Not encomiasts, the Anglo-Norman chroniclers were not engaged in a project of tracing the origins of greatness; if they evaluated kings, they also sought to bring their stories to life. In recounting the Danish wars of the 870s, they narrated tales of struggle and victory in which Alfred was at times fallible and unwise, and in which his comrades emerged with equal or greater prominence than Alfred, as compared to their sources. The relative powerlessness of this leader meant that the *combined* efforts of Alfred and his fighters merited new prominence in the story. These historians crafted narratives that used rhetorical strategies to evoke the experience of frustration, despair and disorder. To begin, let us take a brief look at the texts with which they were working for knowledge of these events.

2. The Danish wars of the 870s and the sources

For those living in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the Danish invasions, the trajectory of the 870s would have seemed an inexorable slope towards defeat.[23] Debates continue as to the extent of damage caused, but the onslaught was unceasing, and Scandinavian rulers and nobles appear to have planned settlement and conquest rather than looting.[24] Raiding armies from Scandinavia invaded in the late 860s and took the kingdom of Northumbria, killing its rulers. In 870, they overran and conquered East Anglia, killing their king, Edmund, around whom a saint's cult sprang up. In the ensuing years, the virtual conquest of Mercia followed,

[22] For further explorations of Alfred's long-term legacy, see e. g. Beatrice A. LEES, Alfred the Great: The Truth Teller, Maker of England, 848–899, New York/London 1915; David HORSPOOL, Why Alfred Burned the Cakes: A King and His Eleven-Hundred-Year Afterlife, London 2006; Joanne PARKER, England's Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great, Manchester 2007.

[23] The manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are edited in: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, eds. David DUMVILLE/Simon KEYNES, Cambridge 1983; the chronicles are presented in parallel in a modern English translation in: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, ed. Michael SWANTON, London 2000. For an overview of these years, see Richard ABELS, Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England, London 1998, 124–168; Patrick WORMALD, Alfred [Ælfred] (848/9–899), King of the West Saxons and of the Anglo-Saxons, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2006a); Alfred P. SMYTH, King Alfred the Great, Oxford 1995, chaps. 1–3; Frank M. STENTON, Anglo-Saxon England, Oxford 1971, 246–257; See more generally on Wessex, Ryan LAVELLE/Simon ROFFEY (eds.), Danes in Wessex: The Scandinavian Impact on Southern England, c.800–c.1100, Oxford 2016.

[24] E. g. DUMVILLE/KEYNES 1983, 876, 877, 880.

under the leadership of Guthrum, the Danish ruler who was now ruling East Anglia, ultimately leaving the kingdom of Wessex as the last outpost against the invaders.

Starting in early January 871, King Æthelred I of Wessex and his younger brother Alfred engaged Danish forces in five separate encounters. The first of these was a losing battle against Danish forces at Reading, a strategic supply and transportation outpost for the Anglo-Saxon forces. Four days after the Danish victory at Reading, the armies met at a place known as Ashdown, in which the forces led by the Wessex royals had the victory. A few months later, in April, Æthelred I died, possibly from battle wounds sustained at another of the conflicts, Meretun, that went ill for the West Saxons. Alfred succeeded his brother as king.

Defeats beset him often during the 870s, and the Danes made continued incursions into Wessex. But at the Battle of Edington in 878, usually seen as the invasions' turning point, Alfred besieged Guthrum, winning the foreign king's surrender, baptism, and acceptance of a peace treaty. In the later years of Alfred's reign, as his victories became more numerous and the Danes diverted their priorities, Alfred's strategic achievements included the successful building of defensive fortresses along his border – and of an alliance with Mercia.[25]

These events are recounted in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and in the 'Life of King Alfred' of Asser, who used a version of the former as one of his key sources for the events of Alfred's life to 887.[26] Although written in different genres, both accounts of the Danish wars sought to highlight West Saxon achievements.[27] Simon Keynes has argued that the late ninth-century chronicler who recounted Alfred's wars in the 870s gave "the impression that the situation was not as bad as it actually was".[28] The chronicler, he notes, highlights that both sides inflicted heavy losses at Reading even though the West Saxons lost, that the West Saxons were winning for a long time before losing at Meretun, and that Alfred kept the Danes at bay for a long time before losing at Wilton. The chronicler also, Keynes observed, gave Alfred

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[25] David HILL/Alexander R. RUMBLE (eds.), The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications, Manchester 1996; Simon KEYNES, King Alfred and the Mercians, in: Mark A. S. BLACKBURN/David N. DUMVILLE (eds.), Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century, Woodbridge 1998, 1–45.

[26] Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and Other Contemporary Sources, eds. Simon KEYNES/Michael LAPIDGE, London 1983, 55; see also James CAMPBELL, Asser's 'Life of Alfred', in: CAMPBELL, The Anglo-Saxon State, Hambledon 2000, 129–55.

[27] On the context and purposes of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, see Nicholas BROOKS, Why Is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle About Kings?, in: Anglo-Saxon England 39 (2011), 43–70; as narrative, Cecily CLARK, The Narrative Mode of 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' before the Conquest, in: Peter CLEMOES/Kathleen HUGHES (eds.), England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock, Cambridge 1971, 215–235.

[28] Simon KEYNES, A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 36 (1986), 195–217, here 198.

agency as the instigator of peace on several occasions, even though the reality of peace-making would have involved more individuals, and the reciprocal exchange of oaths and agreements.[29] John of Worcester did exactly this sort of thing even with catastrophically defeated English kings of the eleventh century, Æthelred II and Harold: they made the kings of the English look well-intentioned and effective at what they could control to put England's past in a more favourable light,[30] just as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle did for Wessex in the 870s. In the latter's variants for the successive battles of 871, King Æthelred and Alfred lead the army (or divisions thereof) alongside one another: the Chronicle uses the same introduction for each battle – the phrase "King Æthelred and his brother Alfred" – thereby creating a reliable anticipation of their joint effort, whether the encounter ended in defeat or victory.[31]

The Welshman Asser, who knew King Alfred personally, used the events of these years in his 'Life of King Alfred' to build towards a story of Alfred's glorious kingship.[32] In particular, he highlighted how the West Saxons owed the victory at Ashdown to Alfred I's prayer, but especially to Alfred's military leadership, sanctioned by God. Later, when Alfred becomes king and marries, Asser extolled his virtuous royal humility, enhanced by the illness that reminded the king of his human infirmity and the need to strive for spiritual union with God.[33]

3. Alfred and the Anglo-Norman Chroniclers

In the twelfth century, English chroniclers had few illusions about the dangers and challenges King Alfred and his contemporaries faced, and chose to explore different ways of conveying these in writing to give them greater emphasis than in their sources. William of Malmesbury, our first Anglo-Norman historian, was an extremely well-read and intelligent Benedictine monk who wrote 'Gesta Regum Anglorum', the 'Deeds of the English Kings' (or the 'Deeds of the Kings of the English'), under the patronage of England's royal family in the 1130s and

[29] Ibid., 198–199; for the battles, DUMVILLE/KEYNES 1983, 871; for peace-making, 871, 876, 877.
[30] Emily A. WINKLER, England's Defending Kings in Twelfth-Century Historical Writing, in: Haskins Society Journal 25 (2013), 147–164.
[31] DUMVILLE/KEYNES 1983, 871.
[32] See David P. KIRBY, Asser and his 'Life of King Alfred', in: Studia Celtica 6 (1971), 12–35; Matthew KEMPSHALL, No Bishop, No King: The Ministerial Ideology of Kingship and Asser's 'Res Gestae Aelfredi', in: Richard GAMESON/Henrietta LEYSER (eds.), Belief and Culture in the Early Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting, Oxford 2001, 106–127; Ralph H. C. DAVIS, Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth, in: History 56 (1971), 169–182; WINKLER 2017a, 59–63.
[33] On the nature and significance of Alfred's illness, see David PRATT, The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great, in: Anglo-Saxon England 30 (2001), 39–90.

1140s. William has been cited as showing Alfred as a type of an ideal king, unblemished by critique.[34] This is not quite the case. Although William praised Alfred's contributions to learning, he was overtly and implicitly critical of Alfred's generalship of the 870s. Not an idealized portrait, William's narrative is more like a 'human interest' coming-of-age story: a brash youth nearly loses a war; as king, he is mired in nine years of powerlessness, wasted wanderings in the face of unrelenting invasion; later, he emerges as a successful leader in many respects.

William of Malmesbury's account of Alfred's generalship accords on many occasions with Asser's positive picture, and the ideal behaviour of rulers.[35] In the later years of Alfred's reign, because of the army's familiarity with war and the king's encouragement (*hortamentis regi animati*), the army is prepared not only to defend but also to initiate a challenge to the enemy (*non solum ad resistendum sed et ad lacessendum*). Alfred leads energetically in every need (*impigre in omnibus necessitatibus*). William emphasizes elsewhere the need for a leader's courage to be seen: here, even the appearance of Alfred's well-known courage is enough to inspire fear in the enemy (*nota suae uirtutis spetie alienos territans*).[36] What is more, Alfred had good intentions: in response to a charge that Alfred stole from the poor, William clarifies that Alfred 'surely did not wish (*nolens scilicet*) to make a sacrifice to God through robbing the poor'.[37]

Worth noting alongside these honouring remarks are two things: the nature of William's critiques of Alfred, and William's oft-made point that Alfred owed his successes to others – something he does less in writing of later kings.[38] William's chronicle materially resembles the narratives of the Danish wars in Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' in its implication that a courageous and spirited military defence was equally as important as piety and prayer in defeating the Danes at Ashdown.[39] But in William's account, full credit goes to Æthelred I, who does both well; the young Alfred, to the contrary, is effective at neither. William found Alfred as a general too hasty, or precipitate (*preproperus*), in advancing to meet the Danes in battle at Ashdown. The two brothers had cast lots *par pari*, for equality, with each to take on one part of the split Danish army, as depicted in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. William

[34] SØNNESYN 2012, chaps. 5 and 6.
[35] For William's account of Alfred, see William of Malmesbury, Gesta Regum Anglorum, eds. Roger A. B. MYNORS/Rodney THOMSON/Michael WINTERBOTTOM, 2 vols., vol. 1, Oxford 1998, 178–197 (book 2, 119–124).
[36] MYNORS/THOMSON/WINTERBOTTOM 1998, 186–187 (book 2, 121).
[37] MYNORS/THOMSON/WINTERBOTTOM 1998, 194–195 (book 2, 124). (Translation by the author)
[38] WINKLER 2017a, chap. 4.
[39] Asser, Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser, eds. William H. STEVENSON/Dorothy WHITELOCK, Oxford 1959, chaps. 37–38; for translation and commentary, see KEYNES/LAPIDGE 1983; on Asser's portrayal of Alfred's generalship, see CAMPBELL 2000, 146–147.

portrayed Alfred acting unadvisedly in his youthful (*immaturitate*) impetuosity and, it is implied, contrary to the brothers' agreement. For while Æthelred I is still praying, Alfred has already advanced, and under his leadership the English line is about to fall. William credited Æthelred I, and the miraculous aid of God, with bringing disorder and confusion to the enemy in a sudden attack. The king's faith, William claimed, was what aided his hasty younger brother: *Quae fides regis multum fratrem adiuuit immaturitate iuuentae preproperum et iam progressum.*[40] The great degree (*multum*) of aid is reserved for Æthelred I, who prays well, leads well, and honours the agreed time and division of labour in engaging in battle.

William made a point of highlighting the disorder of the Danish wars, and observed how Alfred (however understandably) later misremembers these events in a better light. William detailed how Alfred was plagued by Danish invasions, and highlights the human weakness that he was forgetful of his own fears during those years:

> *Continuis nouem annis cum hostibus compugnans, modo incertis federibus illusus, modo in illudentes ultus, ad hoc tandem inopiae coactus est ut* […] *etiam in insulam quandam palustri uligine uix accessibilem, uocabulo Adelingeam, refugerit. Solebat ipse postea, in tempora felitiora reductus, casus suos iocunda hilarique comitate familiaribus exponere, qualiterque per beati Cuthberti meritum eos euaserit, sicut plerumque mos est mortalibus ut eos illa iuuet meminisse quae olim horruerint excepisse.*[41]

William's comments reveal a military leader with less than perfect wisdom, but in a story that would resonate with those trying to make sense of warfare in later, calmer years. William's perceptive remarks resonate with recent work on memory in history and cognitive science, which suggests that the act of remembering entails reconstructing an event each time anew, rather than 'recollecting' an original event, as an item from a drawer.[42] The king's wisdom –

[40] MYNORS/THOMSON/WINTERBOTTOM 1998, 178–179 (book 2, 119).

[41] MYNORS/THOMSON/WINTERBOTTOM 1998, 182–183 (book 2, 121). "Nine years without a break he battled with the enemy. Sometimes they deceived him with an uncertain truce; sometimes he took vengeance on the deceivers. At length he was reduced to such straits that […] he was actually forced to take refuge in an island called Athelney, which from its marshy situation was hardly accessible. Years afterwards, when happier times returned, he himself would tell his friends in cheerful intimacy the story of his adventures, and how he had survived them by the merits of St Cuthbert – so common is it among mortal men to recall with pleasure experiences that were fearful at the time."

[42] The classic work on medieval memory is Mary J. CARRUTHERS, The Book of Memory : A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture, Cambridge 2008; for an accessible introduction to the idea of remembering as constructing (rather than accessing) memories, Charles FERNYHOUGH, Pieces of Light: The New Science of Memory, London 2012.

and the royal humility much-lauded by Asser – emerges in Alfred's insight that what military successes he did have, he owed to St Cuthbert. 'I could not have done this on my own', William's Alfred concludes implicitly.

William observed, and commented on, the parallels between two kinds of disorder: that faced on the ground by a military leader, and that facing the historian in writing about it. Alfred's labours form unfathomable labyrinths (*inextricabiles laberinthos*), wherein the Danes would be forced from one part of the land only to reappear in another, causing destruction throughout. William explained that some might find it insanity (*extremae* […] *dementiae*) for him to follow Alfred's wanderings around the island.[43] William thus created an affinity in prose between himself and Alfred. He evoked a close relationship between narrative and the unfolding of history, implying that only a disordered narrative would suit a disordered era. The peregrinations of England's king, circling the island and ineffectually pursuing the Danes, are less than impressive. There is a subtle suggestion that Alfred's circlings were as senseless – or at least, as ineffectual – as it would be to narrate them in detail.

What is interesting is that in writing of the events of the year 1142 in the prologue of Book III of his 'Historia Novella', William uses the same phrase he used for the ineffectual disorder of the Danish wars in Alfred's time – *inextricabilis laberinthus* – to characterize the happenings of England's civil war in his own day, and in the same sense. William wrote his 'Historia Novella' over the course of England's first civil war, the dispute between Stephen and Matilda, sometimes called the 'reign of anarchy'.[44] A supporter of Matilda and her half-brother Robert of Gloucester, his patrons, William could invoke divine justice while her power was ascendant; after the two were captured in 1141, however, he rewrote a prologue for Book III that stressed fortune's mutability rather than justice.[45] He introduced the new book by writing, *inextricabilem laberinthum rerum et negotiorum que acciderunt in Anglia aggredior euoluere*.[46] The activity (*aggredior*) he is really describing here is not the would-be rulers' attempts to navigate a disordered nation, but rather his own effort as an historian and

[43] MYNORS/THOMSON/WINTERBOTTOM 1998, 180–183 (book 2, 121.1).

[44] See e. g. Oliver H. CREIGHTON/Duncan W. WRIGHT, The Anarchy: War and Status in 12th-Century Landscapes of Conflict, Liverpool 2017; Graeme WHITE, The Myth of the Anarchy, in: Anglo-Norman Studies 22 (2000), 323–337; Carl WATKINS, Stephen: The Reign of Anarchy, London 2015.

[45] William did not think that 'morality determined historical outcomes', and at times invoked God and Fortune together: Rodney THOMSON, William of Malmesbury's Historical Vision, in: Rodney THOMSON/Emily DOLMANS/Emily A. WINKLER (eds.), Discovering William of Malmesbury, Woodbridge 2017, 165–174, here 167–168.

[46] William of Malmesbury, Historia Novella, eds. Edmund KING/Kenneth R. POTTER, Oxford 1998, 80–81 (book 3, prologue). "I am undertaking to unravel the trackless maze of events and occurrences that befell in England."

author in dealing sensibly, in narrative form, with the confusing and constantly-changing situation in England.

Whether or not he had his comments about Alfred's Danish wars in mind when writing his new history, he had the same sort of situation in mind. William ultimately credited the victories of Edward the Elder to Alfred's groundwork, but his account of Alfred's own military travels stressed disorder and the survivor's experience of unrelenting invasion, rather than achievement. William did not erect an edifice to a legacy. He tells a story in which he claims he cannot do justice to the disorder of events in history by writing a disordered narrative. He is, of course, a master of digression and circumlocution; the point remains that he found parallels between these two eras in their frustrations for rulers and authors alike.

Henry of Huntingdon, a contemporary of William's, was a secular cleric who wrote the 'Historia Anglorum' ('History of the English'). He often followed very closely the shape of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's narrative, but viewed the events of England's history as part of a repeating cycle of invasion. The predictability of this cycle, however, did not temper its tragedy. Henry's account of Alfred's wars used rhetorical strategies to bring disorder to the fore, highlighting in particular the feelings of powerlessness of Alfred's allies, and Alfred's own ongoing experience and feelings of disorder. These strategies give the narrative a more 'real-time' quality. The two key moments for observing his rhetoric at work are his account of the events of 896/897 and his summary of Alfred's reign.

Henry placed the despair of Alfred's comrades at the point of most heightened emotion in his narrative of the Danish wars. This occurs at the single moment in his entire account of the Danish wars in which he employs direct address. He explains that he has chosen only one of many naval conflicts (896/897) to describe (*unum pertractabo*), and over the course of this battle, six English ships are cut off, powerless to engage. Henry abruptly moves from *pertractare* to holding up for the reader not a mirror, to reflect our lives or values, but a window, to see those of whom he writes: *Videres autem gentem sex nauium bellum aspicientem et auxilium ferre nequientem pugnis cedere pectus et unguibus rumpere crines.*[47] The single event Henry chooses to show us, when he departs from first- and third-person description, is comprised of the feelings and actions of despair of the men, forced to look on helplessly as their friends face the enemy. They are powerless to aid their allies, and we – equally powerless – are asked to watch.

[47] Henry of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum, ed. Diana E. GREENWAY, Oxford 1996, 296–297 (book 5, 12). "You would have seen the men on the six English ships, who watched the battle and were unable to give aid in the fighting, beat their breasts and tear their hair from their heads."

Henry had not shaken this feeling of tragedy when it came to summarizing Alfred's reign. He composed a short eulogy in verse for Alfred, the subject of which was the king's "difficult rule and inescapable hardship" (*De cuius regimine laborioso et inextricabili uexatione*).[48] The eulogy's tone is admiring, and praises the king's natural nobility, but it ultimately highlights difficulties over deeds. In his verses for Alfred, Henry claims that struggle (*labor*) gave the king an eternal name (*perpetuum* […] *nomen*), but does not provide accolades to this ruler's 'glory' as he does for a ruler like King Edgar (known to later generations as 'the Peaceable'), whom he claims ruled with more glory and peace than all others from Wessex.[49] Nor did Henry downplay endemic struggle and fear in the Danish wars: he says to Alfred, *cui mixta dolori / Gaudia semper erant, spes semper mixta timori*.[50]

Henry pushed this 'mixed' experience of rule further by showing, in verbal form, Alfred's emotion of fear and his preparation for battle: *Si modo uictor eras, ad crastina bella pauebas, / si modo uictus eras, et crastina bella parabas*.[51] Henry locates this pair of phrases in the present: *during* Alfred's tribulations (today), and *before* future battles with the Danes (tomorrow). This rhetorical formula retains the narrative quality of Alfred's living experience of struggle, rather than erecting a textual monument to Alfred's legacy. Instead of listing Alfred's achievements, the eulogy shows Alfred struggling through the Danish wars. By leaving Alfred's victories or defeats until 'tomorrow' – virtually writing as though they haven't happened yet – Henry stresses the disorder and lack of resolution that characterized Alfred's reign. Although not a glorious king, Alfred embodies Henry's sympathy for Anglo-Saxons who resisted invasion in other eras, and for their striving and surviving; here, he shows how it played out.

John of Worcester supervised a team of writers in the monastery of Worcester who created a twelfth-century Latin chronicle completed in the early 1140s, the core structure of which was based on a continental, universal chronicle of Marianus of Mainz. Although this 'Chronicon ex chronicis' drew on material from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,[52] it really presented an entirely new and thematically consistent version of English history. John did not name Alfred greatest king of all, despite retaining Asser's panegyric about his learning, piety and justice.

[48] GREENWAY 1996, 296–299 (book 5, 13).
[49] Ibid., 334–335 (book 5, 32).
[50] Ibid., 298–299 (book 5, 13). "For you rejoicing was always accompanied by grief, hope always mixed with fear."
[51] Ibid., 296–9 (book 5, 13). "If today you were the victor, you feared tomorrow's battles; / if today you were defeated, you prepared for tomorrow's battles." (Translation by the author).
[52] On John's sources for English history, see Cyril HART, The Early Section of the Worcester Chronicle, in: Journal of Medieval History 9 (1983), 251–315; Reginald R. DARLINGTON/Patrick MCGURK, The 'Chronicon Ex Chronicis' of 'Florence' of Worcester and Its Use of Sources for English History Before 1066, in: Anglo-Norman Studies 5 (1983), 185–196.

In his minor changes from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser, John elaborated on Alfred's capacity to feel and react to disorder, and conveys this feeling by a shift in narrative style. He also stressed collective efforts in the defence of Wessex, and enhanced the impression of disorder and disaster.

John highlighted the importance of mutual aid between the brothers Æthelred and Alfred in his account of Ashdown. In this regard John's account is like that of William, who also knew the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser; but it differs from William's in that the providential plan is conspicuously absent.[53] Whereas William underscored the effective and helpful power of the king's prayer, John emphasized that the military defence was a joint effort. Copying Asser's account, John explains that Alfred's military initiative and Æthelred's prayer were jointly responsible for defeating the Danes. However, as the battle reaches its pitch, he appears to add an explanatory comment: *Tandem rex Æthelredus, finitis quibus occupatus erat orationibus, aduenit, et, inuocato magno mundi principe, mox se certamini dedit.*[54] Although this sentence has been read as making explicit something implicit,[55] a key question arises: if it was so obvious that Æthelred finally arrived, why did John bother adding this single sentence to an otherwise unchanged account of the battle? He had to make a decision about two versions of the story that conflicted in their accounts of where Æthelred I's priorities lay: in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in joining battle; in Asser, in delaying to pray. John's use of language hints that he thought it high time for Æthelred to join the fray: the juxtaposition of words meaning 'at last' or 'eventually' with one meaning 'soon' implies the situation's urgency. One might imagine the assembled army would grow impatient at any delay by their king. John thought it important to pray to God, as Æthelred did. But John believed that the military side of the victory mattered equally, and was sufficiently crucial to the outcome that it was worth pointing out to his readers that the king of Wessex took up arms and joined his brother and their comrades on the field of battle against the Danes.

John made a handful of other changes to Asser, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's detail about Meretun being a place of mortality (871), comments from the latter about the Danish forces dividing in 877, and many remarks about the leaders and army acting without delay (e.g. for the years 895 and 896), as he did throughout his 'Chronicon'.[56] The most remarkable

[53] Winkler 2017a, chap. 5.

[54] John of Worcester, The chronicle of John of Worcester, eds. Reginald R. DARLINGTON/Patrick MCGURK/Jennifer BRAY, 2 vols., vol. 2, Oxford 1995, 290–291 (871). "Finally King Æthelred [I], having completed the prayers with which he was occupied, arrived, and having invoked the great Ruler of the world, then entered the battle."

[55] Ibid., 290 n. 2–2; KEYNES/LAPIDGE 1983, 242.

[56] Noted by HART 1983, 260; for the narrative implications, WINKLER 2017a, chap. 5.

change is a new comment about emotions felt by Alfred: anger at himself, and concern for his men. Whilst Alfred is engaged inland, he learns that his men are under siege at Exeter, and John writes that Alfred is angry at himself. This narrative recognizes Alfred's care for his comrades, and their importance to the story; and it creates an Alfred who perceives and reflects on his own weaknesses or errors in battle – perhaps a military variation on a religious theme of Asser, whose concern was primarily with Alfred's spiritual self-correction.

Far from downplaying the destruction wrought during the Danish wars, John departed from existing narratives to include a fervent lament near the end of his account of Alfred's reign. In lieu of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's comment that this particular raiding army of 897 had had little effect on the English thanks to God's grace,[57] John – unusually – lamented the great degree of disasters they brought, heightening the tenor of trouble: *O quam crebris uexationibus, quam grauibus laboribus, quam duris modisque lamentabilibus non solum a Danis qui partes Anglie tunc temporis occupauerant, uerum etiam ab his Satane filiis tota uexata est Anglia.*[58] He retained the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's remark that England's troubles were great because of murrain among animals (which would have brought famine) and death among the king's thegns. It is worth noting that even though John's lament magnifies the scale of trouble caused by the Danes as compared with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, he considered the widespread human disaster of famine-induced death – lacking a human or divine cause – worse trials than the invasions. The scale, widespread nature, and inexplicability of the general disorder of this era appear, in his view, to have merited emotive prose.

Geffrei Gaimar might seem the odd one out of the English writers, as he wrote his 'Estoire des Engleis' for a noble patron as a poem, in Anglo-Norman French. Yet he had a good deal in common with them as storytellers. As many of his readers have noted, Gaimar told heroic stories that often place nobles' deeds at the forefront, rather than kings', befitting the heroic genre and his noble audience.[59] Gaimar has been credited with making Alfred's reign the

[57] DUMVILLE/KEYNES 1983, 897.

[58] DARLINGTON/MCGURK/BRAY 1995, 348–349 (897). "O with what a host of tribulations, what heavy labours, in what cruel and grievous ways was all England harassed, not only by the Danes who at that time held part of England, but also by these sons of Satan [i.e. the pagan raiding army]."

[59] See e. g. Paul DALTON, Geffrei Gaimar's 'Estoire Des Engleis', Peacemaking, and the 'Twelfth-Century Revival of the English Nation', in: Studies in Philology 104 (2007), 427–454; Elizabeth FREEMAN, Geffrei Gaimar, Vernacular Historiography, and the Assertion of Authority, in: Studies in Philology 93 (1996), 188–206.

turning point in English unity,[60] although Gaimar says nothing specifically about Alfred doing anything for national unity. The key contributions, Gaimar thought, were made jointly.

Gaimar cast peace as Alfred's foremost concern, and for this reason Alfred's interactions with the enemy, his allies and his nobles matter, in a way likely to appeal to his noble audience. Gaimar expanded in particular on the king's successes in keeping the peace[61] and upholding treaties, the most important example of which is his christening of Guthrum.[62] His Alfred is thus a 'good king' (*bon reis*),[63] whom he credits with frequent victories, enough that Pope Marinus sent him a fragment of the Cross.[64]

Importantly, however, Gaimar showed that these victories were taken in association with his barons.[65] A distinguishing feature of Alfred's 'goodness' and wisdom as a military leader is his ability to delegate effectively to his subordinates and his allies. In one story, he signals the importance of Alfred's reaction to a Danish attack by asking a question: *Ke fist donc Elveret li reis?*[66] Gaimar then answers the question: Alfred summoned many allies from far and wide, followed his nobles' advice, and named a good commander.[67] What was special about this good king's actions was that he sought victory with the help of many others.

Yet his Alfred is not always successful in battle. If Gaimar magnified Alfred's victories[68] (and he named Danish fighters and highlighted their victories too),[69] he also magnified the scale of Alfred's struggles as compared with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Alfred constructs a fort at Athelney, doing so *od poi de gent, par grant ahan*.[70] In another example, rather than stressing how much damage the English army inflicted at Reading, Gaimar highlighted how much they suffered: he explained that ealdorman Æthelwulf was killed, Æthelred and Alfred were forced to retreat, adding: *e les Engleis sunt eschapez, / mes mulz en sunt morz e naffrez, / ci ourent Daneis [la] victur*.[71] The coordinating conjunction permitted Gaimar to

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[60] John GILLINGHAM, Gaimar, the Prose 'Brut' and the Making of English History, in: GILLINGHAM, The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values, Woodbridge 2000, 113–122, here 122.
[61] E. g. SHORT 2009, ll. 3383–3394, 184–187.
[62] Ibid., ll. 3197–3232, 174–177.
[63] Ibid., ll. 3159, 3194, 172–175.
[64] Ibid., ll. 3321–3324, 182–183.
[65] E. g. Ibid., ll. 3193–3196, 174–175.
[66] Ibid., l. 3362, 184–185. "What did King Alfred do?" (Translation by the author).
[67] Ibid., ll. 3355–3376, 184–185.
[68] Cf. the argument that Gaimar "recognized Alfred for the exceptional ruler he was", and conveyed less of the Danes' desperation than did Asser: GILLINGHAM 1997, 46.
[69] E. g. SHORT 2009, ll. 2971–3016, 162–165.
[70] Ibid, 3158, 172–173. "with few men and much trouble". (Translation by the author).
[71] Ibid, ll. 2969–2971, 162–163. "and this is how the English escaped, but not without suffering many casualties and mortalities. Here the Danes were victorious."

highlight not what the English achieved here, but what they lost: the sense thus differs from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

In dire times Gaimar commented on Alfred's uncertainty: *Li reis Elveret ki ert lur sire / ne sout ke fere ne ke dire*.[72] Furthermore, he used a shift in tense to realize this uncertainty at the crucial moment, and where it leads: to the seeking of comrades. After acknowledging Alfred's uncertainty, Gaimar moves immediately into the present tense when describing Alfred calling on his allies, finding that only a few turn up, and perceiving, because of the distresses of his enemy, that he must retreat: *de tote parz feit gent mander / mes mult en pout poi asembler. / Com veit ke si est entrepris / e malbailli par enemis, / as bois se tint e as gastines / pur eschaper des mains sanguines*.[73] Here, present tense is reserved for highlighting what amounts to desperation in being unable to summon enough aid. Alfred's thoughts and actions in uncertainty are central to the narrative, including the unsuccessful summons and the realization that he is beset. The presence of his allies is a key factor in the potential for success.

Ashdown is a shared victory. In Gaimar's account, neither Alfred nor Æthelred I emerge the greater hero after Assandun: Gaimar follows the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in showing the two brothers sharing the burden of the fighting. Æthelred and the English, he explains, fought against Danish kings; Alfred fought against the Danish earls.[74] But the parallels are not exact, for in Gaimar's explaining *how* the battle was fought, it becomes much more of a shared endeavour. After noting the Danes' pride in dividing their army into two groups and naming some of their knights, he writes, *E les Engleis de l'altre part / se sunt partiz – nel funt a tart*.[75] First, Gaimar credited the strategic decision to divide the army into two groups, each with its own leader, to 'the English', which he is using in this discussion of battle to refer to the English army as a whole.[76] Second, he noted that the execution of this plan happened without delay. Gaimar praised not only the collective decision, but its efficiency.

Furthermore, Gaimar made a point of giving Æthelred I credit, even though he did not live long enough to build a reputation like Alfred's. Gaimar honoured Æthelred I's right intent in preparing for battle: King Æthelred I was ready to confront a Dane, Gaimar subsequently

[72] Ibid., 3133–3134, 172–173. "Alfred their king knew neither what to say nor what to do." (Translation by the author).

[73] Ibid., ll. 3135–3138, 172–173. "He summons the army from all parts, but can assemble only a few. As he sees himself so tormented and harrassed by his enemies, he took himself to the woods and other wastes to escape their bloody grasp". (Translation by the author).

[74] Ibid., ll. 2993–2996, 164–165. Gaimar appears not to have known Asser.

[75] Ibid., ll. 2991–2992, 164–165. "And the English army, on the other side, split in twain without delay." (Translation by the author.)

[76] See e. g. Ibid., ll. 2969, 2975, 2997, 162–165.

insists, but died before he could. For Gaimar, intent mattered as much as success in a ruler's worth.[77] What makes Gaimar's account distinctive is that the most decisive actions, and the major part of credit for victories, lie with Alfred and the English army.

The point is not that Gaimar made Alfred out to be a bad king, or worse king, than others have said, but to show two things about the poem: first, that moments of disorder and confusion on the English side merited rhetorical shifts; and second, that Gaimar did not give this credit unequivocally, or singly, to Alfred alone. He was read this way by many later Alfred enthusiasts, from the authors of the *Brut* chronicles to Victorian historians,[78] but he did not think of his task as building the reputation of a single man destined for greatness. Gaimar highlighted what amounted to a unified effort aided by the nobles' advice, by the actions of allies, and by Alfred's personal wisdom.

What, then, of these writers' contemporary living in Normandy, Orderic? Although born in England, Orderic was sent to Normandy at the age of ten, and in his later years composed an extensive chronicle centred around his monastic home, Saint-Évroul. What is different is that his 'Historia Ecclesiastica' tells a story of long-term religious reform in England, and how kings – both West Saxon, like Alfred, and Norman, like William – prove themselves worthy on the grand stage by acting as Christian rulers because they defeat paganism.[79] Orderic counted Alfred the best of all English kings before and after:

> *Post aliquot annos Elfredus Gewissorum rex filius Edeluulfi regis in paganos surrexit, et uirtute Dei hostes aut peremit, aut expulit aut subegit, et primus omnium regum monarchiam totius Angliæ solus obtinuit. Probitate et liberalitate laudabilique prouidentia omnes Angliæ reges præcedentes et subsequentes ut reor excellit*.[80]

Thus Orderic, in his very first comment about Alfred, evaluated the king in terms of what he achieved in defeating the pagans. His accolades (he compared a king of the West Saxons to all kings of the English) suggest the surpassing value of this quality for Orderic. The general

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[77] WINKLER 2017a, chap. 5.

[78] GILLINGHAM 2000, 122.

[79] For discussion of Orderic's views of the Danish invasions in eleventh-century England, see Emily A. WINKLER, Translation, Interpretation and the Danish Conquest of England, 1016, in: David HOOK/Graciela IGLESIAS-ROGERS (eds.), Translations in Times of Disruption, London 2017b, 173–200, here 190–194.

[80] Orderic Vitalis, The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, ed. Marjorie CHIBNALL, 6 vols., vol. 2, Oxford 1969–1980, 240–241. "After some years Alfred king of the Gewisse [West Saxons], son of King Æthelwulf, mustered his forces against the pagans, and by God's help either slew or drove out or conquered the enemy, so that he became the first king to hold sway over the whole of England. In goodness, nobility, and statesmanship he stood, I believe, head and shoulders above all the kings of England who came before and after him." Cf. KEYNES 1999, 231.

disorder in the realm, however, receives less attention than its resolution. Unlike his contemporaries, he adopted a firmly retrospective stance. An insider's perspective on the events of English history mattered less than the grand narrative of Christianity's triumph in Orderic's broader ecclesiastical history.

For the Anglo-Norman historians writing in England, the continuous state of Danish invasion at the time – that experience of disorder – was an important subject for historical reflection. There were perhaps deeper anxieties about the military threats posed by the Danes in the histories written in England, given the invasions of England by the Danes and Normans in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Yet hindsight coloured their language less than an interest in comprehending the past on its own terms.

4. Conclusion: The reality of disorder

The case of rewriting Alfred, his allies and the Danish wars in the Anglo-Norman histories illuminates how medieval writers navigated through – or around – the order and disorder of rulership. Henry of Huntingdon's characterization of Alfred's career – 'mixta' – is perhaps the word that best captures the order and disorder alluded to in this volume's title. We read often of historians holding up mirrors for princes, telling stories for their moral worth. But it is not obvious that getting from a story to a moral tenet or truth was straightforward. William of Malmesbury, for one, reflected that this was no easy task, and human history at times struck him as so disordered that even God must not know what to do about it all.[81]

One implication of the foregoing study is that the Anglo-Norman chroniclers sometimes encountered a narrative tension between relating disorder and resolving it. Depending on a chronicler's aims, telling the story may not always equate to evaluating, or judging, its end or effects. If historians seek a judgment, they evaluate a ruler's historical standing based on what he or she achieved or accomplished. To do this, historians need to look (within or beyond a lifetime) for conclusiveness: what was finished? What was done? What did it cause? The words *res gestae* – 'things performed', the famous subject of many a medieval history – underline precisely this: history is an account of things done and their effects. F. M. Stenton wrote, for example, that Alfred's "place in history is not affected by the

[81] Addressing God, William wrote: *Quocirca, si fas est dicere, nesciens quo nos modo tractares fortunae populandos exposuisti.* William of Malmesbury, Willelmi Meldunensis monachi Liber super explanationem lamentationum Ieremiae prophetae, eds. Michael WINTERBOTTOM/Rodney THOMSON/Sigbjørn SØNNESYN, Turnhout 2011, ll. 2826–2827 (book. 1); see also THOMSON 2017, 166–168.

inconclusiveness of his later wars" – so Stenton looked beyond, to Alfred's legacy (he saved culture; he built a Mercian alliance), to affirm that place in history.[82]

Disorder, however, does not lend itself to clear conclusions. This was a challenge William of Malmesbury recognized, both in Alfred's day and in his own. If no deeds of note were done, what was there for him to write about in a *res gestae*; and how should wanderings with uncertain routes and ends lend themselves to prose? During the invasions, Alfred and his allies could not perceive where or when the Danish onslaught would end. If a historian tries to adopt a similar stance – that is, not to anticipate outcomes by writing with hindsight – the disorder he or she conveys may appear to be exaggerated if we know full well that Alfred will come to be seen as greatly successful. It may be that trying to stand in the shoes of Alfred and his allies *during* the disorder of the Danish wars interested these writers more than the question of his greatness or glory. The story of this era's wars compelled them not only because Alfred eventually overcame them but, rather, that he persevered even though he could not see all ends. This 'virtual reality' is perhaps the sort of thing that gives us a better sense of greatness – the chance to 'live with' Alfred (to quote Wormald) for a brief moment, and to better appreciate the scale of what he had to overcome.

A second implication is that their narratives thus resonate more with contemporary scepticism of writing history modelled on a 'great man' or 'war hero' model, if for different reasons.[83] Storytelling mattered more than judgment, and the man in life more than his legacy in death. Simon Keynes has observed that, illuminating as the sources for Alfred's reign are, "we would simply like to know how others felt".[84] What would other contemporaries, besides the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser, have thought and written about the Danish wars? Our writers conduct a similar thought-experiment in narrative form. In reflecting on how Alfred might have acted, thought and felt in a time of widely-acknowledged disorder, the Anglo-Norman historians' imagined stories were astute and acute. Our present curiosities mirror theirs. They tended to avoid judging Alfred's role in the wars based on outcomes and achievements – judgments which happen when we ask what made Alfred 'great'. Yet, from their perspective, there was less at stake than there was in the second era of Viking invasion (970s–1016): the whole kingdom of the English was not at stake, because it had not yet been formed.[85] A *preproperus* Alfred caused no lasting damage to the defence against invasion, William of Malmesbury thought: he had his brother's aid, and his brother that of God. A

[82] STENTON 1971, 269.
[83] Cf. WORMALD 2006b, 19–20: "We have little time for hero-kings."
[84] KEYNES 1986, 205.
[85] KEYNES 1986, 204–8.

preproperus Æthelred II in the early eleventh century would have garnered William's censure – as indeed he did – because William thought this king lost a kingdom.

A third implication is that the Anglo-Norman writers were interested in Alfredian teamwork. Alfred emerges in their accounts of the Danish wars not in terms of *gloria* or surpassing individual personal greatness as a war leader, but in relation to the deeds of his allies in battle. They thought great deeds were done, amidst great suffering; but the credit for the doing belonged to the West Saxons together with their leaders – and, in some cases, to God and St Cuthbert.[86] In the quest to recover the reality of Alfred's day and the battles against invasion, the Anglo-Norman histories may have some use in emphasizing the deeds and doings not only of Alfred, but also of his greatest of allies.

The Anglo-Norman historians are often read for what they left to Alfred's legacy in the way of praise. But their deeds, done in poetry and prose, graft an imaginative layer to a story of gritty reality. Their critiques of Alfred, their deviations from description (whether to comment on disorder in the first person, or to show it in the second person), and the critical role they gave to Alfred's allies may have contributed much more to Alfred's legacy than we realize. William's Alfred began as a headstrong youth who nearly catastrophically lost a decisive battle; his peregrinations first brought him nowhere, and he had the foible of misremembering how bad things were. In spite of all this, he became a worthy general and remarkably educated king. John's Alfred was furious with himself for what he perceived as a lapse in his leadership; he yearned to rescue his comrades. For Henry's Alfred the present moment was always uncertain; the disasters his allies faced had moments of acute despair. Gaimar's Alfred led many battles, but was wise enough to follow others' lead. In part because of their efforts to imagine a fuller, more complex story for Alfred, the Wessex king's later admirers came to perceive just how much he might have had to overcome – and, perhaps, to hold him in higher regard as a result.

[86] A more differentiated vision of responsibility, in which the stakes were higher for individual kings, was associated with the kingdom of the English: for which see WINKLER 2017a.

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Dr Emily A. Winkler
St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford
Queen's Lane
OX1 4AR
UK
emily.winkler@history.ox.ac.uk