

‘Ealle þas ungesælða us gelumpon þuruh unrædas’: Voices from the Reign of Æthelred II

I. Introduction

1. King Æthelred II and the Problem of *unræd*

“All those afflictions befell us because of ill counsel.”¹ When translating the title of this thesis we get a fair notion of what is to be regarded exemplary for the so-called ‘lamentations’, which are to be found in those annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* covering the reign of King Æthelred II (978-1016). Although he achieved to be the longest-reigning monarch in Anglo-Saxon history, the reputation of his legacy up to the present day has been tainted to a high degree by the work of a single chronicler who composed the ‘main’ account for Æthelred’s reign² and its subsequent embellishment with discrediting remarks by later historians such as Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury. Æthelred became notorious

¹ This is my translation of a passage from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* s.a. 1011: “Ealla þas ungesælða us gelumpon þuruh unrædas [...]”, see *MS C*, ed. K. O’Brien O’Keefe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes 5 (Cambridge, 2001), p. 95.

² See pp. 17-19 *infra* in my chapter on the ‘Æthelredian Annals’.

for ill-advised policy in the face of the impending Danish conquest of Anglo-Saxon England, almost evoking the impression that he was the one who through his tarrying, incompetence and apparent acts of violence lost the inheritance of the House of Wessex single-handedly. Æthelred *unræd* 'ill counsel' became 'the Unready' in the course of time: never prepared and up to the task he had to face: the defence of the kingdom.³ The Scandinavian invasions and the eventual conquest seem to have generated a trauma, a stain on the national consciousness with the king and his councillors as scapegoats. Even so, this story of Anglo-Saxon failure, of the alleged collapse of English society, might not be as authentic and conclusive as it seems. There appears to have been an alternative tradition, which emphasized Æthelred's positive qualities as argued by Simon Keynes.⁴

Fortunately, during the last three decades intensive research on this period has rendered the events of Æthelred's reign in a much more differentiated way, shedding some light on the dismal picture so prominent hitherto. Nevertheless, there is still further need for a careful and precise survey of the source material transmitted. The Viking conquest denoted a national catastrophe for the Anglo-Saxons, thus an inquiry into their effect on contemporary sources is essential for our understanding of that period.

This thesis aims at analysing various sources from the reign of Æthelred II in order to determine in what way the Danish invasions affected the thinking and perception of the Anglo-Saxons as reflected in source material of various kinds. Moreover, it will examine sources to unearth whether both an explicit awareness of crisis and a common denominator in blaming the king for the national misfortune existed, or whether there is source material that can refute the traditional perception of Æthelred as a weak, violent and incompetent ruler. Important to this discussion will be the question of how the different sources complement or contradict one another.

"Records only speak when they are spoken to and they will not talk to strangers."⁵ This remark by C. R. Cheney pinpoints the problem. Even in the case of the chronicler's account we might gain a different picture if the historian would ask the appropriate questions. Indeed, anyone who ignores this simple principle might be prone to *unræd*.

³ See S. Keynes, 'The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready', in *Anglo-Saxon History: Basic Readings* (New York, 2000), ed. D. Pelteret, pp. 168-75 for an excellent survey on the development of Æthelred's sobriquet from the 12th century onwards.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 168-69 and n. 39 (with reference to Byrhtferth's *Vita Sancti Oswaldi*); cf. also M. Lapidge, 'The *Life of St Oswald* in *The Battle of Maldon A.D. 991*', ed. D. Scragg (Oxford, 1991), p. 54 for a positive, almost laudatory depiction of Æthelred.

⁵ C. R. Cheney, *Medieval Texts and Studies* (Oxford, 1973), p. 8.

2. Current State of Source Material and Research

According to Sir Frank Stenton, we are fortunate that the reign of Æthelred was “one of the few periods which can be studied in a full and contemporary narrative.”⁶ Even so, the account of the anonymous chronicler should not be taken for granted. In contrast to the reign of the great Anglo-Saxon king Alfred we lack a contemporary biography of Æthelred. A Latin chronicle composed by *ealdorman* (denoting ‘chief retainer’, ‘earl’) Æthelweard could have provided us with a clear picture of Æthelred’s reign - given his attachment to the royal court - but a chapter in his work headed *Actibus Eius* was never finished.⁷ We are fortunate, however, that the years between 978 and 1016 provide us with a rich supply of source material ranging from law-codes, coins and charters, to ecclesiastical sources, namely the works of Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham, archbishop Wulfstan of York and Byrhtferth of Ramsey.

The bulk of written material surviving from that period is impressive. It was a time of much activity in manuscript production.⁸ Reflection of contemporary thought and the Viking invasions are to be found in a heroic poem on the battle at Maldon in 991. Later accounts by the Anglo-Norman chroniclers Williams of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon and the author of the *Worcester Latin Chronicle* (*WLC*) reveal their view on the Anglo-Saxon kingdom by drawing heavily on the tradition established by the writer of the ‘main’ account of Æthelred’s reign.

Outside England, various works, such as the chronicles compiled by Adam of Bremen, Thietmar of Merseburg, the *Annales Cambriae*, and Scandinavian sources such as the *Heimskringla* or *Knutsdrapa*, and finally the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, written by a Flemish monk in praise of Æthelred’s and Cnut’s wife Emma, feature among the rich source material bearing witness to Æthelred’s reign.

When reviewing historical research on the subject, Sharon Turner set the tone among modern historians in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (publ. 1799-1805).⁹ By making little assessment of the quality of the evidence or the dimension of the subject he mainly based his account on the catastrophe presented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and held Æthelred personally responsible for the outcome of events. E. A. Freeman, writing in the 1860s, struck the same chord in *The History of the Norman Conquest of England* (publ. 1867-79), and finally in the early 1940s Stenton complained of “national degeneracy”, regarding Æthelred “as a king of singular incompetence”¹⁰ in his *Anglo-Saxon England* (first publ. 1943).

⁶ F. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), p. 394.

⁷ Cf. R. Lavelle, *Aethelred II: King of the English 978-1016* (Stroud, 2002; repr. 2004), p. 10 and *The Chronicle of Aethelweard*, ed. A. Campbell (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 34.

⁸ Cf. S. Keynes, ‘Re-Reading King Æthelred the Unready’, in *Writing Medieval Biography 750-1250: Essays in Honour of Professor Frank Barlow*, ed. D. Bates *et al.* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 95 and n. 89.

⁹ For an overview of the current state of research and source material see S. Keynes, ‘Æthelred II’, *ODNB*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford, 2004), I, 409-19.

¹⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 394-95.

Ever since there has been a broad-scaled attempt by modern scholars such as Dorothy Whitelock, Simon Keynes and Malcolm Godden, to name only a few, at rehabilitating Æthelred, based on a more balanced understanding of the problems that confronted the king. Critical assessment of the literary sources on which the traditional account of his reign depended and integration of evidence from the wide range of source material have contributed to the formation of a more differentiated view. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for modern scholars to come to a conclusive evaluation of Æthelred's reign and build a persuasive case to overcome the deep-rooted tradition of prejudice. However, interest in the king and his times has remained unwaning in recent years as the large bulk of publications shows.¹¹ Nowadays the current study of Æthelred's reign is much more multifaceted and well-balanced than it had been for a long time. Still, many questions concerning his reign in the light of the source material available will remain inconclusive, leaving it impossible to reduce his thirty-eight-year rule to a simple matter of good or bad kingship, but rather demand further intensive investigation.

3. Thematic Structure of the Thesis

My survey of the source material will be divided into three sections: firstly, I am taking a close look at the evidence provided by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, royal charters, coins and laws. Secondly, ecclesiastical sources by Ælfric will be subject to my investigation. Finally, three other sources of interest, namely, Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, the poem *The Battle of Maldon* and an Old English *Promissio Regis* are focused upon. Owing to the scope of this thesis and the abundance of source material, it is impossible to treat every source with the attention it deserves. Thus, various aspects will not be taken into consideration. Furthermore, only sources being datable to the actual reign of Æthelred, i.e. the years from 978 to 1016, will be considered for a close survey. The *Chronicle* as the main source of interest provides the exception from the rule.¹² Later material such as the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* or the Anglo-Norman Chroniclers will be left out of the discussion. Finally, my analysis does not encompass the works of Byrhtferth of Ramsey,¹³ one of the most prominent scholars of that period, for reasons of limited space.

¹¹ For recent studies of Æthelred's reign see N. J. Higham, *The Death of Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1997), pp. 1-71; Lavelle, *Aethelred II*; I. Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England, 991-1017* (Woodbridge, 2003); A. Williams, *Æthelred the Unready: the Ill-Counselled King* (London, 2003).

¹² It was probably written at some time between 1016 and 1023, see S. Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon England: a Bibliographical Handbook for Students of Anglo-Saxon England*, ASNC Guides, Texts and Studies 1, 9th ed. (Cambridge, forthcoming).

¹³ For Byrhtferth see M. Lapidge, 'Byrhtferth of Ramsey', *ODNB*, IX, 332-33.

II. Voices from the Past: Sources for the Reign of Æthelred

1. Records of Royal Government

1.1. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

When speaking about the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (*ASC*), we have to keep in mind that this is a mere term of convenience applied by modern scholars to describe a composite set of annals which has contributed to a large extent to our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon history.¹⁴ The original compilation, the so-called ‘common-stock’, probably compiled at the West-Saxon court of King Alfred and copied for wider circulation, was continued at different centres throughout the country, thus representing particular biases, local features, etc. It is therefore important to note that the *ASC* is far from being a homogeneous or uniform work.

Even though its reliability as a historical source cannot be taken for granted, much of the information can be tested against other independent sources. Despite all its probable imperfection, it provides the historian with invaluable information concerning the history of Anglo-Saxon England.

The Æthelredian Annals

One of the continuations of the *ASC* covers a set of vernacular annals for the reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut between 983 and 1016 (with extensions from 1017-22). It is generally referred to as the ‘main’ account for the reign of Æthelred.¹⁵ This account is to be found in MSS CDE¹⁶ of the *ASC*, with minor variations owed to the process of transmission, thus suggesting that those three manuscripts (with reservations also MS F) were modelled on a common archetype. Furthermore, this set of annals also formed the basis of the *WLC*.

The account was probably written in retrospective, possibly at one time between 1016 and 1023,¹⁷ drawing to an uncertain extent on earlier material, but given its prominence by the distinctive voice of an unknown chronicler. He is traditionally regarded as the ‘Abingdon Chronicler’, given the ‘Abingdon background’ and distinctive additions relating to abbatial succession at Abingdon

¹⁴ Cf. S. Keynes, ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. M. Lapidge *et al.*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2001), pp. 35-6. For editions and general surveys cf. *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel: a Revised Text*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892-99; repr. 1952); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and transl. M. Swanton (London, 1996); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation*, ed. D. Whitelock *et al.* (London, 1961); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes (Cambridge, 1983-); A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, vol I: c. 550 – c. 1307 (London, 1974).

¹⁵ Cf. S. Keynes, *Anglo Saxon England*.

¹⁶ For an overview of the different manuscripts see Swanton, *Chronicle*, pp. xxi-xxviii.

¹⁷ See n. 12 *supra*.

in MSS. CE, 984-5, 990, 1016 associated with this see. Those additions, however, are not integral to the account and might be explained by marginal annotations in the process of transmission from a common ancestor.¹⁸ The provenance still is a matter of debate. Alternatively Abingdon, London,¹⁹ Canterbury²⁰ and Ramsey²¹ have been proposed as places of origin of the *Chronicle*.²² It is hard to discern from the way the narration is presented and the items of local interest seem to be absorbed into the composer's account. Simon Keynes points out that his "consciousness is rather national than provincial."²³

What is so remarkable about the account is that the anonymous chronicler - writing with the advantage of hindsight - digresses from the laconic nature of annals and presents (at least from *c.* 991 on) a compelling story of the wars with the Danes.²⁴ He provides the reader with explanations for the events he records and comments upon them in an often defeatist manner. The episodes are recorded with the consciousness that the kingdom had already fallen. Thus the entries are incorporated into a narrative apparently focused to a large extent on defeat and inevitable conquest:

He had no need to offer comfort or encouragement to his audience, since the cause was already lost; he was like a dead man conducting his own post-mortem.²⁵

was the verdict of Prof. Keynes, who claims that the chronicler might not have had restraints in being outspoken for the nature of his work suggested a detachment from the royal court.²⁶ Another striking feature is the chronicler's interest in portraying personalities, their morals as well as their actions, and passing judgement on them.²⁷ Thus, the downfall of Anglo-Saxon England gets a

¹⁸ Cf. Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', p. 162.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁰ Cf. Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, cxvi.

²¹ Cf. Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', pp. 162-63; cf. also *Chronicles of the Reign of Æthelred the Unready*, ed. C. Hart, The Early Chronicles of England 1 (Lewiston, NY, 2006), pp. xxiii-lvii. He claims that the annals for Æthelred's reign were compiled by Byrthferth of Ramsey.

²² I am not going to include a lengthy discussion on provenance and compilation of the 'main' account and consequently on the relationship of the various manuscripts, as this would be beyond the focus of this thesis.

²³ Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', p. 162.

²⁴ Cf. C. Clark, 'The Narrative Mode of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before the Conquest', in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 215-37, esp. 224-30.

²⁵ S. Keynes, 'A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready', *TRHS*, 5th ser. 36 (1986), p. 201.

²⁶ See *ibid.*; cf. also P. Stafford, 'The Reign of Æthelred II: a Study in the Limitations on Royal Policy and Action', in *Æthelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. D. Hill, BAR British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978), p. 17, who suggests that the *Chronicle* appeared to have had no official or semi-official purpose.

²⁷ Cf. Clark, 'Narrative Mode', p. 225.

very personalized focus. From 991 onwards, the annals strikingly adopt a more literary style, reminiscent of prose narrative. Vocabulary, syntactical constructions and style provide us with a rich diction, occasionally even coming close to poetry.²⁸ The occurrence of certain turns of phrase, which appear time and again in the annals, is another crucial aspect in binding the annals together as a continuous narrative.²⁹

In my survey of the *Chronicle*, MS. C (British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i, fols.115v-164r) will be the main source as it provides us with the most detailed account and was compiled chronologically closest to the events recorded. The greater part of the manuscript was written in all probability c. 1045. The compiler probably drew on an exemplar which also lies behind MS. B (British Library, Cotton Tiberius A.vi, fols. 1-35), inserted a set of 'Abingdon Annals' (976, 977, 978-9, 980-2), before he continued to copy and amend an exemplar of the 'main' account, which he had probably received from London or Canterbury. He concluded with writing down annals for the period c. 1023-1066, including some 'Abingdon' entries in the late 1040s.³⁰ The commonly used term 'Abingdon Chronicle' with reference to its place of origin is disputable.³¹

In two instances, however, I will additionally draw on another work, as we are fortunate to have an independent contemporary source: MS. A, the so-called 'Winchester Chronicle' (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, fols. 1-32r). This alternate evidence reminds us that the 'main' account should not be taken at face value in any regard and therefore is far from being authoritative.

The Depiction of Kingship in the Æthelredian Annals

The Danish Conquest of Anglo-Saxon England has always been closely associated with King Æthelred II and his failed policy of buying off the Scandinavian invaders instead of taking the field and resisting resolutely. The fall of the House of Wessex was more often than not attributed to questionable character traits on the king's part.

The focus of this chapter will be on the depiction of King Æthelred in the *Æthelredian Annals*. The presentation of his actions (or lack thereof) will be analysed against the background of independent source material before contrasting him with the other royal protagonists Edmund 'Ironside', Sweyn

²⁸ Cf. Clark, 'Narrative Mode', pp. 226-9; see *infra*, pp. 49-51 in the context of the martyrdom of Archbishop Ælfheah.

²⁹ Cf. Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', pp. 161-62.

³⁰ Cf. *idem*, *Anglo-Saxon England*.

³¹ Cf. O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, pp. lxxviii-lxxx, lxxxv-vi, lxxxix-xcii and *The Abingdon Chronicle, AD 956-1066 (MS C, with reference to BDE)*, ed. P. W. Conner, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes 10 (Cambridge, 1996), pp. xxi, xxiii-xxiv, xxxvi-xlix.

Forkbeard and Cnut in order to attempt figuring out the attitude of the chronicler towards King Æthelred and his counterparts.

Even though the narrative gains its unique character and momentum from 991 onwards, the initial entries on the king's reign disclose interesting features. The king succeeded to the throne under dubious circumstances, as his role in the conspiracy to murder his half-brother King Edward was far from clear.³² Whereas MS C records in the annal for 978 that King Edward was martyred, DE (as A) claim that he was killed. The latter entries are more detailed and include a panegyric reminiscent of Archbishop Wulfstan, concluding with the statement that wisdom and contrivance of men were worthless against God's purpose. This probably refers to the perfidious murder but could also be read as a defeatist standpoint expressing that the defence against the Viking incursions was pointless. The coronation described in the next year portrays the king in a positive light, as he was consecrated in the presence of two archbishops and ten diocesan bishops, thus being depicted as the Lord's Anointed and rightful king, "mid mycclum gefean Angelcynnnes witon" as DE record.³³ What follows, however, can be seen as a bad omen, when the C-chronicler remarks that a bloody cloud in the likeness of fire had often been seen. Plummer correctly remarks that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have recognized this as sign of the impending Doomsday.³⁴ The description recalls the events of the year 793, when the E-chronicler described bad omens, e.g. fiery dragons in the air, followed by a Viking raid on Lindisfarne.³⁵ In Æthelred's days, this celestial phenomenon was followed by Viking raids during the next three years (980 Southampton, 981 Devon and Cornwall, 982 Dorset and London). These renewed Viking incursions must have come as shock for the English, who had enjoyed the peaceful and prosperous reign of King Edgar (959-75).³⁶ The chronicler probably wrote these entries with hindsight, trying to suggest a connection between the portent and the Viking raids (even to invoke past disasters?) and thus presented Æthelred's reign as doomed from the start, creating the impression that the king was punished for being entangled in his brother's murder one way or the other.

In the C-annal for 982 the chronicler includes an episode about the German Emperor Otto II, which appears unimportant at first sight, but a closer look reveals important implications. Otto is portrayed as vanquisher of the heathen

³² He probably had not been involved in whole affair, which might have been concerted by his mother Ælfthryth, but the whole matter is highly controversial. See Williams, *Æthelred*, pp. 1-19 for an outline and survey of the circumstances of Edward's death.

³³ *MS E*, ed. S. Irvine, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes 7 (Cambridge, 2004), p. 60; *With great rejoicing of the councillors of the English people* (translations in this paper are mine and are given in italics in the footnotes).

³⁴ See Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, 167; cf. also Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', p. 178, who discusses the meteorological background of the phenomenon.

³⁵ See Irvine, *MS E*, p. 42.

³⁶ For Edgar see A. Williams, 'Edgar', *ODNB*, XVII, 698-703.

Saracens who attacked southern Italy. Moreover, the chronicler recalls Otto's dynastic links to Edward the Elder.³⁷ This entry might be a means of implicitly discrediting Æthelred when seen against the background that in reality Otto suffered a disastrous defeat.³⁸ The emperor is portrayed as a Christian king who protects the people against an invading (heathen) army – a task, as we have noted above, to which the king of the Anglo-Saxons did not seem to have been up to. Otto's dynastic links with the House of Wessex, Æthelred's royal bloodline, make it all the worse. The spirit and valour of Æthelred's lineage was still alive, but apparently lacking in the present monarch. This episode shows dissatisfaction with Æthelred's inaction and appears to have provided him with a role model the chronicler wants the king to follow.³⁹ It seems as if part of the criticism is directed at Æthelred's absence from the battlefield. This is not to be underestimated as personal lordship bonds were an important element in the Anglo-Saxon state.⁴⁰ The king in battle encouraging his troops seems to reflect an ideal of the chronicler, which is so prominently presented in *The Battle of Maldon* (see *infra*). Richard Abels stressed the personal connection between the monarch and his subjects when exploring tenth-century Anglo-Saxon rulership, claiming that royal lordship had been an essential part of kingship.⁴¹

When we take a closer look at the account of Æthelred's reign, we sparsely encounter the king leading his troops into battle in person. There were actually only three occasions where his presence is recorded by the chronicler (s.a. 1000, 1009, 1014).

In the year 1000 the king is said to have gone to Cumberland “ȝ hit swiðe neah eall forhergode.”⁴² Furthermore, the annal reports a failed rendezvous with Anglo-Saxon fleet, which instead ravaged the Isle of Man. There is more to this story than meets the eye. What could be dismissed as one of the king's alleged acts of violence, carries great significance for the careful observer. Æthelred in fact displayed his strength as English monarch and his ambitions to an imperial claim over Britain in the tradition of his ancestors Edgar and Æthelstan. The latter was the first to assert an imperial claim and was styled in some of his charters *Rex totius Britanniae*.⁴³ Cumberland (i.e. Strathclyde) had a long history of aiding Viking bands from the Isle of Man as well as the Viking Kingdom of Dublin and served

³⁷ Edith, daughter of Edward the Elder, had married Emperor Otto I, Otto's father.

³⁸ Cf. Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, 169.

³⁹ Cf. A. Sheppard, 'Noble Counsel, No Counsel: Advising Ethelred the Unready', in *Via Crucis. Essays on Early Medieval Sources and Ideas in Memory of J. E. Cross*, ed. T. N. Hall, Medieval European Studies 1 (Morgantown, WV, 2002), p. 403.

⁴⁰ Cf. Keynes, 'Re-Reading King Æthelred', p. 85.

⁴¹ See R. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), pp. 79-96.

⁴² O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 88; *And ravaged nearly all of it*.

⁴³ Cf. M. Wood, 'Stand Strong against the Monsters', in *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. P. Wormald and J. Nelson (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 199-203.

as an area of retreat for them.⁴⁴ Even in the late 10th century royal authority did not cover the whole of England, as Wessex, Kent and parts of Mercia formed the areas where the king could effectively exercise his authority. The expedition to punish that region and align it to his realm seems to have been a clear expression of resolve, strength and imperial ambition.⁴⁵ Seen against this background, the fleet's strike against the Isle of Man was in no way a failure or an arbitrary action, but rather a concerted attack directed against the Viking threat endangering the west-coast of Æthelred's kingdom: a strong political message of a government that was safe-guarding its boarders.⁴⁶ The subsequent remark "Ʒ se unfridflota wæs ðæs sumeres gewend to Ricardes rice."⁴⁷ might indicate that the aggressive politics of the king had intimidated the Scandinavian invaders. Moreover, as henceforth we cannot detect any hints that the Viking raiders afflicting England were of Hiberno-Norse origin, the punitive expedition in 1000 seems to have accomplished its aim. Finally, the reasons for the attack could have had their origin in Æthelredian *realpolitik*, as the dominance of the Irish Sea trading routes and the Northwest coast of Britain up to and including Strathclyde would have been a realistic political ambition, as Simon Keynes has argued.⁴⁸ Indeed, the chronicler is quite reticent about implications that were more than obvious.

King Æthelred makes his next appearance in 1009. In the wake of his naval construction programme the Anglo-Saxon fleet was assembled at Sandwich. Apparently the king was with the fleet, because as a large bulk of the ships was lost due to alleged treason committed by a certain Wulfnoth and the ensuing disastrous punitive expedition led by Brithric, brother of *ealdorman* Eadric (of Mercia),⁴⁹ the king and his *ealdormen* returned to London "Ʒ forleton þa scipo ðus leohtlice."⁵⁰ Consequently, the naval commanders followed the king with their ships. The chronicler's defeatist comment "Ʒ leton ealles þeodscypes geswinc ðus leohtlice forwurðan, Ʒ næs se sige na betere þe eal Angelcyn to hopode."⁵¹ sets the tone. We can deduce a lot from this passage. First, it seems as if the king's

⁴⁴ Cf. Stafford, 'Reign of Æthelred', p. 30.

⁴⁵ Æthelred's claim to authority over Britain is also evident in the *intitulationes* of some of his charters. A charter dated 1001 (S 898) styles him *rex totius insule* 'king of the whole island', see *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, ed. J. Kemble, 6 vols. (London, 1839-48; repr. Vaduz, 1964), III, p. 316; cf. Lavelle, *Aetbelred II*, p. 97. In this thesis Anglo-Saxon charters are cited by their number in P. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks 8 (London, 1968), abbreviated a S.

⁴⁶ Cf. Stafford, 'Reign of Æthelred', p. 31 and Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions*, p. 53.

⁴⁷ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 88; *And the enemy fleet went to Richard's kingdom* [i.e. Normandy] *that summer*.

⁴⁸ See S. Keynes, 'The Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, p. 14.

⁴⁹ For this important protagonist see S. Keynes, 'Eadric Streona', *ODNB*, XVII, 535-38.

⁵⁰ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 93; *And abandoned the ships thus lightly*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; *And let the toil of the nation thus lightly come to nothing. And no better than this was the victory which all the English people had expected*.

presence was an important factor, for after his departure the ships retreat together with their commander-in-chief. Secondly, the chronicler criticizes the king and his actions too easily. Deeming the abandoning of the ships ‘thus lightly’, which echoes the subsequent remark that the naval commanders betrayed the nation’s toil ‘thus lightly’, misses the point. After the loss of some 100 vessels the English fleet would have been decisively weakened – making it an easy prey for an impending Viking attack. Thus, Æthelred’s move was not pointless or even cowardly but rather reasonable. He saved what was left of his fleet and took precautions to avoid complete annihilation, which might have been the outcome of an encounter with an enemy fleet, considering the disarray of the Anglo-Saxon forces reported in this entry. Moreover, in view of the fact that Thorkell’s fleet landed at Sandwich the same year, one might conclude that Æthelred was aware of the Danish plans and wanted to encourage his troops by engaging the Vikings in person: a clear expression of resolve and preparedness.⁵² The lamentation at the end of the passage shows that the English had trust in the king and hoped that the fleet would be the key to success. The chronicler’s critique might reflect the anger of a disappointed people that had borne heavy burdens through paying tribute and contributing to the militarization of the kingdom.

In 1013 the presence of Æthelred played an important part in the siege of London. When Sweyn approached the borough “þa nolde seo burhwaru bugan ac heoldan mid fullan wige ongean forðan þær was inge se cyng *Æþelred* [my italics] 7 Purcyl mid him.”⁵³ The sheer presence of the monarch seems to have inspired the people of London to hold out. Did the chronicler want to highlight what was possible if the king fulfilled his duty and thus indirectly admonish Æthelred that he could have averted the eventual fate of the nation, if he had behaved in like manner more often? This passage makes an even greater impression on the reader when contrasted with the fall of London only a few lines later. Apparently, Æthelred had left the town in preparation for his departure to Normandy after Christmas. At first glance, his departure appears as an act of cowardice, but considering that the Danes virtually had conquered most of the realm, it rather represented a tactical retreat in my eyes. Æthelred wanted to avoid captivity and uphold the hope of his people that their king was not yet defeated, thus still capable of mounting powerful retaliation to regain the kingdom and his people and finally drive the Scandinavian invaders from English soil. This account presents us with a strong correlation between the king’s presence and the resolve and morale of his subjects to fight.

After Sweyn’s death the following year (1014) and Æthelred’s return from exile, he successfully leads his troops into battle against the people of Lindsey, who had just shown allegiance to Sweyn’s son Cnut, displaying a strong determination to

⁵² Cf. Howard, *Swein Forkbeard’s Invasions*, pp. 77-86.

⁵³ O’Brien O’Keefe, *MS C*, p. 98; *There did the citizens not want to surrender but resisted with fierce battle, because the king was inside and Earl Thorkell with him.*

exact his royal authority and show courage. It is remarkable to note that the term *cynig* Æthelred appears three times in this entry within a few lines, just as if the chronicler wants to emphasize that Æthelred was the rightful king. In contrast, Sweyn is not designated with a royal title as long as he had control of England, but loses the adjunct *cynig*, which he had had hitherto as king in his own right (of Denmark and Norway). Moreover, Sweyn is not crowned or elected king, but his accession to the throne is depicted as mere subjugation of the English: ”ȝ eal þeodscype hine hæfde þa for fulne cynig.”⁵⁴ compared to Æthelred, who was the consecrated monarch of the Anglo-Saxons. In summary: the chronicler takes a clear stand, as he seems not to have recognized Sweyn as rightful king but rather still regards Æthelred ruler of England, which the king impressively underpins in taking the field and driving his contender for the throne, Cnut, from the country.

This positive image does not last very long, as the chronicler comments upon Æthelred’s payment to Thorkell’s army after Cnut’s mutilation of hostages given to him “buton eallum þissum yfelum,”⁵⁵ thus regarding the policy an additional burden for the nation. After heroically reclaiming the kingdom by driving out Cnut, Æthelred seems to have lost respect by relapsing into his old policy of paying tribute. In this case, the lamentation might be pointless, as the tribute was not intended to buy off the Danes, but rather pay the wages for his powerful ally Thorkell and his mercenaries.

Finally, in 1016, at a time when Æthelred lay sick at Cosham, his son Edmund ‘Ironside’ was put in charge of the defence of the realm. Here again, the absence of King Æthelred plays an important part in the narrative. When Edmund had gathered the *fyrð*,⁵⁶ the men refused to fight as they wanted to be led into battle by the king in person and eventually dispersed. The next lines present us with a dramatic narrative being suggestive of a ‘last stand’ of the English:

þa æfter ðære tide þa bead man eft fyrde be fullan wite, þæt ælc man ðe fere wære forð gewende, ȝ man sende to ðam cyng to Lundene ȝ bæd hine þæt he come on gean þa fyrde mid þam fultume ðe he gegaderian mihte. þa hi ealle tosomne comon, þa ne beheold hit nan ðinc þe ma ðe hit oftor ær dyde. þa cydde man þam cyng þæt hine man beswican wolde, þa þe him on fultume beon sceoldon, forlet ða þa fyrde ȝ cyrde him eft to Lundene.⁵⁷

This compelling passage suggests that this time not a regional contingent was gathered, but rather the *micel fyrð*, i.e. everyone who was capable of bearing arms,

⁵⁴ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 98; *And all the nation received him there as full king.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99; *Besides all those evils.*

⁵⁶ Cf. R. Abels, ‘Army’, *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 47–48.

⁵⁷ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 100; *Then after the festival, the army was ordered out again on pain of the full penalty, every man to go forth who was capable of service. And word was sent to the king in London, begging him to come to join the army with the forces he could gather. When they all came together, it availed nothing, no more than it had often done before. The king was then informed that those who should support him wished to betray him. He then abandoned the army and betook himself to London.*

to encounter the Danes in a decisive battle. Once more, the presence of the king seems to be crucial in order to elevate the morale of the Anglo-Saxons and apparently he answered the call and joined the main army mustered by his son. What follows is another fitting piece for the narrative of the chronicler. He bemoans that as usual the effort of the nation had been brought to nothing by another episode of ill counsel. It cannot be proven if there was any truth to the alleged conspiracy, but it seems rather unlikely, even though Æthelred's court seems to have been a place of competing factions.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, these lines fit the pattern of a narrative of national degeneration, breaking bonds and conspiracy presented by the C-chronicler. In effect, he blames *unrad*, but refrained from identifying the informants. It is hard to detect personal criticism directed at the king as he answered the call of his subjects to lead his troops into battle. Given the tense political situation (with his hitherto senior *ealdorman* Eadric switching sides regular as clockwork) and his fragile state of health, the king's return to London should be seen in a more favourable light.

Concluding from the examples discussed, the chronicler does not seem to have a purely negative attitude towards the king, but rather reveals an intention to portray what effect royal presence on the battlefield can have. The resolve and the morale of the Anglo-Saxons in battle was depicted as depending on the king, whose official duty – at least in the eyes of the chronicler – it was to lead the defence against the Danes himself at that stage.

In fact, Anglo-Saxon kingship had always been manifested by military resolve and personal prowess in battle as epitomized by the prominent members of Æthelred's lineage, Alfred, Edward the Elder and Æthelstan.⁵⁹ The careful observer might detect a veiled invocation of the grandeur assigned to Anglo-Saxon kings of the House of Wessex. This gives rise to the question of purpose. With the account of the *Chronicle* being written after the Scandinavian conquest, such an appeal and commemoration of the past might appear pointless.

Perhaps this question can be answered in connection with reference to the use of the term *Angelcynn*. According to Alice Sheppard, the *Angelcynn* denoted those people, who in the face of impending conquest were created by personal bonds of lordship to the king “and who in Æthelred's case are lost because of the failure of lordship ties.”⁶⁰

It is probable that the chronicler intended to remind his readers of the fact that there were still kings of the bloodline of the House of Wessex, who would hopefully return to England and lead the *Angelcynn* against the Scandinavian usurpers: namely the *athelings* ‘princes of royal blood elective to the throne’, who were exiled in Normandy. Sheppard claims that the *Chronicle* seemed to regard

⁵⁸ Cf. Stafford, ‘Reign of Æthelred’, esp. pp. 23-30.

⁵⁹ Cf. P. Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 2003), p. 204.

⁶⁰ Cf. A. Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Toronto Old English Series 12 (Toronto, 2004), p. 16.

kingship as an office and a “reconsideration of the authorizing power of genealogical discourse.”⁶¹ Genealogical discourse operates as authorizing a king’s claim to the throne.⁶² It is quite significant, therefore, that the *Chronicle* does not refer to Æthelred’s sons simply as ‘his sons’, but uses the specific term *atbelings* with all its implications concerning royal succession.

The question of lordship seems to be crucial in this regard. The introductory quote from the *ASC* s.a. 1011 is of special interest: “Ealle þas ungesælða us gelumpon þurh unrædas þæt man nolde him a timan gafol beodon oþþe wið gefeohtan.”⁶³ Sheppard goes on to claim that the interpretation of this passage depended on the translation of the word *þæt*.⁶⁴ She states that the meaning of this passage as far as *unrædas* was concerned would be clear, but could have had an ambiguous meaning, when read in full. If we translated the *þæt* with ‘namely’, it would simply state that the king and his councillors pursued a twofold strategy of military resistance and tribute without modifying the statement to an extent that any of the strategies was intrinsically wrong. Doing so, Sheppard in effect argued that the king’s weakness was one of ‘policy’. If, however, we were to interpret the *þæt* as ‘with the consequence of’, as suggested by her, the methods of defence would be separated from the *unrædas*. In that reading, the criticism points rather to the fact that the councillors were unwilling to carry out the aforementioned strategies in the appropriate circumstances.⁶⁵ This would not only signify a shift of perspective from criticism of the king to criticizing his councillors, but even more importantly, a division between Æthelred and his *witan* ‘wise councillors’, displaying a flaw in the king’s relationship to his advisors:⁶⁶ this is yet another example of failed lordship ties.

When Æthelred returned to England in 1014 lordship ties seemed to have played a significant role. After Sweyn’s death the councillor’s invited him back to England pleading “þæt him nan hlaford leofra nære þonne hiora gecynda hlaford”⁶⁷ on the condition that he would govern *rihtlicor* ‘more justly’ than before. Two things are of importance here: first, the term *hlaford* might have denoted a pledge of allegiance to some higher authority, involving the relationship of lord and man.⁶⁸ Second, it implies misdemeanour on the part of the king hitherto as

⁶¹ Cf. Sheppard, *Families of the King*, p. 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶³ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 95; *All those afflictions befell us because of ill counsel, that they never were offered tribute in time nor fought against.*

⁶⁴ Cf. Sheppard, ‘Noble Counsel, No Counsel’, pp. 397–402.

⁶⁵ Although I concur with Sheppard’s second translation ‘with the consequence of’ – a possible translation of *þæt* being ‘so that’ – I have not found it denoting ‘namely’ in the dictionaries consulted, cf. *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. J. C. Hall, 4th ed. (Cambridge 1970), s.v. *ðat* and *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. and enlarged T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1882), s.v. *þæt*.

⁶⁶ Cf. Sheppard, ‘Noble Counsel, No Counsel’ pp. 401–2.

⁶⁷ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 98; *That no lord would be dearer to them than their natural lord.*

⁶⁸ Cf. Hunter Blair, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 198.

far as he had not governed his people wisely and justly. Subsequently, Æthelred sent his son Edward (the future Anglo-Saxon king Edward ‘The Confessor’) to England to negotiate terms on which the Anglo-Saxons would accept him as rightful ruler. He promised to be a gracious ruler and to reform the things which the people hated. Æthelred’s law code of 1014 (*VIII Æthelred*) might have been such an attempt.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he wanted to forgive all the things that had been said and done against him in return for allegiance without treachery. Consequently, the people “æfre ælcne deniscne cyng utlah of Engla lande gecwædon.”⁷⁰ This passage conveys the impression of a covenant between the king and his subjects, describing lordship ties, rather than innate authority of the king. It looks like a contract, which Stenton regards as “of great constitutional interest as the first recorded pact between an English king and his subjects.”⁷¹ He might have had a case here, but these terms are still far from being an ‘Anglo-Saxon *Magna Charta*’. The account communicates the notion that the weakness of the king and former differences between the monarch and his subjects were the result of Æthelred’s lack in establishing (and keeping) proper relations in terms of lordship bonds with his nobles.

Another striking feature clearly is, that during the whole account of his reign in the *Chronicle* Æthelred is always assigned the title *cyng/cyning*. The phrase *se cyning* without adding the personal name is exclusively reserved for Æthelred (with one exception in 1016 when Cnut is referred to as *se cyng*). One gets the impression that it implied ‘king of the English,’⁷² denoting a genuine Anglo-Saxon king. After Æthelred’s death the phrase is applied to his son Edmund, giving further credit to this assumption. These seem to have been the words of someone “whose devotion to the king was unswerving.”⁷³

Assuming that the depiction given by the chronicler could not have been intended to be directly directed at Æthelred, it might well serve as a reminder and encouragement for the princes of royal blood to return to England, to govern more justly than their father had done and re-establish the bond of royal lordship with the *Angelcynn*, as they were rightful kings-to-be of their people. The significance of lacerated lordship bonds played an important role and is not to be

⁶⁹ See pp. 72-73 *infra* in my chapter on Æthelred’s later codes; cf. Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, 193.

⁷⁰ O’Brien O’Keefe, *MS C*, p. 99; *For ever denounced every Danish king an outlaw from England*.

⁷¹ See Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 386.

⁷² For a discussion on the development of the titles ‘king of the Anglo-Saxons’ and ‘king of the English’ see S. Keynes, ‘England, 700-900’, in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. D. Abulafia, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 1995-2005), II: *c.700-c.900*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 18-42 and idem, ‘England, c.900-1016’, in *Cambridge Medieval History*, III: *c.900-c.1042*, ed. T. Reuter (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 456-84.

⁷³ S. Keynes, ‘Apocalypse Then: England A. D. 1000’, in *Europe Around the Year 1000*, ed. P. Urbańczyk, (Warsaw, 2001), p. 250.

underestimated,⁷⁴ but nevertheless has to be treated with care. Without doubt Anglo-Saxon society around that time was still dominated by personal bonds of lordship, kinship and family ties, and the apprehension that the *Angelcynn* were primarily those people forged as a unity through the example of their ruler in opposition to Scandinavian invaders in the tradition of King Alfred's struggle with the Danes prevailed. Nonetheless, *Ænglaland* by then had become a political unity of its own, defined by recognised boundaries and specific institutions. The king was not only the leader of the people but also lord of the territory.⁷⁵ Moreover, as Sarah Foot has shown, the term *Angelcynn* in the meaning that had been used since the times of King Alfred did not only have the connotation described by Sheppard.⁷⁶ It is difficult, therefore, to come to a conclusive statement concerning the role of lordship bonds, but it does not seem unlikely that the chronicler at least wanted to remind the audience of this immanent notion of his account.

The question of whether a king should fight seems to be presented in the affirmative, but we will see later on that it was also subject of the hagiographic and homiletic discourse of Ælfric.⁷⁷ In any circumstances, one is not to forget, that especially in the initial years his reign, the Viking incursions might not have been regarded as a significant threat. It would have been imprudent of the king to risk his life in order to tackle a problem which was merely the duty of the *ealdormen*, whose office included organizing the local (shire) defence.⁷⁸

From 991 onwards the wind might have changed. According to Eric John, Byrhtnoth's inconceivable defeat at Maldon might have come as a shock, when the English realized that their defences were not adequate: "It is after this defeat that the mood of the English slides into defeatism and division."⁷⁹ This corresponds with the shift in tone prevalent in the chronicler's narrative. It might have been deemed too foolhardy for the king to jeopardize his life in those circumstances, for without adult male progeny his death would have meant a severe succession

⁷⁴ That bond was established by an oath of loyalty sworn publicly by the king's subjects since the time of King Edmund – corresponding with a threefold promise made by the king at his coronation, cf. S. Keynes, 'Apocalypse Then', pp. 256-57 and pp. 106-108 *infra* in my chapter on the Old English *Promissio Regis*.

⁷⁵ Cf. Keynes, 'Apocalypse Then', p. 251.

⁷⁶ See S. Foot, 'The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th ser. 6 (1996), 33-49. She claims that it was an abstract construct generating a common identity of the West-Saxons, Mercians and Kentish men, defined by the West-Saxon court in stressing the otherness of those Germanic subjects from those under Danish rule. Moreover, she emphasizes the significance of a common cause, i.e. fighting off the Danes, under one leader and on a more general basis the sense of a common heritage, one faith and a shared history to this concept of 'common identity'. In her view cultural qualities such as customs, language, law and linguistic bonds were paramount in forging a collective identity in medieval societies.

⁷⁷ See my chapter on Ælfric of Eynsham *infra*.

⁷⁸ Cf. Lavelle, *Aethelred II*, pp. 81 and 97; cf. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, pp. 58ff.

⁷⁹ E. John, 'War and Society in the Tenth Century: the Maldon Campaign', *TRHS* 5th ser. 27 (1977), p. 174.

crisis as Higham claims.⁸⁰ This could have been one of the reasons why the king does not appear to have led his troops into battle in person till the year 1000, by which date his first wife Ælfgifu had already born him male heirs, who, however, might not have reached adulthood by then. The marriage with Emma of Normandy, in spite of their strategic significance of forging an alliance with Normandy to contain the Scandinavian threat, in 1002 provided the king with problems of a related kind. Henceforth, male heirs by two different wives could assert their respective claims to the English throne, thus providing a potential source of upheaval of rival contenders in case the king would experience an untimely death. Provided that knowledge of the cessation of the Carolingian line in 987 – without a doubt one of the most distinguished dynasties in Europe – had spread to England, this probably had made a lasting impression on Æthelred and his contemporaries, who witnessed this caesura first-handedly.⁸¹

Evidently much was at stake for Æthelred (and the kingdom) if he showed military courage and campaigned against the Vikings in order to elevate the morale of his troops. Either the chronicler did not bear that in mind or he just voiced popular dissatisfaction with the absence of the king. In either case his depiction of the ruler not fighting comes short of Æthelred's contemporary concerns, which would have entailed severe repercussions for his people.

When considering the chronicler's habit of de-contextualizing events and withholding important information, the accounts of Æthelred's apparent acts of violence deserve further discussion. Despite the attack on Strathclyde and the Isle of Man mentioned above, the *Chronicle* records apparent violent outbursts more than once. Historians should be aware that those acts of violence might have seemed different to contemporaries who knew their circumstances and true nature. Accordingly, interpretation and evaluation of the text of the *ASC* and the effect on the audience is difficult from today's perspective.

In 986 the *Chronicle* sparsely records “Her se cyning fordyde þæt bisceoprice æt Hrofeceastre”⁸² without giving detailed information about circumstances or background. Taken at face value this annal depicts an outrageous crime of the king, whose duty, according to the idea of Christian (pastoral) kingship, it was to protect the churches in his realm – a promise made during coronation by Anglo-Saxon kings.⁸³ Additionally, the ensuing entry records the renewal of Viking incursions after a cessation of five years, as Watchet is said to have been ravaged and many losses were to be mourned. This annalistic sequence conveys the impression that Æthelred had committed a crime against God by ravaging

⁸⁰ See Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 26. According to him, it might have been possible that Æthelred's first wife had not yet born him sons up to that point and his brothers, also potential successors to the throne, had already been deceased.

⁸¹ Cf. Lavelle, *Æthelred II*, pp. 81-82; Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 26-27.

⁸² O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS. C*, p. 85. *Here the king laid waste the bishopric at Rochester.*

⁸³ See my chapter on the *Promissio Regis infra* (p. 106 f.).

Rochester with the result of incurring His wrath manifested by the Scandinavian raiders. However, put in the right context this event appears in a quite different light. There seems to have been a dispute between bishop Ælfstan and King Æthelred, concerning a temporary royal grant of land of ecclesiastical property (OE *lan*) to his *thegn* ‘retainer’ Æthelsige, which the bishop resented, subsequently evicting Æthelred’s man and provoking an over-reaction on the king’s part.⁸⁴ Seen against this background the whole affair can no longer be ascribed to a specific character trait of arbitrary violence, but rather expresses Æthelred’s exercising of authority when one of his royal prerogatives was disputed. This perfectly corresponds with this particular period of his life, when after the death of Bishop Æthelwold in 984, hitherto one of the king’s most influential teachers and advisors, the young king attempts to break free of factional influence and assert his innate royal authority.⁸⁵ Besides, a king resorting to ravaging as a punishment was not uncommon in the tenth and eleventh century and not exclusively reserved for Æthelred, but in line with the kings Eadred, Edgar, Harthacnut and Edward the Confessor.⁸⁶

1002 marked another dismal event which contributed to Æthelred’s reputation of being violent to the point of tyranny: the so-called ‘St. Brice’s Day massacre’. The *Chronicle* records that the king

het ofslean ealle þa deniscan men þe on Angelcynne wæron; [...] forðam þam cyninge wæs gecyð þæt hi woldan hine besyrwan æt his life 7 siððan ealle his witan 7 habban sibþan þis rice.⁸⁷

This passage does not, however, have an explicitly negative tone. Æthelred reacted to what sounds like “an eleventh-century Gunpowder plot”⁸⁸ that endangered his life and the future of his kingdom. Nevertheless, it suggests an unprecedented level of violence by implementing a nationwide slaughter of the Danes. We should be careful not to take those lines at face value. As mentioned before, the full scale of royal authority was confined to certain territories.⁸⁹ It seems rather unlikely that in the area of the former *Danelaw* (Northumbria, Eastern Mercia and East Anglia) the king’s order could have been carried out with the same efficacy as

⁸⁴ Cf. Williams, *Æthelred*, pp. 26-9; see also Keynes, ‘A Tale of Two Kings’, p. 211; S. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred ‘The Unready’. 978-1016: a Study in their Use as Historical Evidence* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 178-80 and idem, ‘Æthelred II’, p. 411.

⁸⁵ Keynes headed a chapter on the period c. 984-993 ‘The Period of Youthful Indiscretions’, see *Diplomas*, pp. 176-86.

⁸⁶ Cf. Keynes, ‘Tale of Two Kings’, p. 211 and n. 60.

⁸⁷ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 89; *Ordered all Danish men to be killed who were among the English people [...] because the king had been told that they would deprive him of his life and afterwards all his councillors, and then possess this kingdom.*

⁸⁸ J. Wilcox, ‘The St. Brice’s Day Massacre and Archbishop Wulfstan’, in *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. D. Wolfthal, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 4 (Turnhout, 2000), p. 83.

⁸⁹ See Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 380.

in the royal heartland Wessex. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxons had a long tradition of amalgamation and intermarriage with the Scandinavians, who had settled in England for almost 150 years.⁹⁰

I agree with Simon Keynes and other scholars suggesting that the king's order was directed at a certain group of 'Danes', who were most likely to be mercenaries and traders, "whose trustworthiness the king and his councillors had good reason to suspect."⁹¹ The aspect of trustworthiness can be underscored by a contemporaneous account, apparently independent of the 'main' chronicle.

For the year 1001 the 'Winchester Manuscript' (MS A) records a Viking raid on Devon, in which a certain Pallig is accused of having deserted king Æthelred in spite of pledges and gifts received. Pallig seems to have been a Danish mercenary in the service of the English monarch, who had broken his promise and treacherously turned against his former employer. This was all the more severe as in the light of the fact that from 997 on the Viking forces (or at least parts of it), pacified and hired as mercenaries after Æthelred's truce with Olaf Tryggvason in 994, appear to have ignored the provisions of the agreement and renewed their raids. If this were indeed the case, one can assume that the 'massacre' in 1002 – on whatever scale it had been carried out – was an outburst not only of ethnic hatred, but also of frustration about the Scandinavians, who had pillaged the country for a decade, betrayed the English and nevertheless were profiting from Anglo-Scandinavian trade. Simon Keynes remarked that "deep-rooted anger materialized in the massacre on St. Brice's Day."⁹² From this perspective the order of the king might even have been a popular decision. Æthelred appears to be an active ruler who was well aware of the national mood. Rather than being skulking and fearful, he responds to the issues of the day with a high degree of energy.⁹³

In the context of the *Chronicle*, however, it emerges to have been an unwise action as in the following year the Danish raids recommenced under the leadership of Sweyn Forkbeard. What makes this situation even more intriguing is that according to William of Malmesbury, Pallig and his wife were killed in the massacre.⁹⁴ Pallig's wife Gunhild was the sister of Sweyn. Although we should be careful in our treatment of William's account, as his work is interspersed with exaggerations and inadequacies, we cannot dismiss the idea of a retaliatory attack

⁹⁰ The process of Scandinavian settlement and Anglo-Scandinavian amalgamation commenced with the creation of the *Danelaw* 'area under Danish law and custom' resulting from the division of England after King Alfred's victory over the Viking leader Guthrum at Edington 878 and the subsequent 'Treaty between Alfred and Guthrum' (c. 886/890).

⁹¹ Keynes, 'Tale of Two Kings', p. 212.

⁹² S. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop, and the Viking Raids of 1006-7 and 1009-1012', *ASE* 36 (2007), p. 154. According to him, there had been basically one Viking force active in the period from 991-1005.

⁹³ Cf. Lavelle, *Aethelred II*, p. 102.

⁹⁴ See *William of Malmesbury. Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and transl. R.A.B. Mynors *et al.*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1998), I, 300.

led by Sweyn, which had been provoked by an act of violence against his countrymen and subjects, his family even. The chronicler's account conveys the notion that the Anglo-Saxons seemed to have borne the brunt for their king's character traits, resulting from apparent rumours of an attempted overthrow of government, which contributed to Æthelred's reputation of having relied on *unrad*. Whatever the case, there is another document related to the massacre: a royal charter, dated 1004 (S 909), concerning the renewal of land privileges of the monastery of St. Frideswide, Oxford. In its discursive section the charter refers in retrospective to the massacre. The tone of the charter shows no signs of remorse, and the murder of the Danes ("qui in hac insula uelut lolium inter tritictum pullulando emerserant")⁹⁵ in Oxford is called "iustissima examinatione"⁹⁶ agreed upon by the king "cum consilio optimatum satrapumque meorum,"⁹⁷ thus making it not only a decision of Æthelred alone, but one in accordance with his *witan* 'wise men'.

The St. Brice's Day massacre leaves us with an evident discrepancy in judging events. It might have been a popular measure regarded appropriate at the time of implementation, but seen in the context of the chronicler's narrative, it is yet another example of violence and *unrad* with severe repercussions for the people.

Another element which seems to be connected with Æthelred's violent streak, were the recorded blindings of prominent retainers of the king. In 993 Ælfgar, son of *ealdorman* Ælfric (of Hampshire), was blinded. At first sight this might appear as a kind of collective family punishment for the alleged treason committed by Ælfric in the preceding year (see next chapter), but this is hard to believe. Simon Keynes pointed out that Ælfgar's blinding had not been a barbaric and arbitrary act of revenge but the result of personal crimes of the *thegn* representing another stage "in the king's escape from the influence of those who had misled him in his youth."⁹⁸ Furthermore, blinding was an act of legal enforcement as it was implemented as mercy punishment under King Edgar.⁹⁹ That is why we should regard it as a display of royal strength rather than an act of violence. The late tenth and early eleventh centuries saw an increase of mutilation as a punishment for crimes in general.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, the king's order was far from unusual. Thirteen years later, Wulfheah and Ufegeat were blinded, and *ealdorman* Ælfhelm (of Northumbria) killed. The *Chronicle* does not mention those punishments to have been carried out on behalf of the king although this would

⁹⁵ Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, III, 328; *Who on this island sprung up, sprouting like cockles amongst the wheat.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; *By most just extermination.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; *With the counsel of my leading magnates and leading men.*

⁹⁸ Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 183-84 for a discussion on Ælfgar.

⁹⁹ Cf. *idem*, 'Tale of Two Kings', pp. 212-13.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. A. Cowen, 'Byrastas and bysmeras: The Wounds of Sin in the *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*', in *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: the Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. M. Townend, *Studies in The Early Middle Ages* 10 (Turnhout, 2004), p. 404.

be the first idea most likely to come to the mind of the reader. The *WLC* adds details concerning the involvement of *ealdorman* Eadric (of Mercia) in the murder of Ælfhelm and the blindings being carried out on royal order.¹⁰¹ In spite of all the dubious circumstances those actions make no impression of arbitrariness, but seem to have been part of a greater scheme, which Simon Keynes identified as a ‘palace revolution’ in 1006, probably engineered by Eadric, whose family rose to prominence at court in those years.¹⁰²

Taking it one step further, Higham assumed this ‘palace revolution’ to have been planned by Æthelred, who had used Eadric as an instrument to get rid of his opponents, in this case an East Mercian/Northern faction at court entertaining good relations with the malcontent *ætheling* Athelstan, who was afraid of being disinherited after his father’s second marriage. Higham sees the actions taken against the *thegns* Sigferth and Morcar in 1015 in the same context.¹⁰³ Although he seems to have an interesting case here, based among other things on the apparent generosity of Athelstan towards members of this East Mercian/Northern faction in his will of 1015,¹⁰⁴ it is far from conclusive.

No matter what verdict the chronicler wanted his audience to cast, he finally strikes a more conciliatory note when recording Æthelred’s death admitting that “he geheold his rice mid myclum geswince 7 earfoðnessum þa hwile ðe his lif was”¹⁰⁵ thus acknowledging the king’s efforts in consideration of the circumstances he had to reign in.

After Æthelred’s death “ealle ða witan þa on Lundene wæron 7 seo burhwaru gecuron Eadmund to cyninge 7 he his rice heardlice werode þa hwile þe his tima was.”¹⁰⁶ This account is quite interesting as it suggests a smooth transition from Æthelred to his undisputed heir. Edmund is portrayed as being unanimously elected. Although this sets him apart from Sweyn (to whom the people only bowed), it also indicates a different perception of kingship in contrast to Æthelred’s coronation. Whereas he was consecrated with the blessing of the church, reflecting his ‘divine right of kings’, Edmund was chosen king. This seems to be no less than a shift from hereditary succession – which in Anglo-Saxon England was not clearly regulated, for it could also include fraternal succession – to some kind of elective kingship, in which the monarch and his subjects were bound to each other in a relationship of lord and men (not unlike the situation

¹⁰¹ See *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, vol. II: *The Annals from 450 to 1066*, ed. and transl. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk (Oxford, 1995), pp. 456-59.

¹⁰² See Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 209-13 and idem, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 155.

¹⁰³ See Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 41-47.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *English Historical Documents*, vol. I: c. 500-1042, ed. D. Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, 1979), pp. 593-96.

¹⁰⁵ O’Brien O’Keefe, *MS C*, p. 101; *He held his kingdom with great toil and difficulties as long as his life lasted.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; *All that councillors who were at London and the citizens chose Edmund as king. And he defended his kingdom zealously as long as his life lasted.*

when Æthelred returned from exile). This action might denote the claim of the English not to accept an unjust or even despotic king, whose elevation to the throne depended on birthright, but instead to choose their ruler on certain requirements, including a pledge of allegiance in return for just and benign rule on the king's part. Again the chronicler seems to give us a glimpse of his ideal of kingship, which could be read as an appeal to future kings to keep in mind that members of the House of Wessex were still seen as rightful heirs to the throne, but only under certain conditions.

Still, Edmund's election is portrayed in a more positive light than it really was. First, only the *witan* at London and its inhabitants (supposedly by acclamation) are shown to be the electorate and secondly, the *WLC*, biased as it might be, recorded that at Southampton the *sanor pars* (the majority, including the most influential councillors) of the *witan* unanimously elected Cnut and renounced the *athelings*.¹⁰⁷ Once more the wording of the passage is suggestive of a contract-like agreement. Keeping that in mind, the chronicler's intention was to make a strong case for Edmund right from the start. In contrast to his father he is portrayed as a resolute, almost heroic leader mounting a forceful campaign against the invaders. Edmund leads his troops into battle himself and is victorious, whereas English efforts in the reign of his father displayed a notion of futility and helplessness. But even Edmund could not avert the eventual fate of the kingdom as he lost the decisive battle at Ashingdon, where he, like his father, was betrayed by *ealdorman* Eadric, whom he had recently received into his service despite his constant change of allegiance. The chronicler mourned “*næs nan mara unræd geræd þonne se wæs*,”¹⁰⁸ voicing what looks like a pun on an uninterrupted royal policy in the reigns of Æthelred and Edmund. The chronicler elevated Edmund, making him a torch of hope for the Anglo-Saxons – in contrast to his father's (in-)actions and caution – whose light was eventually extinguished by the same wind which had been the cause of Æthelred's troubles. Nonetheless Edmund averted utter conquest by coming to terms with Cnut on a division of the kingdom. The similarity to the agreement of King Alfred and the Viking leader Guthrum in 878 is striking. The death of Edmund ‘Ironside’ brought to naught what might have been the starting-point of a renewed history of re-conquest¹⁰⁹ and finally Cnut succeeded to the kingdom.

The conclusion to be drawn from this chapter emerges to be that the chronicler has a strong tendency to de-contextualize his depiction of Æthelred and show reticence with regard to important implications of the king's actions. We

¹⁰⁷ See Darlington and McGurk, *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, pp. 484-5.

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 102; *No greater ill-counsel was ever agreed to than that was*.

¹⁰⁹ Renewed insofar as beginning with the reign of Edward the Elder (899-924), the kings of the House of Wessex had extended their influence northwards, embarking on a conquest of the *Danelaw*, whose end came with the dissolution of the Viking kingdom of York and the expulsion of its last Norwegian ruler, Eirik ‘Bloodaxe’, in 954.

have to keep in mind that his account was written in retrospective, which gave him the opportunity to present events in a way fitting into his narrative of national defeat. Æthelred's actions have to be conceived in a wider context resulting in eventual conquest. Even so, he does not criticize the king directly and much of the alleged implicit criticism is a matter of debate and interpretation. The picture of Æthelred given in the *ASC* is not permanently negative but appears basically sympathetic towards the king despite all his apparent faults. Unfortunately, the question of whether the chronicler deliberately held back information which would have enriched his narrative and presented Æthelred in a more positive light, or whether he expected his intended audience to be informed about the circumstance and aware of all the implications, cannot be answered with certainty.

The depiction of Æthelred's son Edmund, despite his 'rebellion' against his father in 1015,¹¹⁰ is predominantly positive. He is presented in an almost heroic way: an active king of resolve and strength, being victorious where his father appeared to have failed. Eventually, however, the sins of the father seem to have descended upon the son, as the chronicler mourns the decision to receive *ealdorman* Eadric into his service and condemns this measure even more than the alleged ill counsel his father had taken and thus had brought *ungesaldða* upon the English nation.

Alice Sheppard's explanation for the failure of both Anglo-Saxon kings is grounded in her reading of the *Chronicle* as salvation history:

by assenting to the Christian theory of historical causality – political change is caused by sin [...]. As salvation history, the Æthelred-Cnut Chronicle understands conquest and invasion as a necessary part of the divine plan. Æthelred fails because he, like all the other kings in the tradition of salvation historiography, is supposed to. What at first seems to be the story of personal incompetence is instead merely the necessary preface for the coming of the next kingdom. In the accession of Cnut, that kingdom comes.¹¹¹

Her treatment of the issues is intriguing, especially when we assume that the chronicler probably had a monastic background and would have been well-accustomed with the concept of salvation history. Taking into consideration millenary expectations, this reading of the account would stand to reason. If we accept this idea, the tone of the *Chronicle* appears to be rather conciliatory. It

¹¹⁰ Edmund acted against the king's will when he married the widow of Sigeforth, a Northumbrian *thegn*, whom Æthelred had intended to be brought to Malmesbury after her husband's murder. The *atheling* also gained submission from the people of the 'Seven Boroughs' (Lincoln, Leicester, Stamford, Derby, Nottingham, York and Torksey), cf. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* s.a 1015. I am not quite sure what to conclude from those actions but a bid for the throne on Edmund's part cannot be ruled out, although we have to be careful with such insinuations.

¹¹¹ Sheppard, *Families of the King*, p. 93.

functions as both an explanation for the afflictions and appeal to the audience that they should not be afraid or malcontent with the outcome of the Danish conquest, which would by the time of the account's composition have permeated every layer of society. My opinion is that we should be cautious not to read it as ecclesiastic propaganda for the Scandinavian rule, come upon the Anglo-Saxon with divine approval, even though it cannot be ruled out. Notwithstanding, the evidence of passages suggesting underlying glimpses of hope, or an appeal to remember what could be possible, seems to be the more convincing interpretation.

The positive image of a resolute king leading the *Angelcynn* and boosting the morale of his troops might be seen as a veiled rallying cry of resistance. It was directed at an audience which should not despair as still one day the Danish rule might be ended by a king from the House of Wessex, having learned from the positive actions as well as from the faults of Æthelred. The chronicler is not overtly critical of the king but at the same time does not portray him in the most favourable light. This could be an indication that the chronicler might not have been able to voice his message openly in the contemporary political circumstances (i.e. the reign of Cnut), but needed an audience capable of understanding the implications of his narrative.

Defending the Kingdom: English Resistance and the Role of the Ealdormen

The narrative of the *Chronicle* is focused on the English dealing with the Viking invasions. Domestic affairs are only hinted at or completely neglected, thus making the struggle with the Scandinavians the preponderant element in a story of national failure towards inevitable defeat. In order to understand the effect of these incursions on the chronicler's way of writing and interpreting things, a closer survey of his depiction of the English defensive strategies, efforts and the people who implemented them is needed.

The most prominent of the policies pursued in the face of the Viking onslaught was peace-making by providing tribute and provisions for the raiding parties in order to come to terms or employ them as mercenaries.

The *Chronicle* records several instances where the Vikings were bought off (991, 994, 1002, 1007, 1012, 1018) for a truce. Apart from those national payments devised by the king and his *witan* there seem to have been local payments (e.g. the people of East Kent in 1009 and the Londoners in 1013 and 1018), accumulating to an impressive amount, which appears to have been an enormous burden for the English people. Although it was a common strategy implemented throughout Europe in the Viking Age and had been part of King

Alfred's policy towards the Scandinavian raiders a century earlier,¹¹² the fact that the chronicler gives exact figures, which at first glance appear to be quite intimidating, makes one wonder about his intention in doing so, even if we cannot verify the amount of the recorded payments.¹¹³ In combination with his depiction of English military efforts, the image created is one of cowardice, where money did the job swords should have done. The chronicler does comment frequently on the payments himself. As mentioned above, the payment of 21,000 pounds to Thorkell's army at Greenwich in 1014 was described to be 'on top of all woes'. In 1006 the king and his councillors agreed on paying tribute "eallum þeodscype to þearfe, þeah hit him eallum lað wære."¹¹⁴ The message of this passage is inconclusive. We cannot discern what the chronicler's attitude was when he records that it was for the benefit of the nation, especially if we keep in mind that the chronicler remarked in the preceding lines that in a situation of sheer terror, the king and his councillors eagerly contemplated what seemed to them most advisable in order to save the country from complete devastation.

Whatever his attitude, the statement that the nation hated this policy hints at an English dissatisfaction with the measure and denotes that there might have been a discrepancy between popular expectations and governmental measures, although Keynes has found evidence that the king enjoyed the support of his subjects in raising the money to buy peace from the Danes.¹¹⁵ Coming back to our introductory quote of 1011, we cannot detect genuine criticism of the payment as such, just that the appropriate strategy (tribute or military resistance) was implemented on the wrong occasion. Even if we were to assume an underlying critique of the strategy pursued, it could have well been the outcome of a retrospective verdict on a measure that had been regarded appropriate at the time of its implementation. One has to keep in mind that buying off the Vikings did not only buy time but in my opinion also emerges to be a prudent decision, as after the annihilation of Byrhtnoth's forces at Maldon in 991, the Anglo-Saxons were aware that the alternative would be paying with English blood. Whereas the Scandinavians were a trained military force, the Anglo-Saxons had enjoyed almost twenty years of peace during the reign of Edgar (959-975). When the Vikings returned in the 980s England was ripe for pillaging, as the defences had eroded, the garrisons were not permanently manned and the standing armies established

¹¹² Cf. R. Abels, 'Paying the Danegeld: Anglo-Saxon Peacemaking with the Vikings', in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. P. de Souza and J. France (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 173–92, for a general survey of Anglo-Saxon strategies.

¹¹³ Cf. Keynes, 'Historical Context' pp. 100-1 and n. 60. He argued that the statements about the tribute sums seemed credible, as they would not be incompatible with the volume of coinage during Æthelred's reign.

¹¹⁴ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 92; *For the benefit of the whole nation, although it was hateful to them all*.

¹¹⁵ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 202, n. 182.

in the reigns of Alfred and Edward the Elder had become unnecessary.¹¹⁶ Coming to terms with the Scandinavian invaders thus seems to have been a reasonable strategy. Ryan Lavelle argued that peace had been a continuation of politics by other means.¹¹⁷ Large armies (or *fyrds*) were difficult to keep together, making the cessation of hostilities and the setting up of a truce a practical necessity.¹¹⁸

Damon has cogently argued that those payments need to be seen as part of a peace plan related to a concern in the society about the morality of warfare. According to him, the idea that peace could have been best achieved through conversion to the Christian faith played an important role.¹¹⁹ It is significant therefore, that, according to the *Chronicle*, archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury seems to have advised that course and figures prominently among others in the text of Æthelred's treaty with the Viking forces (*II Æthelred*).¹²⁰ When we take into consideration the account of the events of the *Chronicle* concerning the raids led by Olaf Trygvason, the scheme of payments and conversion comes into our focus.

The various manuscripts give a different reading as far as Olaf's campaigns are concerned. MS A seems to conflate the annals for 991 and 994, as it connects Olaf's presence at Maldon with the statement that the king stood sponsor at his confirmation, which the 'main' account records for 994 in the wake of the attack on London.¹²¹ Therefore, my analysis is based on the 'main' account. Æthelred continues a policy which had been successful during Alfred's times and which had had several continental precedents, such as Louis the Pious who received the Dane Harald Klak at baptism at Ingelheim in 826. However, the Norwegian king-to-be became Æthelred's confirmant, i.e., a member of the king's family, not a godson by baptism.¹²² According to the annal, Olaf promised that he would never come back to England in hostility, and states that he had fared thus. Although Olaf may have been baptized before he came to England,¹²³ the event at Andover and the subsequent treaty with the Norwegian and his forces were a clever tactical move, whose significance the chronicler did not present in full.

Not only does Olaf seem to have come into Æthelred's service, but he also became a great promoter of Christianity throughout Norway, Greenland and the

¹¹⁶ Cf. R. Abels, 'English Tactics, Strategy and Military Organization in the Late Tenth Century', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, p. 144.

¹¹⁷ See R. Lavelle, 'Towards a Political Contextualization of Peacemaking and Peace Agreements in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Peace and Negotiation*, ed. Wolfthal, p. 39.

¹¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹¹⁹ See J. E. Damon, 'Advisors for Peace in the Reign of Æthelred the Unræd', in *Peace and Negotiation*, ed. Wolfthal, p. 58.

¹²⁰ See p. 66 *infra* in my chapter on the early legislation of Æthelred.

¹²¹ Cf. J. Bately, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, pp. 37-50.

¹²² See Darlington and McGurk, *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, pp. 444: "sibi in filium adoptavit"; *Adopted him as a son.*

¹²³ Cf. E.V. Gordon, 'The Date of Æthelred's treaty with the Vikings: Olaf Trygvason and the Battle of Maldon', *Modern Language Review* 32 (1937), pp. 29-30.

Orkneys after he had succeeded to the crown of Norway.¹²⁴ It is also possible that England provided parts of the clergy for conversion. Æthelred thus pursued an intricate foreign policy in order to drive a wedge between the Danish and Norwegian factions. When we keep in mind that the Anglo-Saxon king had agreed to a peace treaty with Normandy in 991, secured by the marriage to Emma of Normandy in 1002, he had ingeniously guarded his flanks. The peace treaty of 991 is not mentioned by the chronicler. We can but only speculate about his intention. Maybe it was a matter of deliberation to conceal this achievement of Æthelred's foreign policy or he regarded it as too insignificant, as the treaty's intention had come to nothing with regard to the renewed Viking raids, especially the fleet which (according to the *ASC*) retreated to the duchy in 1000, thus apparently proving the provisions of the treaty meaningless.

The full impact of Æthelred's foreign policy might become clear when we consider the dates of events. It is striking that the first recorded event in 994 takes place in September (Nativity of St. Mary). Bearing in mind that the dating of the annals in the *Chronicle* was not consistent, as Swanton has shown,¹²⁵ it cannot be ruled out that the attack on London took place in September 993, with the annal following the indiction year commencement (a tax cycle with the beginning of the (fiscal) year in September).¹²⁶ Consequently, the following events and the hiring of Olaf as mercenary can be brought into line with renewed Viking attacks on Saxony in 994 as recorded by Thietmar of Merseburg.¹²⁷ Those raids might have been the consequence of Æthelred securing his coasts by means of an alliance with the Norwegian, thus forcing Viking adventurers to look for another area to loot and pillage. From this perspective, the arrangement between the English king and Olaf exhibits a well-planned foreign policy.

Even though the chronicler does not record all the important implications of the strategy implemented in Olaf's case, he does not deem it imprudent or false. In like manner receiving Thorkell's forces into his service initially appears to have been a story of success. Only when those forces demanded payments in order to take up weapons against Sweyn does the description of Æthelred's policy take a negative connotation. Nevertheless, the 'main' account does not voice overt criticism towards this policy. MS A, however, as I have mentioned previously, portrays Pallig's broken pledge of allegiance without criticizing his employment as mercenary in the first place. It rather sounds as if the A-chronicler was disappointed with the Dane's disregard of lordship ties than an utterance of critique. The fact that the entry concerning Pallig is not recorded by the main

¹²⁴ Cf. T. M. Andersson, 'The Viking Policy of Ethelred the Unready', *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987), p. 285.

¹²⁵ See Swanton, *Chronicle*, pp. xv-xvi.

¹²⁶ Cf. Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions*, pp. 42-43.

¹²⁷ See *Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon*, IV, chs. 23-25, ed. and transl. W. Trillmich, *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters* 9 (Darmstadt, 1957), pp. 139-43.

chronicler is puzzling. Even if it is hard to draw a proper conclusion from this, it at least reminds us that the information given by the ‘main’ account should by no means be taken for granted, as the independent account of MS. A provides us with additional and different information for Olaf’s campaign and the year 1001.

Paying tribute and setting up truces was but only one aspect of the Anglo-Saxon resistance. In the 990s Æthelred began an ambitious programme of military construction: new boroughs were raised on the sites of Iron-Age hill forts (south Cadbury, Old Sarum, Cissbury) in connection with the refurbishment of defences of existing boroughs.¹²⁸ Moreover, after the renewed Viking raids of the 980s seem to have passed by unopposed, English military resistance was mounted to engage the Scandinavian threat.

The entry on the encounter at Maldon in 991 provides us with the first account of a pitched battle between Anglo-Saxons led by their *ealdorman* Byrhtnoth and a Viking force. Unfortunately, both the accounts of CDE and A are very sparse in their description of the event. This is significant in two ways: first the defeat of the Essex *fyrð* led by such an important *ealdorman* like Byrhtnoth must have come as a shock for the Anglo-Saxons and secondly, the chronicler shows a tendency to personalize his accounts of military encounters with the Vikings by describing and commenting upon the behaviour of the leading men.

In that way the alleged deficiency of Anglo-Saxon defences is embodied by *ealdorman* Ælfric (of Hampshire), who features prominently in the English defeats of 992 and 1003.

In 992, when the English had assembled a fleet on a national level to entrap the Danish army, the *Chronicle* records that the *ealdorman* warned the Danish fleet and abandoned his own forces at night “him sylfum to myclum bysmore.”¹²⁹ What seems to be despicable treachery must be treated carefully. Following Damon’s argumentation, Ælfric might have been a proponent of a peace policy of tribute and conversion. What the chronicler portrayed as an act of betrayal might have been an “attempt to pre-empt the fighting by a peace parley that went awry.”¹³⁰ He further suggests that Æthelred himself had favoured secret negotiations, despite pursuing a military solution on the outset, in order to overcome a division among his *witan* on the question of military resistance or coming to terms in a peaceful way. Damon has a point when he claims that “a policy of appeasement can easily be termed treason if it results in defeat.”¹³¹ Whatever the case, such an obvious act of betrayal would have entailed severe consequences. Oddly enough, Ælfric is not deprived of his office, as he reappears in the narrative of the *Chronicle* in 1003 and 1016 and features among the senior *ealdormen* in attesting the king’s diplomas,

¹²⁸ Cf. Abels, ‘English Tactics’, p. 145.

¹²⁹ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 86; *Himself to great disgrace*.

¹³⁰ Damon, ‘Advisors for Peace’, p. 66.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

being in top position from 999 to 1009.¹³² The objection that Æthelred might have been too powerless to discharge and punish Ælfric for his actions is hardly credible.

When making his reappearance in 1003, the picture we get from Ælfric is far from positive. In order to encounter the Danes, a great *fyrð* was gathered from Wiltshire and Hampshire, which is said to have gone “swiðe anrædlice”¹³³ against the Viking army, giving the impression that the force was determined to defend the kingdom. In this context (given the background of 992) it appears symptomatic that, when Ælfric enters the scene as the leader of the *fyrð*, the whole effort turned into disaster. The chronicler remarks that he had been up to his old tricks, feigned himself sick and said that he was ill “ȝ swa þæt folc becyrde þæt he læden sceolde, swa hit gecweden ys, þonne se heretoga wacað þonne bið eall se here swiðe gehindrad.”¹³⁴ The first remarkable thing about this passage is that Ælfric is said to have continued his ‘old tricks’. Either the chronicler’s remark about the *ealdorman*’s character was common knowledge, or he rather tries to stir up the emotions of his audience in being suggestive of Ælfric’s character traits and intended to influence its judgement of him. The overriding issue in these lines is that of lordship bonds. Instead of inspiring his men and leading them into battle, Ælfric betrays them and thus the mutual bonds of lordship which were so important in late Anglo-Saxon England.

The subsequent proverb looks like the chronicler’s attempt to remind his audience what was necessary to fight off the invaders and probably to implicitly criticize the practice of those in command, who apparently had failed to act according to the code of conduct drawn up by the chronicler. Lordship ties and personal leadership were paramount to him. T. D. Hill has shown that the proverb had several predecessors: similar sayings are to be found in a letter by Alcuin, in the *Durham Proverbs* and the Alfredian translation of the *Regula Pastoralis* of Gregory the Great.¹³⁵ He concluded from those lines in the *ASC* that it

reflects one of the central themes of the Anglo-Saxon literary response [...], the tension between the old heroic ideals and the harsh necessities demanded by the reality of war. From a purely pragmatic perspective avoiding combat might on occasion be wise, but from the perspective of traditionalists such as the Maldon-Poet or the chronicler [...], prudence seemed too similar to cowardice.¹³⁶

¹³² Cf. S. Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations in Anglo-Saxon Charters c. 670-1066*, vol. I: *Tables*, ASNC Guides, Texts and Studies 5 (Cambridge, 2002), Table LXII.

¹³³ O’Brien O’Keefe, *MS C*, p. 90; *Very resolutely*.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*; *And thus betrayed the people he should have led, as it is said, when the leader gives way, the whole army will be much hindered*.

¹³⁵ See T. D. Hill, “‘When the Leader is Brave...’: an Old English Proverb and its Vernacular Context”, *Anglia* 119 (2001), pp. 233-34; see also Plummer, *Chronicles*, II, 183.

¹³⁶ T. D. Hill, “‘When the Leader is Brave...’”, p. 236.

The chronicler further embarks on the question of leadership when he describes the Danes to have exploited the army's confusion when they saw that they "anræde næron."¹³⁷ This seems to have been a pun on the introductory remark to this passage, when the *fyrð* approached the Vikings *anrædlice*. Alice Sheppard is of the opinion that this further denoted the English defeat being the result of a lack of commitment to their leader rather than a lack in bravery, referring to the meaning of the word *anræd*, which in a political context meant 'loyal', 'faithful', 'committed to a lord or king'.¹³⁸ The defeat of the Anglo-Saxons in spite of a promising beginning was thus personalized and attributed to an *ealdorman* incapable of fulfilling his duties and provoking the break of lordship ties resulting in inevitable defeat. Once more, one is inclined to suspect Ælfric's 'tricks', as his position as prominent general and councillor of the king in royal diplomas does not suggest wrongdoing on his part. Ælfric's sickness might have been perceived by bystanders as feigned and embellished as fitting piece for his narrative by the chronicler. In contrast thereto, it could also have been the natural reaction of someone who, in the face of an overwhelming Viking force with the prospect of slaughter and the terror of war, had lost his nerves. This reaction would have been human if we consider the brutality and ruthlessness of shield-wall encounters in those days. Probably Ælfric was not up to his job anymore, although I would dismiss Higham's remark that by 1003 he was a "frightened old man."¹³⁹

Comparing the events of 1003 with the annal for the following year makes the latter a sort of counterpiece. The prominent English leader in this case is a certain Ulfcytel (styled *dux Eastanglorum* by the *WLC*,¹⁴⁰ though there is no contemporary evidence that would validate his office as *ealdorman* of East Anglia). When he is confronted with the task of dealing with a Danish force lead by Sweyn Forkbeard – the same force which had vanquished the *fyrð* lead by Ælfric – he and his councillors deem a strategy of buying off the invaders most reasonable, as he was not able to collect large enough an army in due time. The Danes consequently break the truce and Ulfcytel orders their ships to be destroyed. Unfortunately, he is betrayed by those "þa ðe he to þohte"¹⁴¹ – displaying yet another episode in the

¹³⁷ O'Brien O'Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 90; *Were not resolute*.

¹³⁸ See Sheppard, 'Noble Counsel, No Counsel', pp. 408-9 and n. 46. This meaning is not to be found in the dictionaries I have consulted: see Hall, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *anrædice* and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *an-rædlice*. I am highly indebted to Janna Müller, who made me aware of the fact, that according to the *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* *anræd* could indeed have had the meaning of 'resolute in support of (the king)'. Nevertheless, it assumes that denotation only in combination with the preposition *mid*, which consequently seems to be a set expression or idiom. Therefore, as this is not the case in the passage under investigation, Sheppard's reading provides us with an intriguing point, which, however, does probably not apply to our context; cf. A. Di Paolo Healy *et al.*, *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *ān-ræde*, *ānræd*.

¹³⁹ Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ See Darlington and McGurk, *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, p. 454.

¹⁴¹ O'Brien O'Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 90; *Those who he beseeched for this*.

chronicler's tale of disloyalty and constant failure. Following this alleged act of treachery, Ulfcytel assembles an army and engages the Danish force "fæstlice" 'stoutly'.¹⁴² The chronicler bemoans the bereavement: "ðær wearð Eastengla folces seo yld ofslagen"¹⁴³ and boasts that if the full strength of the East Anglians had been there, the Danes would have been annihilated and closes this entry by claiming the Danes to have said "þæt hi næfre wýrsan handplegan on Angelcynne ne gemitton."¹⁴⁴ By effectively juxtaposing the accounts of Ælfric and Ulfcytel, the chronicler depicts good and bad leadership. The East Anglian *thegn* at first pursues a policy similar to that of Æthelred and his councillors. But unlike him, Ulfcytel does not accept the apparent treachery but collects his forces and leads the troops into battle himself. There might be even more to it than meets the eye. Ulfcytel in contrast to Ælfric is no *ealdorman*. Nevertheless, he seems to have been able to collect a strong force because of his personality. The chronicler perhaps intended his audience to perceive him as a brave leader who had earned his people's allegiance through exemplary lordship – intensifying the contrast to Ælfric. Moreover, the fact that he was no *ealdorman* might have been a criticism of Æthelred's practice of leaving those important offices vacant.¹⁴⁵ In the case of East Anglia this entailed severe consequences as two major Danish incursions (1004 and 1010) are recorded in the *ASC*. The remark that the East Anglians would have had a more commensurate victory if their full strength had been there could have been a side blow for Æthelred to the effect that if Ulfcytel – who would have been more capable of that office than the other leaders the king had appointed – had been an *ealdorman*, he would have had the authority to muster a larger force to fight off the Danish invaders. Although this is of course a matter of speculation it seems quite plausible. Finally, the choice of words in the 'Ulfcytel episode' seems to invoke Old English poetry, using this annal to promote a heroic lordship as Alice Sheppard has so cogently argued.¹⁴⁶ We find *handplegan* in the *Battle of Brunanburh* (l. 25a)¹⁴⁷ and *yld* usually denotes warriors or noble leaders in heroic poetry. In the same vein the dramatic account of the East Anglian chief men perishing makes Ulfcytel's victory even more heroic and simultaneously conveys the idea that it was honourable to face the enemy on the battlefield and perish while defending one's people and country against all odds.

At the same time, it adds to the impression that buying off the Danes was regarded as a suitable and advisable strategy for coping with the Scandinavian raiders when the occasion arose. It was only deemed negative in retrospective

¹⁴² O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 90.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*; *There were the leading men of the East Anglian people slain.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1; *That they never met worse an encounter among the English nation.*

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 197-98 and n. 163. There had not been an East Anglian *ealdorman* since the death of Æthelwine in c. 990.

¹⁴⁶ See Sheppard, 'Noble Counsel, No Counsel', pp. 410-11.

¹⁴⁷ See O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 78.

when additional financial burdens like the *Danegeld*¹⁴⁸ had afflicted the Anglo-Saxons without procuring the intended result of averting national defeat.

Ulfcytel's importance is stressed once more in 1010 when the Danish army landed at Ipswich and went straight away to the place where they had heard the East Anglian *thegn* to be with his army. It seems as if the Danes either wanted to show their boldness and take revenge for the humiliation in 1004 or simply that the chronicler wants us to believe that they regarded Ulfcytel the most menacing threat to their plans. Thus, the hero of the East Anglians becomes a symbol for Anglo-Saxon resistance, casting a shadow on the king and his *ealdormen*. This entry, however, does not provide us with another account of fierce courage of Ulfcytel's forces, but instead reports the flight of the East Angles without mentioning their leader at all. Instead, the men of Cambridgeshire resisted resolutely, but more often than not in the chronicler's narrative, the effort was betrayed by the flight of a named leader, in this case Thurcetul 'Mare's Head', who "fleam ærest astealde" 'first started the flight'.¹⁴⁹

Eventual flight and defeat of the English forces after being deserted by their leader feature as recurring images in the sympathetic story of English resistance.

In 993 the supposed leaders of the Anglo-Saxon forces (Frana, Godwine and Fryðegyst) are said to be the ones who first gave flight, but like Ælfric they continued to witness diplomas long after their actions, from which we can conclude that their behaviour was not regarded as an act of treachery.¹⁵⁰ Likewise, even if the image of fleeing Anglo-Saxon forces is quite frequent in the *Chronicle*, we should neither come to the conclusion that fear and cowardice prevailed among the descendants of those bold and warlike warriors who had come to Britain in the 5th century, nor that all the chief men were traitors or hampered by fear. What is portrayed as flight could, from a more objective perspective, be regarded as tactical retreat in the face of an enemy which outnumbered the often hastily gathered English *fyrð*. Simon Keynes has argued that the Viking forces in the latter part of Æthelred's reign appeared to have been considerably larger than e.g. the *micel here*, which troubled England in King Alfred's days. The armies of Æthelred's time had numbered "between five and ten thousand men,"¹⁵¹ including "professional soldiers recruited from throughout Scandinavia [...], products of a land effectively organized for war."¹⁵² A tactical retreat when facing a superior opponent in order to avoid total defeat was without a doubt the most reasonable decision Anglo-Saxon leaders could make.

We can in no possible way appropriately assess the situation 1000 years ago, but what definitely influences our verdict on the account is the portrayal of the

¹⁴⁸ Cf. S. Keynes, 'Heregeld', *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 235.

¹⁴⁹ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LXIII.

¹⁵¹ Idem, 'Tale of Two Kings', p. 206; cf. also idem, *Diplomas*, pp. 224-25.

¹⁵² Idem, 'Tale of Two Kings', p. 206 and n. 36.

notorious *ealdorman* of Mercia, Eadric ‘Streona’ (‘the Aquisitor’), who in the *Chronicle* appears to be the very personification of betrayal, breaking lordship bonds and personal gain, leading to the breakdown of society and eventual defeat.

His appointment to the post of *ealdorman* of Mercia can be seen as a brilliant tactical move by Æthelred. After a vacancy of some 20 years, the Mercian ealdormanry was revived in order to provide an organized and effective resistance and put the forces of central England under a single command. It seems to be an appropriate response to what the chronicler criticized in 1010:

Bonne bead man eallan witan to cynge, 7 man sceolde þonne rædan hu man þisne eard werian sceolde, ac þeah mon þonne hwæt rædde þæt ne stod furðon ænne monað; æt nextan næs nan heafodman þæt fyrde gaderian wolde, ac ælc fleah swa he mæst mihte, ne furðon nan scir nolde oþre gelæstan æt nextan.¹⁵³

This lamentation shows us quite frankly that the perception of measures implemented by the royal government and the nobles was one of chaos. Like an almost similar passage in 1006, it suggests discord among the leading men and consultations, which in the end showed no expedient results, while at the same time the country was harried and destroyed – as the saying goes: “War means old men talking and young men dying.”

Even so, this annal is recorded for 1010, when Thorkell’s fleet had already landed in England, causing indescribable harm and devastation, and therefore might have influenced the perception of the chronicler, who provides us with a dramatic narration of a nation breaking apart. The account probably pinpoints a problem which had been there from the start. Seen against this background, assigning Eadric the office of Mercian *ealdorman* was an attempt to overcome dissension in order to organize an effective defence against the Vikings. Eadric was an upstart from a not very prominent West Mercian family. His appointment meant a break with the established aristocracy, which had hitherto shown a disappointing performance in defending the kingdom. Æthelred put his trust in *homines novi* (the appointment of Uhtred to the ealdormanry of Northumbria in 1006 being another example), not at least to secure his own position in uncertain times by enlarging a faction among his *witan* of men loyal to him. On the other hand, Æthelred took a considerable risk by investing him with a level of unprecedented power. The account in the *ASC* suggests that the king’s expectations and trust were undeserved.

The chronicler records Eadric’s appointment in 1007 with plain words without passing any judgement on him. But as the narrative gains momentum Eadric turns

¹⁵³ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 95; *Then all councillors were summoned to the king and it was then to be decided how this country should be defended. But even if anything was then decided, this did not even stand for more than a month. Thereafter, there was no leader who wanted to gather an army, but each fled as best as he could and in the end no shire would even help the next.*

into the figure-head of Anglo-Saxon failure and treachery. In 1009, when the king had issued a nationwide order of resistance and apparently entrapped the Viking army lead by Thorkell, the long-desired triumph was thwarted by the *ealdorman*: “Ac hit wæs þa ðuruh Eadric ealdorman gelet swa hit gyt æfre wæs.”¹⁵⁴ This statement, however, is anachronistic and passes judgement on Eadric with the advantage of hindsight, as up to that point he does not appear to be accountable for any kind of transgression as far as defending the kingdom was concerned. The chronicler deliberately sets the tone for our subsequent understanding of the Eadric’s character, quite similar to his approach towards Ælfric. What we have here is an absolutization. In this case, Streona’s action is all the more severe, as Thorkell’s army which would have been on the brink of defeat, henceforth wrought unprecedented harm, overrunning the larger part of Eastern and Southern England. Nevertheless, Eadric rose to top-rank among the *ealdormen* from 1010 on, thus disturbing the system of seniority.¹⁵⁵ We get a notion of the dimension of his influence in 1012 when it is said “Eadric ealdorman ȝ ealle þa yldestan witan, gehadode ȝ læwede, Angelcynnes”¹⁵⁶ came to London. This wording is quite reminiscent of the usually applied phrase ‘the king and all his councillors’. It is tempting to assume a pun inserted by the chronicler to show how much influence Eadric had gained despite his questionable character.¹⁵⁷

The most prominent qualities of this *ealdorman*, if we follow the account in the *Chronicle*, are betrayal and intrigue. In 1015, when Edmund collected an army to fight Cnut with the combined forces of him and Eadric, the latter thwarts the mutual effort by deserting Edmund and swapping sides, taking 40 ships with him to support Cnut. The passage explicitly states “ða wolde se ealdorman beswican þone æþeling.”¹⁵⁸

He would have been worthy of the nickname ‘turncoat’ as after Edmund’s initial victories against Cnut one year later, Eadric rejoins his ranks the following year. The Battle of Ashingdon provided the scene for his final act of treachery: “Þa dyde Eadric ealdorman swa swa he ær oftor dyde; astealde þæne fleam ærest mid Magesæton ȝ aswac swa his cynehlaforde ȝ ealre Angelcynnes þeode.”¹⁵⁹ This decisive encounter resulted in total defeat of the English forces, wherein all the nobility perished (e.g. Ælfric and Ulfcytell). Thereafter, Eadric played a prominent part in the negotiations between Edmund and Cnut. The choice of words seems

¹⁵⁴ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 94; *But it was then hindered by ealdorman Eadric such as it always was.*

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LXII. Usually the senior, i.e. the one who had held his office the longest, was in top-position to attest royal charters.

¹⁵⁶ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 96; *Ealdorman Eadric and all the chief councillors, clerical and lay, of the English people.*

¹⁵⁷ A later Worcester monk assigned him the title *sub-regulus*. Cf. *Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesiae Wigorniensis*, ed. T. Hearne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1723), I, 281.

¹⁵⁸ O’Brien O’Keeffe, p. 100; *Then the ealdorman wanted to betray the prince.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102; *Then did ealdorman Eadric as he had often done before; he first started the flight together with the Magonsætae and so betrayed his lord and all the people of the English.*

important. The term *cynþlaforð* (with reference to Edmund) instead of *cyning* evokes the impression that the chronicler wants to stress the bonds of lordship which were torn apart. Eadric betrayed his natural lord, underscoring the argument that Æthelred's reign was permeated by the dissolution of personal bonds within society. The chronicler seems to have been determined to have a named villain to personalize the issue of loyalty.¹⁶⁰ Æthelred's kingdom seems to have collapsed from within when confronted with an exterior threat.

The apparent palace revolution in 1006, the events of 1015, when the king's *þegns* Sigferth and Morcar were betrayed and killed by Eadric, and the subsequent 'rebellion' of Edmund *ætheling* against his father (a bid for the throne on his part?) are evidence of a late Anglo-Saxon state that began to crumble. Internal divisions and factionalism seem to have weakened the nation from within, making it ripe for conquest. In this situation, the influential protagonists seemed to have striven for power and tried to gain what was possible, thus undermining a united Anglo-Saxon effort to overcome the invaders. This was exemplarily displayed by the actions of the *ealdormen*, whose apparent acts of cowardice and treason were all the more tragic, as they were the king's confidants and generals, in whom the monarch and the Anglo-Saxon people had put their trust and hope: "Treachery, like loyalty, is in starker relief when it comes attached to an identifiable character"¹⁶¹ as Jonathan Wilcox has argued. The submissions of Æthelmær in 1013 and Uhtred in 1016 to the Danish invaders are contributing to this picture. Seen against the depiction of Ulfcytel as heroic leader, Æthelred's choice of generals appears to be particularly unfortunate, thus blaming the eventual conquest – at least indirectly – on the king.

Despite the personalized focus on English defeat, the whole narrative conveys the impression of desperation as no measures seem to be effective. In 1006 the Anglo-Saxon defensive efforts are not only presented to have been ineffective ("ac hit naht ne beheold þe ma ðe hit oftor ær dide"),¹⁶² but the English forces seem to have caused afflictions for the population: "seo fyrding dyde þære landleode ælcne harm, þæt him naðer ne dohte ne inghere ne uthere."¹⁶³ As Wilcox remarked, the equation of the Danish army and the Anglo-Saxon *fyrð* was quite cynical. The compound *inghere* blends contradictory elements as on the one hand *ing-* suggests a domestic element as opposed to foreign invaders, but on the other it is combined with the term *here*, which in the narrative of the *Chronicle* always denotes a Viking force. The boundaries are blurred. The afflictions for the people must have been so severe that the contemporary perceptions appear to be one of

¹⁶⁰ Cf. J. Wilcox, 'The Battle of Maldon and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 979–1016: a Winning Combination', *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 3 (1995), p. 39.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 91; *But it availed no more than it had often done before.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*; *The English army caused the people of the country every sort of harm, so that they profited neither from the native army nor the foreign army.*

general woe. Trust in Anglo-Saxon institutions (i.e. the *fyrð*) must have been shaken in its very foundation. The people were no longer able to identify friends and foes. A similar passage is recorded for 999 when the English efforts resulted not in fighting the Danes but in the oppression of the people, the waste of money and even the encouragement of the raiders.

This notion of chaotic circumstances, where the terror caused by the Danes goes hand in hand with the oppression caused by the English forces, is reminiscent of Archbishop Wulfstan, who in his *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos* admonishes the English for imitating Danish practices and causing woe.¹⁶⁴

Even Æthelred's nationwide naval building programme in 1009 comes to nothing because of the treacherous action of individuals. The perception of this catastrophe is even aggravated by the fact that the chronicler records that there had never been a larger fleet in Anglo-Saxon England and stresses what high hopes the people had concerning the fleet, but in the end desperately concludes: "J næs se sige na betere þe eal Angelcyn to hopode"¹⁶⁵ after remarking near the beginning of the entry: "Ac we ða gyt næfdon þa gesælða ne þone wyrðscype þæt se scyfyrd nyt wære þissum earde þe ma ðe heo oftor ær wæs."¹⁶⁶ The nation had made a tremendous effort and endured the burdens imposed upon them, but once again it had availed nothing. The defeatist tone immanent in statements like this is striking and provides something of a red thread meandering through the chronicler's narrative.

Nonetheless, this is not the end of the story. Although the chronicler "presents the reign as a remorseless progression towards ultimate disaster,"¹⁶⁷ as Simon Keynes put it, an uncertainty remains concerning the question whether the Anglo-Saxons in the 990s and the first decade of the eleventh century had this "threat of defeat"¹⁶⁸ looming on their consciousness.

The answer cannot be given with certainty, but, surprisingly, evidence from the *Chronicle* seems to give credibility to the argument that in fact the English did not display defeatism, but resolutely tried to withstand the Viking onslaught. On several occasions the Anglo-Saxon forces are portrayed as having courageously resisted their enemies,¹⁶⁹ even though the final outcome of those encounters was defeat or retreat in most cases. The focal point of English resistance seems to have been the borough of London.

The chronicler gives special credit to the *burhwaru* 'citizens' of London, who in 994, 1009, 1013 and 1016 withstood the Scandinavian attacks. In 994 the

¹⁶⁴ See p. 98 *infra*.

¹⁶⁵ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*; p. 93; *And no better than this was the victory which all the English people had hoped for.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 92; *But yet we had not the good fortune nor the bonour that the naval force was of use to this country, any more than it had been on many previous occasions.*

¹⁶⁷ Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', p. 166.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ See O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, s.a. 999, 1001, 1003, 1004, 1009, 1010.

chronicler records that when the Scandinavians attacked it

hi þær geferdon maran hearm 7 yfel þonne hi æfre wendon þæt him ænig buruhwaru gedon sceolde. Ac seo halige Godes modor on þam dæge hire mildheortnesse þære buruhware gecydde 7 hi ahredde wið heora feondum.¹⁷⁰

suggesting that not only the Londoners surprised the Vikings by their resolve, but also that they had divine assistance. We find similar entries for 1009: “7 oft hi on þa buruh Lundene fuhton. Ac si Gode lof þæt heo gyt gesund stent, 7 hi þær æfre yfel geferdon.”¹⁷¹ and 1016: “gewende se here sona to Lundene 7 ða buruh utan embsæt 7 hyre stearclice onfeht ægðer ge be wætere ge be lande, ac se ælmihtiga God hi ahredde.”¹⁷² Only in 1013 the victory of the Londoners seems not to have been due to divine providence but rather to the presence of the king, who thus had lifted the citizens’ morale and fighting spirit as I have mentioned in the preceding chapter. Nevertheless, even London was not impregnable, as it was burnt in 982 and submitted to the invaders in 1013 and 1016. It is significant that after Cnut’s accession, the *buruhwaru* of London had to pay an extra tribute in 1018, giving credit not only to the wealth of the prosperous trading centre but also as a sign of special humiliation in order to demoralize the very symbol of Anglo-Saxon resistance.

With regard to the London context, another event is of importance: the martyrdom of Archbishop Ælfheah in 1012. The archbishop of Canterbury was kidnapped by the Viking force in 1011, after he was betrayed by a certain Ælfmær who showed the Scandinavians a secret passage into the city. Again, this contributes to the chronicler’s narrative of disloyalty and betrayal, in this case made all the more despicable as, according to the *ASC*, Ælfheah had saved the traitor’s life beforehand. The description of the archbishop as “heafod Angelkynnes 7 Cristendomes”¹⁷³ is telling in this regard. Oddly enough he is assigned the title ‘head of the English’ instead of King Æthelred. Maybe this denotes the chronicler’s perception of all secular institutions having failed and an appeal that from now on the people should place their faith in religion to aid the English defences in times of distress.

After Ælfheah was martyred, his body was translated to London, where it was buried at St. Paul’s, where “nu God sutelað þæs halgan martires mihta.”¹⁷⁴ These

¹⁷⁰ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 87; *There they suffered more harm and evil than they ever thought any citizens would do to them. But the holy mother of God on that day showed her mercy to the citizens and delivered them from their enemies.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94; *Often they attacked the borough of London. But, praised be God, it still stands untouched and they always suffered evil there.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 102; *The army soon turned to London and besieged the borough, attacking it strongly both by water and by land, but the Almighty God delivered it.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 96; *The head of the English and of Christendom.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97; *Now God reveals the powers of the holy martyr.*

passages appear as a hagiographical piece making the dead archbishop something like a patron saint. According to Paul Cavill, this passage on Ælfheah is reminiscent of elements of the rhythmical prose of Ælfric and Wulfstan.¹⁷⁵

Apart from that, the fact that he was buried in London makes this city the focal point of English resistance as the head of the *Angelcynn* and Christendom lies there. In the eyes of the chronicler the burial of Ælfheah might have been the reason for the deliverance of the borough from the Viking onslaught. The attack on Canterbury as the spiritual centre of the Anglo-Saxons and the barbaric slaughter of the Archbishop – a crime with almost biblical dimensions – must have come as a shock for the people, which they probably conceived as a sign of the impending breakdown of society and a precedent of the last days. At the same time, by shifting the spiritual centre from Canterbury to London, the chronicler tries to invoke the example of Ælfheah's weaponless resistance and attributes divine assistance to London.

The 'faith factor' should not be underestimated as in the course of British and Anglo-Saxon scholarship Gildas, Alcuin and Bede, to name but a few, stressed the importance of the Anglo-Saxons as favoured by God, almost invoking the notion of 'God's chosen people', a concept originally reserved for the Israelites. Especially Bede's notion of the *adventus Saxonum* (the arrival of the Germanic tribes in Britain) and the subsequent progression of Anglo-Saxon (ecclesiastical) history as a story of the confirmation and trial of a Christian nation pleasing to God was of importance. The Angles, Saxons and Jutes were portrayed as the chosen people who took their rightful place in conquering the Britons.¹⁷⁶ Given the circumstances of the chronicler's account, history seemed to have repeated itself, once again replacing a people which had become corrupt due to its sins and therefore lost God's favour, by yet another chosen people – the Danes.

Therefore, it does not seem too far-fetched that the chronicler wanted to provide London as an example for the Anglo-Saxons that God was still on their side, trying to dismiss possible defeatism among the people, who believed that it was part of God's divine plan to punish them for their transgressions. Even if the enemy emerged to have been sent as divine wrath for English sins, they should not give up hope, but believe in the notion of being God's chosen people. This could have well been the case, even if we assume that the 'main' account was written after the Danish conquest. The careful observer can detect a slight notion

¹⁷⁵ See P. Cavill, *Vikings: Fear and Faith in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 2001), pp. 165-66 and Plummer, *Chronicles*, I, 142; cf. T. A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories. Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2001), pp. 106-110 for a possible attribution to Wulfstan. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe argues against the passage of 1011 to be read as verse (cf. *MS C.*, p. 96, n. 7).

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, pp. 48-57. For Bede's account of the *adventus Saxonum* see Bede, *Storia Degli Inglesi (Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum)*, ed. M. Lapidge and transl. P. Chiesa, 2 vols.: *Volume I (Libri I-II)* (Milan, 2008), pp. 66-72. For the OE translation: *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people*, ed. T. Miller, 4 vols., EETS os 95, 96, 110, 111 (London, 1890-98; repr. as two volumes 1959), I.1, 51-55.

of encouragement in the annals at a time when an overt rallying cry for resistance was not possible. He appeals to the Anglo-Saxons that they should not accept the Danish conquest especially if they regarded it as divine providence, but rather remember that the Lord had not forsaken them for good.

The portrayal of English resistance is quite ambiguous in the narrative of the *ASC*. On the one hand, the Anglo-Saxons seem to have mounted a considerable effort to overcome the Viking threat, showing that it was not courage they lacked. On the other the story of resistance is one of constant defeat due to individual failure, (apparent) treachery and dissensions among the nobles which deprived the English measures of its efficiency. Wilcox has cogently argued that the audience “was primed to contemplate issues of loyalty and disloyalty expressed through death in battle or retreat when listening to a story of English engagement with the Vikings.”¹⁷⁷

Occasionally, the tone of the narrative is almost desperate. The cohesion of the chronicler’s account is in part represented by his lamentations about the Anglo-Saxons not being able to act as a united force due to individual interests and thus thwarting the defensive efforts, subsequently availing nothing but defeat and oppression of a wretched people. Despite all that the chronicler almost praises the citizens of London, making the borough the focal point of English resistance and a torch of hope in times of distress, reminding the Anglo-Saxons that they still could avert their apparently inevitable defeat and conquest by putting their faith and trust in God, who “chastiseth every son whom he receiveth.”¹⁷⁸ The undertone of a nation chosen by the Almighty and tested upon its faith cannot be dismissed in my eyes. Written in the reign of Cnut, the account could not voice its message more overtly. That is why it is necessary to search for subtle evidence of an appeal by the chronicler. He deemed Anglo-Saxon resistance with divine approval to be successful and rightful.

Ravaging Sea-Wolves: the Portrayal of the Vikings

One of the most striking features of the ‘main’ account is its almost singular preoccupation with the Viking raids of that period. Important events concerning domestic policy, ecclesiastical issues or Anglo-continental relations remain absent from the chronicler’s narrative. Accordingly, it remains questionable if his focusing on the battle against the Vikings was deliberate, or whether he just recorded what appeared to be the overriding issue on the minds of the chronicler and his contemporaries.

The 38 years of Æthelred’s reign were characterized by incessant Scandinavian

¹⁷⁷ Wilcox, ‘*Battle of Maldon*’, p. 34.

¹⁷⁸ Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 845. This line is from a letter by Alcuin written to the bishop of Lindisfarne after the Viking raid in 793.

onslaughts, changing their nature from hit-and-run raids in the 980s, to settlement and employment as mercenaries in the 990s, to eventual large-scale invasions aiming at the conquest of England during Æthelred's last days. Whereas the early entries seem to portray insignificant raids in which the Vikings were up to their traditional hit-and-run tactics, the nature of narration changes from 991 onwards. The accounts are much more elaborated and detailed in the depiction of the terror and affliction the Vikings caused.

In 994 the Vikings “worhton þæt mæste yfel ðe æfre æni here gedon meahste”¹⁷⁹ and “ridon him swa wide swa hi woldan 7 unasecgendlice yfel wyrsgende wæron.”¹⁸⁰ Those lines stand exemplary for certain idioms, which were used by the chronicler to express aspects of mastery of the Danes when they were ravaging the country as Simon Keynes argued.¹⁸¹

In this context the devastation caused by the Scandinavians are portrayed as the working of evil (993, 994, 997, 1001, 1002, 1009, 1011). Moreover, the phrase *swa hi woldon* ‘as they pleased’ or the like to describe the activities of the Vikings occurs ten times (994, 998, 999, 1001, 1006 (twice), 1009, 1010, 1011, 1013), suggesting unopposed campaigning and discrediting any efforts of defence by the king and his subjects.

Finally, another recurring idiom *swa heora gewuna was* ‘as their custom was’ (or similar phrases) permeates the entries from 1001 onwards (1001, 1006 (twice), 1009, 1016). By choosing this phrase the Vikings are portrayed as genuinely barbaric and warlike as their customs exhibited in the *Chronicle* are ravaging, burning and slaying.

The chronicler seems to have raised the activity of the Scandinavians to a level beyond that of the Anglo-Saxon forces by describing it with elements of heroic poetry. In 1003 the raiders return to their *ȝohengestas* ‘wave-stallions’ when the English dispersed in confusion, and in 1004 their encounter with Ulfcytel is termed *handplegan* ‘encounter of hands’. Both terms are common to Old English heroic poetry and the latter is to be found e.g. in the *Battle of Brunanburh*.¹⁸²

The chronicler goes as far as to ridicule the whole situation by making his account for 1006 sound like a satire. In that year the Vikings’ mastery of the situation is striking. When winter approached, the Danish army retreated to their *frīdstol* ‘sanctuary’ on the Isle of Wight and “eodan him to heora gearwan feorme.”¹⁸³ This activity is juxtaposed with the king, who went to Shropshire instead of dealing with the Vikings “7 nam þær his feorme,”¹⁸⁴ as his royal prerogative was. This mirroring of activities ridicules Æthelred, as the *feorm* ‘food-

¹⁷⁹ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 87; *And wrought the greatest evil that ever any raiding army could do.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; *Rode as widely as they pleased, working inconceivable harm.*

¹⁸¹ See Keynes, ‘Declining Reputation’, p. 161.

¹⁸² See n. 147 *supra*.

¹⁸³ O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, p. 91; *They betook themselves to the entertainment waiting for them.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; *And took there his food-rent.*

rent' was a duty the people were obligated to perform on the king's request. Seen against this background, the chronicler satirizes the royal authority and at the same time elevates the Danes to a level of 'natural' authority, matching or even outclassing the king's.

The entry provides us with another satirical remark by the chronicler as he records that the Danes on their way through England "dydon heora ealdan gewunan, 7 atendon hiora herebeacen swa hi ferdon."¹⁸⁵ This not only ridicules the English beacon system as apparently ineffective defence measure, but first and foremost euphemises the dreadful reality as the chronicler uses this metaphor for his description of the burning villages the Scandinavians left in their wake.

Contributing to this picture of fierce defiance is the description of the Vikings carrying their booty to the ships past the gates of Winchester "rancne here 7 unearhne"¹⁸⁶ while the citizens could do nothing but look on. The defiance of the Vikings shown in front of England's capital seems outrageous. Possibly the chronicler laments the cowardice and helplessness of the Anglo-Saxons in a way reminiscent of Wulfstan, who in his *Sermo Lupi* decries the inactivity of the people, doing nothing but stand by and look at the evils caused by the heathens out of a sense of false shame instead of acting, thus committing sins and procuring divine anger.¹⁸⁷ The defeatist tone of the chronicler is remarkable as he claims

Đa wearð hit swa micel ege fram þam here þæt man ne mihte geþencan 7 ne asmeagan hu man hi of earde adrifan sceolde oþþe ðisne eard wið hi gehealdan, forðan þe hi hæfdon ælce scire on Wesseaxum stiðe gemearcod mid bryne 7 mid heregunge.¹⁸⁸

The significance of these lines should not be underestimated. Apparently, the perplexity of the English and their indecisiveness is causally linked to the activities of the Vikings. The Anglo-Saxons seem to have faced an enemy which not only outnumbered them, but also showed a level of ruthlessness and cruelty which was beyond imagination. The whole issue turned into one of avoiding complete devastation. It might not have been a downright exculpation, but at least it sheds light on the dramatic situation and the horror creeping into the minds of those in command, thus mitigating their eventual failure.

Apart from their uncompromising savageness, also manifested by the accounts of the mutilation of the Anglo-Saxon hostages by Cnut in 1015 and the recurring theme of incessant devastation and slaughter, the preponderant picture given of

¹⁸⁵ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 91; *Followed their old habits and lit their beacons as they went.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; *The proud and undaunted army.*

¹⁸⁷ See p. 98 *infra* in my chapter on Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*.

¹⁸⁸ O'Brien O'Keefe, *MS C*, p. 92; *Then was such great terror wrought by the army, that no one could think or conceive how to drive them from the country, or to defend this country from them, because they had cruelly left their mark on every shire of Wessex with their burning and their harrying.*

the Scandinavians is one of heroic defiance, humiliation and untrustworthiness. Examples are given in 1004 when the Viking army despite a truce with the English sneaked inland to burn and ravage Thetford. Another example is the aforementioned account of Pallig in MS A, who deserted the king after he had received great gifts and apparently had pledged his allegiance to Æthelred.

This manuscript is of great importance in another respect, as the text differs from the main account.¹⁸⁹ For 1001 the A-chronicler gives details of a raid in Hampshire not mentioned in other manuscripts of the *ASC*, and is generally much less dramatic in his account. Moreover, whereas the ‘main’ account sticks to its narration of a precipitated flight of the Anglo-Saxons MS A records an almost heroic resistance against the odds. Finally, the Winchester manuscript records a truce made with the Vikings, which is not recorded in the ‘main’ account. The A-chronicler’s use of the Old English idiom *niman frið* ‘obtain peace’ is reminiscent of the annals of King Alfred’s reign and suggests that he saw nothing remarkable about this policy. The same phrase is used in 991 where the ‘main’ account explicitly refers to the payment of *gafol* ‘tribute’. The conclusion to be drawn from the comparison of the ‘main’ account and MS A is that the latter’s view of things might be more balanced and free from a single-mindedness to portray contemporary events in a specific way.

In spite of Pallig’s apparent betrayal, there are two positive examples of Viking mercenaries. Apart from Olaf Tryggvason, who was received into the king’s service, Thorkell ‘the Tall’, whose army had brought terror over the Anglo-Saxons from 1009 to 1012, culminating in the martyrdom of archbishop Ælfheah, joined the Anglo-Saxon forces with 45 ships. This was indeed a strategic masterpiece, as Æthelred ensured the service of one of the most influential warriors of the Scandinavian world, enlarged his naval defence, drove a wedge between the Danes and counterbalanced the influence of *ealdorman* Eadric. Perchance this action finally drove Sweyn, who feared to be toppled by an alliance of Thorkell and Æthelred and regarded the Dane’s move as an outrageous provocation as is sometimes suggested in the literature,¹⁹⁰ to invade England and take revenge. It cannot be said for certain. Thorkell’s employment at first seemed to pay off, even though he could not avert Sweyn’s conquest of England in 1013 and remained inactive as his paymaster’s hands were bound. In the end he pledged his loyalty to Cnut and became earl of East Anglia.

Remarkable about the ‘treacherous’ nature of the Vikings is that they are never overtly accused of treachery in contrast to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, first and foremost the *ealdormen*. It seems as if the chronicler intended to blame the Anglo-Saxons for being foolish enough to trust the Scandinavians rather than making the Vikings subject to his criticism. One could conclude that in his

¹⁸⁹ For a comprehensive survey and edition of the manuscript see *MS A*, ed. J. Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition*, ed. D. Dumville and S. Keynes 3 (Cambridge, 1986).

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Howard, *Swein Forkbeard’s Invasions*, p. 84.

opinion the Vikings behaved according to their nature, i.e., burning, ravaging, slaying, breaking truces etc. – you cannot blame the children because they have not been restrained by their parents. To summarize the issue: the chronicler does not blame the Vikings but the Anglo-Saxons. When we are to assume that the account was written in the first years of the Danish rule it appears to be strange that the Vikings on the one hand are portrayed in such an unfavourable way, but on the other, are not specifically blamed for certain actions.

An evaluation of the supposedly most important source for the reign of King Æthelred II is anything but easy and conclusive. Much criticism of the king and his policy is based on this account, compiled by a single chronicler after the Danish conquest, who retrospectively gives his perception of events. His narration is centred on the struggle with the Vikings and the failure of the Anglo-Saxons to overcome this problem. At first sight, it seems to convey a personalized story of continuous cowardice, treachery and domestic dissension making the Anglo-Saxon state collapse from within. The king and his councillors seem to have been inconsequent, devising inappropriate countermeasures at the wrong time. Desperation, even anger, appears to permeate his account – a decent ‘post-mortem’ of Anglo-Saxon England.

Nevertheless, the careful observer would be too hasty to pass such an unreflected judgement on the *ASC*. As we have seen the chronicler is far from consistent in his narration. This is what should puzzle the onlooker. Despite all his explicit and (probably) implicit criticism, we get glimpses of hope every now and then. Not everything seems to be doomed, for we, as readers, are incited to learn from the examples of the citizens of London, Ulfcytel, and even King Æthelred and his son Edmund. The main intention of the *Chronicle* was surely not to blame the Anglo-Saxon monarch for the Danish conquest. Simon Keynes remarked:

It is the voice of one who identified with the cause of the English people, and, after over thirty years of almost uninterrupted warfare, it is still the voice of one who knew that his loyalty was owed to the king.¹⁹¹

I would like to take the discussion one step further. In the course of analysing the *Chronicle* I came across several hints that the chronicler was not only loyal to King Æthelred, apart from his apparent errors and character traits, but was cautious not to discredit the royal lineage of the House of Wessex. Ostensibly, for him the rightful king of England could be no one but an Anglo-Saxon. That is why he did not criticize the king openly, but instead depicts his exiled sons as *athelings* and heroicizes Edmund’s efforts in defending the kingdom. It seems as if he wants to send out a message that Anglo-Saxon England was not to be ruled by Scandinavian rulers for good, but that instead a rightful Anglo-Saxon king should

¹⁹¹ Keynes, ‘Apocalypse Then’, p. 251.

learn from Æthelred's fate, claim his heritage and lead his subjects against the foreign usurpers. An important feature of his narration is that he gives an explanation for the conquest. The cause of events was not due to divine punishment, but to human failure – an instruction how *not* to act in such circumstances. The chronicler was loyal to the king and the English people, whom he wanted to encourage by his depiction of the heroic struggle of the Londoners.

The 'main' account of the *Chronicle*, despite its critical and defeatist undertone, was a means of encouragement and exhortation at the same time. The chronicler mainly provided his audience with an instruction how not to handle the problem, but at the same time offers insight in his notion of how the things could have been handled in order to avert the Danish conquest. He could not voice this in an open rallying cry for resistance, given the circumstances he wrote in, but had to do this under the cover of an apparent harsh verdict of the Anglo-Saxon leadership. Whoever the chronicler was, under which supervision (if any) he had written his account of Æthelred's reign, his expectations lay with the descendants of the House of Wessex, who were exiled in Normandy back then and who he hoped would learn from the reign of their father, inspire their people by just and courageous kingship and one day return victorious to England, shaking off the Danish rule and take their rightful place as kings of the *Angelcynn*.

1.2. Charters from the Reign of Æthelred

The *Chronicle* remains the most influential source in determining our understanding of Æthelred's reign, but as we have seen it is ambiguous, deficient and biased in some regards and therefore far from conclusive. I am inclined to agree with Prof Keynes when he points out

It is to Æthelred's laws and charters that we should turn in the hope of gaining a more balanced view of the state of affairs during the course of his reign as a whole.¹⁹²

Indeed, as far as charters are concerned, we are blessed with a considerable abundance of documents which are of great use for a better understanding of events. Some 120 royal charters survive from the period 979 to 1016, representing a remarkable continuity of diplomatic activity.

Keynes' work *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'The Unready'* still sets the tone for any detailed analysis of those documents. He has argued that the production of diplomas had probably been undertaken by a central writing office or at least by a government agency.¹⁹³ There seems to be evidence that not only a royal secretariat

¹⁹² S. Keynes, 'Crime and Punishment in the Reign of King Æthelred the Unready', in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. I. Wood and N. Lund (Woodbridge, 1991), p. 73.

¹⁹³ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 134-53.

responsible for administrative documents had existed, but also a royal seal and government archives. Even the possibility of an official equal to the status of chancellor (though lacking that title) could not be ruled out.¹⁹⁴ Keynes suggested that this agency, though it may not have had a monopoly for the production of diplomas, had operated on the occasions of the *witenagemot* ‘meeting of the wise’, which seems to be feasible as certain groups of charters show striking similarities as far as formulas and witness-lists are concerned, thus are suggestive of being produced on a single occasion.¹⁹⁵ Such meetings of the *witan* were held regularly and thus are not only evidence for a working government, but provide us with a large amount of diplomas.¹⁹⁶ Keynes, however, admitted that he had developed the idea of a secretariat or central writing office for the sake of convenience, as the evidence was not conclusive.¹⁹⁷ If such an office existed, it would have been a clear indication for a centralized authority of royal government during Æthelred’s reign.

The bulk of charters belongs to the first decade of Æthelred’s reign, accounting for about one-third of the overall amount, but there is a steady output of diplomas throughout his reign. Only on four occasions (991, 992, 1010, 1015) do we lack any charters, which might be either due to the fact that the drawing up and issue was interrupted by political circumstances or that no charters survive from those particular years.

Those four years without charters could reflect the events portrayed in the *ASC*. In 991 and 992 the Anglo-Saxons had to fight off the Vikings at Maldon and London, respectively. The English effort might have been directed at active defence against the Vikings, for no meetings are recorded for those years.¹⁹⁸ The absence of royal diplomas might suggest that the royal government was acting, instead of hesitating and discussing – a sign for a resolute and determined policy of tackling the problem without further ado. The lack of diplomas in 1010 can possibly be explained by the fact that Thorkell’s army was ravaging large parts of England. In those circumstances the pressing needs of reality would have been regarded more important than consultations, as no time could be wasted but a country had to be defended. This could also have been the case in 1015 when Edmund, Æthelred and Cnut were competing for England, although the *ASC* records a great assembly at Oxford – an occasion prone to draft royal diplomas. The political upheaval with the murder of Sigferth and Morcar apparently hindered such activities.

The fact that despite all political trouble, confusion and defeatism suggested

¹⁹⁴ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 151.

¹⁹⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 126-34, esp. 132-34.

¹⁹⁶ Williams, *Æthelred*, p. 21, Table 2, records 25 possible meetings; cf. also Keynes, *Diplomas*, Appendix 2, pp. 269-73.

¹⁹⁷ See Keynes, *Diplomas.*, p. 153, n. 242.

¹⁹⁸ See Williams, *Æthelred*, p. 21, Table 2.

by the ‘main’ account of the *Chronicle*, we have a continuous (but declining) production of royal diplomas during the period of 1011-1016 is of paramount significance. The process of government and decision-making seems to have been uninterrupted, which is remarkable under the given circumstances. Nine diplomas (including the recently discovered *Barking Charters*)¹⁹⁹ survive from 1012-3, giving the impression that the King and his government wanted to show strength and resolve after the terror caused by the Viking armies of Tostig (1006-7) and Thorkell (1009-1012).

We can detect a general tendency towards a decline in the issuing of royal diplomas during the course of his reign, but Simon Keynes has persuasively argued against interpreting that as a sign of a weakened government.²⁰⁰ Other tendencies are similarly striking. Firstly, whereas the diplomas of the first decades of his reign grant land and privileges in areas which one would attribute to the king’s ‘heartland’ (Wiltshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Kent and parts of Mercia), from c. 1000 onwards a shift towards Eastern and even Northern England becomes evident.²⁰¹ Significant in that regard are three grants made to the important Northern *thegn* Morcar in 1009 (S 922), 1011 (S 924) and 1012 (S 928). If those grants are of a specific political intention – and there seems to be no doubt about that in my opinion – it appears as if Æthelred wanted to gain influence in Northumbria, trying to bind this remote area to his authority. This would have bundled the defensive powers of all England and protected himself against any shift of Northumbrian loyalty due to veiled sympathies for a Danish invasion. Moreover, Æthelred did in no way turn a blind eye to the growing power of Eadric ‘Streona’ and might have intended his grants to create a counterweight in the person of Morcar, corresponding with his rise among the *ministri* ‘retainers’ in the diplomas.²⁰² Eadric, however, thwarted the king’s plans as he killed Morcar and Sigeferth when the king lay sick at Cosham in 1015. We can probably determine the king’s areas of influence and interest by analyzing the location of the lands and privileges granted in his charters. For example, the fact that the king only once at an early stage of his reign granted land on the Isle of Wight (S 842, dated 982) might be seen as an indicator that in the course of the years it became an important base for the Vikings, which the chronicler of the ‘main’ account called their *frīðstol* ‘sanctuary’ in 1006.

Unfortunately, I cannot embark here on a detailed analysis of land grants with regard to the question where the king’s influence and power lay, and to which extent the grants reflect a tendency to make good the losses of certain religious

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Hart, *Chronicles*, p. xciv.

²⁰⁰ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 141-42.

²⁰¹ Cf. Stafford, ‘Reign of Æthelred’, p. 33. The shift to the East might be owed to the fact that London became the centre of resistance during the last year of Æthelred’s reign. Thus we might detect a tendency to highlight the importance of those regions.

²⁰² Cf. Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LXIII.

houses or laymen as a consequence of Viking devastation.

Secondly, the diplomas provide us with evidence that Æthelred wanted to create his own sphere of influence by promoting and rewarding certain *thegns* (e.g. Ælfgar, Æthelsige and Wulfric ‘Spot’) who were dear to him and being less generous as far as *ealdormen* were concerned. This probably needs to be seen in connection with his policy of creating a personal element of power within particular shires: the appointment of reeves invested with far-reaching authorization. While leaving the kingdom without high-ranking officials, Æthelred encouraged the emergence of the reeve as his representative at shire-level. What appears to be a tactical masterpiece to tighten control of his kingdom in order to promote law and order at the same time created friction between those in high offices, leaving especially the *ealdormen* (the first line in defending the kingdom) taken aback and discontented.²⁰³ Prime examples for this home-made conflict are the charter S 883 (c. 995), in which the competences of ealdorman Leofsige (Essex) and two of the king’s reeves clash,²⁰⁴ and the murder of the king’s high reeve Æfic in 1002.

Thirdly, we have a noteworthy alteration with regard to the beneficiaries of royal diplomas. From 979 to 989 the majority of the charters record grants to laymen. This was changing during the following two decades – reaching a peak between 1000 and 1010 – when Æthelred seems to have given more attention to ecclesiastics and religious houses. Remarkably enough the last years of his reign again witness a clear swerve towards lay grants.

The emphasis on laymen as beneficiaries during the early years of his reign might indicate resolve to secure his position as king (which was far from undisputed given the circumstances of his brother’s death) by building up a loyal faction at court, rewarding faithful followers and at the same time saturating those who had reservations against the king.²⁰⁵ In this ‘period of youthful indiscretion’ the king wanted to break free from the influence of his mother and other influential councillors and assert his authority and independence.²⁰⁶ He seems to have come to regret that later on, when his diplomas show specific features and a shift towards ecclesiastical beneficiaries, but I will focus upon that issue in due time as we first have to analyse the phenomenon in a wider context. The fact that lay grants are preponderant during the last years of his reign might indicate that the king was at pains to secure personal loyalties of important *thegns* and their warriors in order to bundle the Anglo-Saxon efforts of defence. Seen in this light, his grants seem to be a clever and pragmatic move to keep his kingdom from

²⁰³ Cf. Stafford, ‘Reign of Æthelred’, pp. 29, 31 and Keynes, ‘Crime and Punishment’, p. 80.

²⁰⁴ See Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 571-73.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Stafford, ‘Reign of Æthelred’, p. 26; see also Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 181, who argues that it might have reflected the king’s sympathies at that time.

²⁰⁶ This is also underscored by the fact that his mother Ælfthryth stopped attesting charters after 984 to return only in 993, see Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LIX.

disintegrating.

The most striking feature of Æthelred's diplomas is without a doubt an apparent change of mind, reflected in the nature of his charters from 993 to 1005. In this period the king was eager to confirm or renew earlier grants of land or privileges to particular churches, granting them land and privileges which they had not enjoyed before.²⁰⁷ Simon Keynes remarked that his charter for Abingdon Abbey (S 876, dated 993) had been a key document, as far as it represented the recognition in high circles of the Viking raids as divine punishment for transgressions – not least on the part of the king himself.²⁰⁸ Those charters in favour of religious houses must be seen in the context of a pledge for averting further punishment and earn divine assistance. It seems as if the king had come to regret some decisions of his youth and wanted to make good and atone for the wrongdoings, i.e. the maltreatment of certain churches and their property. Therefore, it is not surprising that the king restores land to Rochester after having ravaged that see in 984.²⁰⁹ In another grant to St. Albans (S 916), he explicitly states “ut Deo quae Dei erant restituerem.”²¹⁰ This is further stressed by his tendency to change the order of witnesses in favour of abbots.²¹¹ Keynes explains this change of mind by the people surrounding the king in those years, who seemed to have been of considerable reputation and closely associated with the advancement of monastic reform.²¹² The theme of divine assistance also finds expression in the appearance of distinctive *chrismons* in charters. Simon Keynes has shown that we come across two charters issued in 1011-12 (S 923 and S 926), where distinctive forms of pictorial invocation, namely of Christ and peace, were employed.²¹³ Those ‘PAX’ *chrismons* must have perfectly fitted the contemporary mood, representing an appeal to divine assistance in order to bring about peace in times of turmoil. According to Keynes, this invocation of Christ reflected Frankish tradition and also had (numismatic) precedents in Anglo-Saxon England, which the draftsman of the ‘PAX’ *chrismons* had apparently been aware of.²¹⁴

The king bemoaning the wrongdoings of his youth, and especially the greed of certain men who had led him astray with their counsel, was another feature, according to Keynes. Æthelred in his diplomas often refers to the period when after the death of Bishop Æthelwold in 984 he was manipulated by a group of men acting in their own interest by taking advantage of his youth and

²⁰⁷ Cf. Keynes, ‘Apocalypse Then’, p. 263.

²⁰⁸ See *idem*, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 154.

²⁰⁹ Cf. S 885, 893.

²¹⁰ *Charters of St Albans*, Anglo-Saxon Charters XII, ed. J. Crick (Oxford, 2007), p. 190; *That I should restore to God the things which were God's*.

²¹¹ Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 118.

²¹² See *ibid.*, p. 189.

²¹³ See Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, pp. 202-3.

²¹⁴ See *idem*, ‘An Interpretation of the *Pax*, *Pax* and *Pax* Pennies’, *ASE* 7 (1978), pp. 169-70.

inexperience at the expense of various religious houses.²¹⁵ The charters S 876, 885, 891 and 893 form a distinct group in which the king explicitly regrets the indiscretions of his youth.²¹⁶

Pauline Stafford, drawing on Frank Stenton's work, has pointed out that the charters of the period 993 to 1000 had become much more detailed and discursive with a "tendency to enlarge upon the history of the property."²¹⁷ They often in their discursive sections embark on the justification and explanation of the grant and the authority to possess it in the estate in question. In most cases it was a freestanding section, separated from the Latin text and recorded in the vernacular (as opposed to the Latin corpus of the diplomas). Connected with that is the reference to crimes in those sections in order to explain the forfeiture of land, which had brought the estates into the hands of the king. Keynes remarked that only in Æthelred's reign such a profusion of references to former crimes was to be found.²¹⁸ The question is whether those passages are an indicator for an extraordinary level of criminal activity, which would deem his reign as a period of lawlessness. Whitelock has argued that the elaboration on crimes "give away his sense of insecurity and his need for self-justification,"²¹⁹ but, even if she might have a case here, I would like to agree with Prof. Keynes, who argues that it might have been a fashion, expressing a desire to strengthen the new owner's title to the estate.²²⁰ He continues to claim that, on the contrary, the vivid accounts of how the malefactors had been brought to justice rather showed consequent law enforcement and thus the power of the crown. Nevertheless, we should not overestimate the king's capacity to exercise his supremacy. A charter dated 996 (S 877) might serve as an indicator for the "weakness of Ethelred's regime" as Dorothy Whitelock remarked.²²¹ Although I do not agree with her terminology, the charter at least provides us with a notion of apparent limits of royal authority, as it records the crimes of a certain Wulfbald, who ignored the king's order to undergo trial four times. In the end, all his property is assigned to the king and he himself is placed at Æthelred's mercy. But this instance shows that it was possible to disobey the king's will.

Undisputedly, the charters show a claim to authority as they often refer to the loss of documents and their replacement and the relationship of present charters to former ones, always asserting the singular and ultimate authority of the new grant, as to be seen in S 883: "Hoc autem precipiens precipio ut nulla aliorum

²¹⁵ Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 177, 186.

²¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 180, n. 101.

²¹⁷ P. Stafford, 'Political Ideas in Late Tenth-Century England: Charters as Evidence', in *Law, Laity and Solidarities: Essays in Honour of Susan Reynolds*, ed. P. Stafford *et al.* (Manchester, 2001), p. 68; see also F. Stenton, *Latin Charters of the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Oxford, 1955), p. 74.

²¹⁸ See Keynes, 'Crime and Punishment', p. 76.

²¹⁹ Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 47.

²²⁰ See Keynes, 'Crime and Punishment', p. 77.

²²¹ Cf. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 575.

librorum scedula nostro libello precelli uideatur, sed inperpetuum delitescat et aboleatur.”²²² Similar sanctions are to be found with great regularity in the charters of this period.

Another feature mentioned by Stafford common to this distinctive group of charters are lengthy proems/*arangae*. The king’s actions are portrayed in the context of salvation history, a tendency common in the last decades of the 10th century. Furthermore, in the early years of the new millennium we come across references to the affliction of his enemies and the Last Judgement.²²³ The context of the Last Judgement is of special interest, for the king in religious discourse was regarded as shepherd of his people to be held accountable at the Last Judgement as we will see in the *Promissio Regis*.²²⁴

Pauline Stafford has brilliantly summarized the character of Æthelred’s charters of the 990s:

In sum, there is a stress on kingship, family and inheritance – including that of the king himself; on consultation and advice often with reference to some notion of the public good; and on documentary proofs of ownership: all in the context of a view of history, both dynastic and salvational, and of the king’s own bodily history. Much of this is framed by the concern to justify and explain the king’s action.²²⁵

Following her argumentation, the circumstances called for a definition of good kingship or at least for an explanation of royal action, thus representing evidence for contemporary political thought.²²⁶ Of central importance seems to have been the idea that a king was bound to the advice and counsel of his *witan* as we find numerous references to councillors (*satrapes/optimates*) and even the process of consultation.²²⁷ Another charter dated 1012 (S 926), which refers to the downfall of *ealdorman* Leofsige, describes the result of decision-making as a *foedus*, i.e., a settlement being arranged among the king and his council.²²⁸ Counsel and crimes (e.g. betrayal) emerge to have been seen in a wider context of public interest as we find several references to the public good and *patria*, which conveys a strong notion of unity “if not Englishness.”²²⁹

Stafford argues that the nature of Æthelred’s diplomas served as an explanation for reversing his previous grants, which she regarded, quite correctly,

²²² *Charters of Abingdon Abbey: Part 2*, Anglo-Saxon Charters VIII, ed. S. E. Kelly (Oxford, 2001), p. 484; *This however, I strongly enjoin, that no document of other title-deed may be superior to our charter, but such to lie hidden for ever and be destroyed.*

²²³ See S 984, 985, 899, 911.

²²⁴ See p. 107 *infra* in my chapter on the *Promissio Regis*.

²²⁵ Stafford, ‘Political Ideas’, p. 71.

²²⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

²²⁷ S 876 and 891 give details about that process.

²²⁸ Cf. Stenton, *Charters*, pp. 79–80.

²²⁹ Stafford, ‘Political Ideas’, p. 80.

as difficult to promote. This change of mind on the king's part was presented as a shift from youth to maturity of a good king who acted justly and rightfully according to the advice of his councillors.²³⁰ We should not underestimate another significant feature here which Stafford mentioned in one of her previous works, namely that during the 990s the royal grants show a wider geographical spread: "The build-up of followers in the Wessex heartland is replaced by a wider royal largesse."²³¹

Finally, the royal charters of Æthelred give us an insight into his self-awareness. The diverse *intitulationes* of his diplomas suggest an almost imperial understanding of his office, reminiscent of his ancestor Æthelstan. *Rex Anglorum totiusque Britannie orbis gubernator* 'King of the English and governor of the whole orbit of Britain' (S 877), *Anglorum rector caeterumque gentium per circuitium adiacentium gubernator* 'Leader of the English and governor of the other neighbouring nations round about' (S 882) or *Anglorum basileus caeterumque gentium triviatim persistentium gubernator et rector* 'Ruler of the English and governor of the other adjoining nations round about' (S 882) are only a few titles reflecting his self-perception as potent ruler who sometimes is even styled *totius Albionis imperator* 'emperor of all Albion' (S 886). Those titles appear as a vigorous claim to authority in combination with the almost obligate invocation of divine favour and genealogical descent. Important in this regard as a means of legitimizing the claim to authority of the West-Saxon bloodline and safeguard the royal succession is the fact that from 993 onwards the *athelings* attest Æthelred's diplomas, coinciding with the reappearance of his mother Ælfthryth.²³² Maybe the king wanted to display the unity of the royal house, to disavow any accusations regarding solo-attempts in decision-making and at the same time stress the claim of his sons to the throne in order to prevent a possible succession crisis following his death, as this image loomed dreadfully on his mind after he had experienced that difficult situation after the death of Edgar.

Without a doubt, Æthelred's charters provide us with invaluable information about his politics, character and process of development as monarch. The output and the form give evidence of a highly productive administration showing its capacity in decision-making even in times of turmoil. Following the 'red thread' of his diplomas we can detect a change of mind on the king's part from the young 'hotshot' who wanted to assert his authority and relied on councillors who took advantage of his inexperience and youth to the mature and determined monarch, who had realized the error of his ways and tried to atone for the wrongdoings of his youth. In this respect he did not only rely on the advice of his leading men but

²³⁰ Cf. Stafford, 'Political Ideas', p. 82; it is also striking that in the second half of Æthelred's reign the witness lists appear to be longer as if to stress the approval of a considerable number of councillors.

²³¹ Idem, 'Reign of Æthelred', p. 29.

²³² Cf. Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LIX.

also tried his utmost to earn divine favour and mount a collective resistance against the Vikings while struggling to mend the flaws running through society and aristocracy. While emerging as documents of a time of lawlessness at first sight, the charters rather provide us with records of effective law enforcement and unequivocal legal security for the grants and privileges executed.

Æthelred's diplomas bear witness to a king whose self-image was that of a rightful ruler, being the descendant of the royal House of Wessex, member of the lineage of Alfred, Æthelstan and Edgar, hatching an imperial ambition to rule the whole of Britain by right of ancestry and divine acquiescence.

1.3. *Æthelred's Law-Codes*

The state of affairs within a society finds reflection in its legislation. Anglo-Saxon England was no exception in this respect, although we have to keep in mind – to quote Patrick Wormald – that

we have no good reason to doubt that Anglo-Saxon law-codes tell the truth, within reasonable limitations, about Anglo-Saxon law. But we have every reason to wonder whether they tell us the whole truth.²³³

Even so, the law-codes of Æthelred provide us with another valuable source of contemporary thinking and the state of Anglo-Saxon England during his reign.

Eight surviving law-codes (and their variations) and two fragments help us gain insight into contemporary society and the position of king and government, although we have no conclusive evidence that the surviving versions of the legislative pieces represent the original form (if any) of the decrees as late Anglo-Saxon law was not comparable to modern Statute Law. The word of the king commanded authority, but its legal implementation depended rather on local agencies of enforcement rather than the letter by letter wording of the documents.²³⁴

The legislation of Æthelred can be roughly divided into two periods. His early law-codes were mainly secular, dealing with traditional issue of tenth-century Anglo-Saxon legislation, whereas his later codes represent a strong ecclesiastical and homiletic element as they were influenced by Archbishop Wulfstan of York, who in the latter half of his reign gains reputation as important advisor, composer of legislation and, according to the *Liber Eliensis*, close friend and confidant of Æthelred.²³⁵

²³³ P. Wormald, 'Æthelred the Lawmaker', in *Ethelred*, ed. D. Hill, p. 49.

²³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 48 and 56-57; cf. also P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol I: *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), p. 338. Wormald argues that the Q version of VII Æthelred and perhaps IX and X Æthelred represented the official form of the decrees.

²³⁵ See *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), p. 62 and *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*, ed. D. Whitelock, 3rd rev. ed. (Exeter, 1976), pp. 16-17.

The Early Legislation

It is probable that Æthelred promoted new legislation as early as the 980s as two of his law-codes (*I* and *III Æthelred*) refer to an assembly at *Bromdun*. Whatever the case, the first important law-codes were issued in the 990s. The dates of *I* and *III Æthelred* are uncertain for their prefaces mention only the place of the legislative assembly (Woodstock and Wantage, respectively). Concluding from the fact that there was a great *witenagemot* at Wantage in 997²³⁶ and the striking parallels of both codes (clauses of *I* are repeated in *III*), one might argue that they originate from that particular meeting. Wormald suggested that both codes might have originated from the decrees agreed at the Pentecost assembly at Winchester in 993.²³⁷ Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered with certainty and remains a matter of debate.

Despite the fact that a solution of the problem of origin is out of reach, the striking parallels and the almost similar wording of both codes suggest that they were pieces of the same legislative process. The Wantage code deals mainly with the affairs of the Danelaw (as opposed to Woodstock, which was decreed “after Engla lage”),²³⁸ partly giving *I* and *IV Æthelred* harsher applications on particular issues. The Wantage code is full of Scandinavian vocabulary and it appears that Æthelred scheduled a vigorous enforcement of his will in the Danelaw, the implementation of which was probably entrusted to the king’s representatives.

Both codes deal extensively with legal procedures concerning theft, purchase of land and goods and the surety system. The overriding issue emerges to have been the improvement of public security as this aim is addressed in both prefaces. The Wantage code stresses in its first chapter the keeping of the peace. With reference to the King’s peace the code invokes the long tradition of Anglo-Saxon lawgivers and decrees that a breach of that peace could not be compensated for (ch.1). This does not only stress the monarch’s universal assertion of power, but also conveys the impression that Æthelred wanted to extend his influence to the North of his realm and pacify the unruly regions in Mercia and Northumbria.

Those law-codes stress the concept that every crime committed was a crime against the king himself (and thus the whole *Angelcynn*) as he was entitled to all the fines (eg. *I Ætr.* 1.9a; 1.11; 1.13; 4.3). Moreover, the reeve, as representative of the king in the shires, gains prominence in those codes, thus stressing the monarch’s influence and authority.²³⁹

Important provisions of *III Æthelred* deal with theft – which was severely punished - and exactly determined fines, which suggest that by means of legal enforcement Æthelred’s government ensured a steady flow of money in order to

²³⁶ Cf. Williams, *Æthelred*, p. 21, Table 2.

²³⁷ See Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 328.

²³⁸ *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I*, ed. and transl. A. J. Robertson (Cambridge, 1925), p. 52.

²³⁹ Cf. *III Ætr.* 11, which sets down that no one except the king was entitled to judge a *thegn*.

finance the kingdom's expenses. Notwithstanding, I strongly doubt this to be an indicator of financial problems or despotic tendencies. On the contrary, it was an ingenious legal guaranty of the governmental finances.

Another sign of royal authority in the Wantage code are the chapters on coinage (III *Ætr.* 8-8.2; 16), being directed at those minting counterfeit money. The production of coins at authorized mints seems to have been subject to royal prerogative, as only the king was entitled to appoint moneyers (ch. 8.1). Those coinage laws are found in a more elaborated form in *IV Æthelred*, a codex in Latin of unknown date. Here they comprise the greater part of that code (chs. 5-9.3), the other chapters of which deal with trade regulations already in force in London. Those regulations hint at a prosperous Anglo-continental trade.²⁴⁰

We can conclude from the coinage laws a highly centralized and efficient system of coinage being firmly under royal control, whose pillars were weight standards, authorized moneyers and mints. Furthermore, those laws represented a claim to ubiquitous validity as they applied to Anglo-Saxons, Danes and foreigners.²⁴¹ The fact that penalties for moneyers who produced false coins outside the boundaries of royal authorization were very harsh²⁴² shows that the highly organized system of coinage was essential to *Æthelred's* government. The king asserted his authority by keeping the whole monetary system under his royal dominion.²⁴³

Those provisions with regard to counterfeit money should by no means be regarded as indicating lawlessness and a weak government. It is rather a sign of royal authority and the success of the coinage system as well as the trust *Æthelred's* subjects had in that system and its control by royal government, as no one would counterfeit coins which were not respected and trusted.

Prominence among the early legislation of *Æthelred* has gained a text now termed *II Æthelred*, which principally records a treaty between the king and the Viking army led by Olaf Trygvason, Jostein and Guthmund. The date of this piece (991 or 994) has long been debated, but I agree with E. V. Gordon who dates it – contrary to Liebermann – to 994.²⁴⁴ *II Æthelred* represents one of the

²⁴⁰ P. Sawyer, 'The Wealth of England in the 11th Century', *TRHS* 5th ser. 15 (1965), pp. 156-61 had argued that ch. 2.8, which is concerned with the subjects of the Holy Roman Emperor, might indicate particularly strong trading connections between England and the Empire. He assumes that the bulk of silver for the production of the English silver penny might have originated from there.

²⁴¹ See *IV Ætr.* 5.2., 8

²⁴² See *III Ætr.* 8; 16; *IV Ætr.* 5.3; 5.4

²⁴³ The importance of royally organized coinage is also evident from clauses in *Æthelred's* later codes, which deal with its improvement (*V Ætr.* 26.1; *VI Ætr.* 32.1).

²⁴⁴ The terms in ch. 1 seem to represent previous local arrangement now incorporated into a general peace treaty agreed upon after the events mentioned in the *Chronicle* for 994, although the text does not incorporate any provisions that are in line with Olaf's confirmation at Andover. But the fact that the text refers to tribute payment in the past (see chs. 1 and 7.2), makes it ap-

few instances of a recorded peace treaty. It functions as a prime example for Æthelred's policy of buying off Viking invaders and employing them as mercenaries in order to prevent further Viking onslaught and secure English trade. Chs. 8 and 9 seem to have been an independent piece of legislation and deal with vouching for warranty. Intriguing in that regard is that in that process the accused was bound to declare how the land or goods in question came into his possession. This parallels the lengthy discursive sections of Æthelred's charters where he does the same to justify his claim to the lands he granted. Probably the provisions in *II Æthelred* can be seen in the same vein of creating indisputable legal security.

Finally, another significant feature of Æthelred's early legislation is the nature of decision-making. As to be seen in his charters from 993 to 1005, the legal documents stress that they were *laga* 'laws' or *gerådnyssse* 'ordinances' which were agreed upon by the king and his councillors.²⁴⁵ Moreover, if we have personal reference, we come across *we* more often than *I* (i.e. the king).²⁴⁶ The process of decision-making seems to have been promoted as one of collective action by the king in agreement with his advisors. This indeed stands in line with the impression we gain from royal diplomas.

In sum, Æthelred's early legislation dealt with strictly secular themes. The codes display a high level of contingency and according to Wormald, "English legislation had seldom before been so thoroughly planned."²⁴⁷ The law-codes *I* and *III* set down definite regulations for legal procedure and stand in line with the laws of Æthelred's ancestors Æthelstan and Edgar.²⁴⁸ The general impression is one of a well-pondered legislative process aiming at bringing about order and legal security and provided the Anglo-Saxons with specific and definite guidelines. The law-codes display a universal claim of royal supremacy and strengthen the position of the monarch and his representatives while simultaneously trying to extend Æthelred's sphere of influence.

I agree with Simon Keynes' remark that there was nothing to be found in his legislation being suggestive of a collapse of social order in the face of the renewed Viking attacks in the 980s and 990s.²⁴⁹ The law-codes rather bear witness to "a king who is perfectly capable to take appropriate action to traditional tenth-century concerns."²⁵⁰

pear rather likely to have been drafted after the events of 994; cf. Gordon, 'The Date of Æthelred's Treaty with the Vikings', pp. 24-32.

²⁴⁵ See the prefaces of *I Ætr.* and *III Ætr.* in Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, pp. 52 and 64.

²⁴⁶ The only instances where the documents apply the first person are to be found in *IV Ætr.* 6; 9.2 and 9.3, but even then they are always contextualized with reference to decisions made by more people than just the king.

²⁴⁷ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 325.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, p. 48.

²⁴⁹ See Keynes, 'Crime and Punishment', p. 74.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Æthelred's Later Codes

The later legislation of Æthelred brought about a remarkable change. The law-codes become more ecclesiastical in tone with a distinctive homiletic element. This shift of focus and nature is owed to the influence of Archbishop Wulfstan of York, who became one of the chief advisers to king Æthelred and whose style and language permeates the legislation of the latter half of Æthelred's reign. The earliest code apparently drafted by Wulfstan some time between 1002 and 1008, dealt with the relationship between English and Danes and reflects his conception of both the ordering of society as a whole and acknowledgment that there had always been a differentiation in legal terms and regulations between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians,²⁵¹ which, however, will not be the object of my discussion here.

In the context of the Viking raids of 1006-7 and 1009-12 there are remarkable examples of legislation as a religious response to the pressing realities bearing the mark of Wulfstan.²⁵² Emanating directly or indirectly from a *witenagemot* at (King's) Enham at Pentecost 1008, three texts were drafted by the archbishop: *V Æthelred*,²⁵³ the version apparently envisaged for common circulation, a Latin version designated *VI Æthelred (Lat.)*,²⁵⁴ probably intended for higher ecclesiastics and giving valuable procedural information (e.g. the involvement of the archbishops Wulfstan and Ælfheah) and finally *VI Æthelred*,²⁵⁵ a vernacular version with some additional material. I am not going to embark on a lengthy discussion on the relationship of those codes and the different manuscripts they are preserved in as this debate would have taken the survey of those codes too far with regard to the focus of my thesis.²⁵⁶

The Enham decrees provide us with a kind of hybrid legislation. Religious

²⁵¹ The so-called *Laws of Edward and Guthrum*; see *Councils & Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. I: *A D. 871-1204*, ed. D. Whitelock *et al.*, 2 pts. (Oxford, 1981), I, 302-12; cf. also Wormald, *Making of English Law*, pp. 330-40 and 389-91.

²⁵² Several clauses and themes are derived from or reflected in other works of Wulfstan, like the *Institutes of Polity* or the *Sermo Lupi*. For a detailed analysis see e.g. Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, pp. 326-36.

²⁵³ See Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 344-62.

²⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 362-73.

²⁵⁵ See Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, pp. 91-107.

²⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion see K. Sisam, 'The Relationship of Æthelred's Codes V and VI', in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 278-87; Wormald, 'Æthelred the Lawmaker', pp. 50-8; Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 338-43; Wormald, *Making of English Law*, pp. 191-92, 199 and 332-35. Wormald (*ibid.*, pp. 336-7) suggested that the fragment X Ætr. might have been part of the Enham legislation and represented an 'official version', as the preamble was reminiscent of the beginning of contemporary diplomas. The act of law-giving is explained and conveys the notion of an official approach. Besides echoing the law-traditions of Edgar and Edmund, the prologue clearly was Wulfstan's work and throughout the preserved chapters we find clauses reminiscent of the Enham decrees and other Wulfstanian works, see Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, pp. 130-33 and notes.

themes (e.g. as the duties of good Christians and clerics) go hand in hand with secular concerns. Following Lawson's argumentation, they show a general interest in protecting the weak, suppressing disorder and improving the state of the church, which all were characteristic of Carolingian thought and the contemporary peace movement on the continent.²⁵⁷ This would have been extraordinarily remarkable, as it would have meant official royal promotion of that movement.²⁵⁸

The essential message seems to be a reordering of society, i.e. the shunning of all *unlaga* 'injustices', and observation of God's laws and the practices as laid down in the code. Wulfstan seems to have detected abuses within society and tries to remind the people of their wrongdoings²⁵⁹ in order to earn God's favour and bring about improvement throughout the country in religious and secular concerns.

Apart from the religious element there are also more practical concerns. For the first time we encounter a legislative statement on the *trinoda necessitas* (maintenance of fortifications and bridges and military service).²⁶⁰ To be regarded as complementary is the clause of supplying ships, to be ready after Easter each year.²⁶¹ This is an unmistakable sign that the government was aware of the dangers posed by the Vikings and responded to it with a long-term focus. Striking in this respect is that one decree includes a clause concerning the damage of warships and the subsequent severe punishment.²⁶² It appears that it might have been inserted in retrospective with regard to Wulfnoth's treachery the following year (see *ASC* s.a. 1009). The pressing concern for military response and strict discipline as the only way of overcoming the immediate threat of the Scandinavians can also be seen in the fact that for the first time since the days of King Ine of Wessex (c. 688-726), desertion from the *fyrð* was severely punished.²⁶³

²⁵⁷ See M. K. Lawson, 'Archbishop Wulfstan and the Homiletic Element in the Laws of Æthelred II and Cnut', *EHR* 107 (1992), p. 575. According to him, Wulfstan's access to earlier sources from England and the continent might have stimulated his desire for a more ordered and Christian society. For the Carolingian tradition see Wormald, 'Æthelred the Lawmaker', pp. 71-74.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Wormald, 'Æthelred the Lawmaker', pp. 70-71; cf. also H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'The Peace and the Truce of God in the Eleventh Century', *Past and Present* 46 (1970), 42-67 and J. Campbell, 'England, France, Flanders and Germany in the Reign of Æthelred II: Some Comparisons and Connections', in *Æthelred*, ed. D. Hill, p. 194, who wonders whether there had been similarities between Æthelred's later legislation and that produced on the continent in connection with the Peace of God.

²⁵⁹ See V Ætr. 24-26, 32-33.1; VI Ætr. 53.

²⁶⁰ See V Ætr. 26.1; VI Ætr. (Lat.) 32.3; see Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 344; cf. R. Abels, 'Trinoda Necessitas', *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 456-57.

²⁶¹ See VI Ætr. 32.3.

²⁶² See VI Ætr. 34.

²⁶³ Cf. Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 344; Æthelred's active strife to suppress abuses and maintain public order and security, even in the North, can be derived from one manuscript of V (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 201), where in chapters. 32 and 32.5 the king is praised to

Loyalty to the king and a united stand against the Danes seems to have been paramount, as can also be derived from the final chapter:

ȝ utan ænne cynehlaford holdlice healdan ȝ lif ȝ land samod ealle werian,
swa wel swa we betst magan, ȝ God ealmihtigne inwerdre heortan fultumes
biddan.²⁶⁴

This is also echoed at the beginning, where the loyalty to one lord, one Christian faith and the casting off of heathen practices are stressed (cf. V Ætr. 1; VI Ætr. 1).

Of special interest is one clause included in *V Æthelred* – but not to be found in the other Enham decrees – concerning the nation-wide observation of St. Edward’s festival. Although it has been regarded as a later interpolation,²⁶⁵ it yet provides us with evidence that the cult of St. Edward was well-established by the early eleventh century. The appearance of this clause in a document of Wulfstan’s making is particularly interesting, for in the concluding annals of the ‘Northern Recension’ of the *ASC*, in whose production Wulfstan was apparently involved,²⁶⁶ regard Edward’s murder as a horrible crime for which the English were punished by renewed Viking attacks. Therefore, I tend to concur with Simon Keynes, who saw the ‘official’ enforcement of the cult of St. Edward in *V Æthelred* as a means of Wulfstan’s concern to help the English repent of their sins and thus avert further punishment.²⁶⁷

The Enham legislation intended to strengthen the position of the king, restructure society with the aim to abjure all wrong-doings and eagerly to follow the laws of God to earn his favour to overcome the contemporary afflictions. The borderline between law-code and homily are blurred in the context of Wulfstan’s influence. This tendency is further elaborated in what can be seen as a direct response to the arrival of the Viking fleet led by Thorkell in 1009: the law-code *VII Æthelred*. It is extant in two versions, one in Latin (*VIIa Æthelred*),²⁶⁸ probably translated from a now lost Old English version and another version in the vernacular.²⁶⁹ Even though the Latin version probably did not come from Wulfstan, its Latin shows marks of his composition.²⁷⁰ The two versions differ in matters of content and organization with the Latin being the more detailed

have tackled the problems connected with the appeal “þæt he ma mote” (‘may he do more’), see Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 361.

²⁶⁴ Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 362; *And let us loyally support one royal lord, and all together defend our lives and our land, as well as ever we can, and pray to Almighty God from our inmost heart for his help.*

²⁶⁵ Cf. Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 178, n. 132.

²⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 158-59; for the Wulfstanian poems in the *ASC* see Bredehoft, *Textual Histories*, pp. 106-110 and K. Jost, ‘Wulfstan und die angelsächsische Chronik’, *Anglia* 47 (1923), 105-23.

²⁶⁷ See Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 179.

²⁶⁸ See Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 375-78.

²⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 379-82.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 330 and n. 308. Putting a halt to the selling of Christians overseas (VII Ætr. 5) was one of Wulfstan’s constant anxieties (see V Ætr. 2, VI Ætr. 9).

providing us with useful information.²⁷¹

Central issue of this law-code was a programme of prayer, including a three-days-fast and barefoot processions to church accompanied by a priest in order to make confession. After having addressed the general congregation the code lays down special arrangements for the members of religious houses: the masspriest had to say mass for the king and his people (VII Ætr. 6.1), a special mass (*contra paganos*) had to be sung at Morrow mass (VII Ætr. 6.2; VIIa Ætr. 3) and on top of that the whole community had to lie prostrate before the altar at each of the Hours and sing Psalm 3 (*Domine, quid multiplicati sumi*) together with the collect *contra paganos* (VII Ætr. 6.3; VIIa Ætr. 3.1) until things would become better.²⁷² Psalm 3 is of special interest in that regard as it reflects on God's protection of his chosen people against persecution by non-believers.²⁷³ Accordingly, this law-code would stand in line with other religious works which associated the Anglo-Saxons with God's chosen people.²⁷⁴ The Viking attacks seem to have sharpened Wulfstan's sense of the havoc and mayhem which pagans could impose on a Christian nation²⁷⁵ – a notion which was reflected in his awareness of abuses and society's need for improvement underlying the Enham legislation.

VII Æthelred does not provide us with any practical measures against the Viking incursions as the Enham codes had done, but it was symbolic “of the desperation and despair which the English felt when faced yet again by a hostile force, and their perfectly natural appeal for divine help.”²⁷⁶

Although all elements of VII Æthelred appear to have had earlier Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian antecedents and might have been commonplace among the English,²⁷⁷ yet their *combination* is what gives this penitential edict its striking significance. Indeed this nationwide programme of prayer, with processions through England, carrying relics of saints and chanting in unison must have been an overwhelming sight. In effect, it was a concerted religious effort to do penance for the nation's sins and try to achieve divine assistance for the struggle against the Danes.

This code also provides us with evidence that there seems to have been a change of mind. Whereas in the 990s the renewal of the Viking incursions seems

²⁷¹ Whereas the OE version states that it was decreed “ða se miccle here com to lande” (‘when the great army came to the country’), the Latin one claims “Hoc instituerunt Æþelredes rex et sapientes eius apud Badam” (‘This decreed King Æthelred and his councillors at Bath’). Other differences pertain to the duties of the clergy and prohibitions added. Cf. Whitlock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 447.

²⁷² Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 171, argued that there had been a programme of prayer and fasting in response to Scandinavian incursions, instituted collectively by the bishops of England at some point between c. 995 and 1008.

²⁷³ Cf. Wilcox, ‘St. Brice's Day Massacre’, p. 88.

²⁷⁴ It is evident in the works of Alcuin, Bede and Ælfric.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Wilcox, ‘St. Brice's Day Massacre’, p. 88.

²⁷⁶ Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 181.

²⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 181-89.

to have been connected with the misdemeanours of the king himself, the edict of 1009 sees a shift of focus towards the notion that the Vikings were an instrument of God's wrath incurred by the sinful Anglo-Saxons as a whole, which now required a united nationwide act of penance.²⁷⁸

The last law-code to be taken into consideration is another ecclesiastic code of 1014 (*VIII Æthelred*).²⁷⁹ It is chiefly ecclesiastical in subject matter and deals with the protection of the churches from breaches of their peace, the rendering of tithes and dues and accusations against the clergy. Judging from the prologue, it is not unlikely that there had been a secular companion volume as Wormald has suggested, but, even so, nothing of that legislation has survived.²⁸⁰

This code is also of special interest because it tells us about the development of the concept of kingship. After having stated that someone who committed homicide has to pay compensation "þam cyninge 7 Christe"²⁸¹ Wulfstan explains this clause: "Førðam Cristen cyning is Cristes gespelia on Cristenre þeode; and he sceal Cristes abilgðe wrecan swiðe georne."²⁸²

Here we have an invocation of the pastoral kingship, i.e. the king being the shepherd of his flock (his people), a theme which had gained prominence in England since the time of King Edgar.²⁸³ The king was reminded of his office – an indication that he had not fulfilled his duties before? I do not want to speculate on that issue but it fits rather well with the events after Æthelred's return from exile, when the account of the 'main' chronicler gives the impression that there had been a certain disaffection and discontent with regard to the king's former ruling practices. This law-code thus might reflect the Anglo-Saxon apprehension that the king had to be reminded of his office and role as Christian monarch.

In the same vein, particular clauses of *VIII Æthelred* reflect a consciousness of Anglo-Saxon law-making tradition. After having stated that once there had been wise councillors who designed secular laws with religious concern (ch. 36), Wulfstan laments that ever since the days of Edgar, the laws of Christ and the king had dwindled and deteriorated, and that things had grown worse (chs. 37-39) – all elements which feature prominently in Wulfstan's works, especially the *Sermo Lupi*. But at the same time he kindles hope by holding out the prospect of

²⁷⁸ Cf. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 181; see also idem, 'Re-Reading King Æthelred', pp. 91-92.

²⁷⁹ See Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 386-402.

²⁸⁰ See Wormald, 'Æthelred the Lawmaker', p. 59 and Lawson, 'Homiletic Element', p. 578 and n. 4.

²⁸¹ Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 388; *To the king and Christ*.

²⁸² Ibid.; *Because a Christian king is Christ's deputy among a Christian people, and he must avenge very zealously offences against Christ*. This idea is also to be found in Wulfstan's *Institutes of Polity*, probably drawing on Sedulius Scottus' *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis* as ultimate source (see Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 388, n. 2). J. C. Pope (*Homilies of Ælfric: a Supplementary Collection*, 2 vols., EETS os 259, 260 (London, 1967-68), I, 374-77) suggests that Wulfstan used Ælfric as a source.

²⁸³ Cf. also Lawson, 'Homiletic Element', p. 568, who points out that in the tradition of Ottonian practice from the times of Edgar onwards the kings had looked upon themselves as Christ-like.

improvement in case it was God's will and the people would pursue it zealously. He mentions the example of former kings of the House of Wessex and praises their legislation and their piety (ch. 43), placing Æthelred into that glorious bloodline, hence portraying him as an able descendent of the those rulers but at the same time reminds him of his duty derived from the king's ancestry and obligation to God without addressing him in person.

Similar to the Enham legislation, the law-code closes with an appeal to honour God and His laws and to display unity in supporting one royal lord “ȝ freonda gehwilt mid rihtan getriwðan oðerne lufige ȝ healde mid rihte.”²⁸⁴ Those closing chapters are suggestive of a shepherd who is trying to bring his flock into line when facing the wolves.

The code brings about the notion of yet another concerted action: an appeal to king and people to bundle their strength and effort and bethink themselves of Anglo-Saxon tradition and their own wrongdoings, which have resulted in the deteriorating circumstances of the day. At the same time there is no sign of desperation but rather the notion of a fresh start, beginning with a change of attitude, as the opportunity to avert the impending doom was still there. Wulfstan expected every man to do his or her duty (including Æthelred) in order to achieve the common aim of fighting back the Vikings. Concluding from this law-code in correspondence with the *Chronicle*, there seems to have been a general sense of elation in England upon Æthelred's return from exile.

From 1008 to 1014 we can detect a development in Wulfstan's drafting of law-codes. He is moving from a purely homiletic perspective to a more balanced blend on the conventions of preaching and law-making.²⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the ‘later Wulfstan’ tried with full confidence to put governmental power behind the needs of church and people. With a steady increase the laws designed to repress sin and crime were fused “with a pastoral tradition striving for moral and spiritual rearmament.”²⁸⁶

There is a discernible shift of character in Æthelred's law-codes from the moment Wulfstan becomes influential in the process of drafting them. Whereas Æthelred's early codes deal with traditional issues and display an able, sagacious monarch who tries to uphold law and order in England and assert his royal authority on a national scale even in the areas of limited royal influence, the later codes show a clear preoccupation with the dangers posed by the Vikings. The Scandinavian threat is seen in a religious context, as expression of divine wrath triggered by the people's sins. Wulfstan strives to unite the Anglo-Saxons under the Christian banner, evoke a ‘holy war’ against the heathens (who by this time were Christians for the most part) and draws on homiletic tradition, as he had

²⁸⁴ Whitelock, *Councils & Synods*, I, 402; *And each of the friends shall love with true fidelity the other and support him rightly.*

²⁸⁵ Cf. Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 341.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

come to think that homiletic legislation was the appropriate way “to achieve the purposes for which Anglo-Saxon legislation had always been intended.”²⁸⁷ After all secular measures to overcome the invaders had failed, Wulfstan’s law-codes take the lead in mounting spiritual resistance and it is essential for their understanding that, though a common denominator is discernible, each piece of legislation has to be viewed in its specific historical context.

Æthelred’s legislation has been viewed as deficient, loquacious and vague, arguments which I neither can agree with nor definitely dispense with. Nonetheless, in appreciation of his reign and seen against the circumstances of his in one way or the other troubled reign, I want to conclude my discussion with a statement by Patrick Wormald:

Æthelred was no Justinian, no Charlemagne, no Æthelstan even. But his ge-ræd-nessa supply no justification for the immortal and malicious pun, Æpel-ræd Un-ræd.²⁸⁸

1.4. Coins

Æthelred’s Coins

Any comprehensive survey of source material would be deficient without numismatic evidence. For a period which saw incessant Viking incursions and tribute payments the factor of coinage should not be underestimated.

England enjoyed high-standard coins and probably the “most sophisticated monetary system in Western Europe.”²⁸⁹ Æthelred had inherited an effective and productive system of coinage and recoinage from his father Edgar, whose reform in 973 was a not only a landmark in the medieval monetary system, but set the scene for the next 150 years. The central features of Edgar’s reform were uniformity of types, centralized die-production being under firm royal control and synchronized changes or *renovationes monetae* on a six-year basis, with the coins bearing the inscription of both moneyer and mint.²⁹⁰

During Æthelred’s reign the nationwide system of 47 productive mints under Edgar was extended to 75,²⁹¹ although we have to keep in mind that not all of them were productive on the same level at the same time. Therefore, Dolley’s claim that no man had to travel more than fifteen miles to get to a mint has to be

²⁸⁷ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 345.

²⁸⁸ dem, ‘Æthelred the Lawmaker’, p. 77.

²⁸⁹ M. Blackburn, ‘Æthelred’s Coinage and the Payment of Tribute’, in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, p. 156.

²⁹⁰ For details of Edgar’s reform see S. Lyon, ‘Some Problems in Interpreting Anglo-Saxon Coinage’, *ASE* 5 (1976), pp. 192-95.

²⁹¹ Cf. Blackburn, ‘Æthelred’s Coinage’, p. 158.

treated with caution.²⁹²

Nevertheless, Æthelred's reign saw the production of six substantive types, reminted on a six-year basis. This system fails only once "precisely when the whole fabric of the English state comes closest to collapse"²⁹³ as a regular *renovatio monetæ* would have been due 1015, but instead its abandonment displays a concession to military disaster and political turmoil in that year.

Detailed analysis of the different types and a lengthy discussion on metrology despite its importance would have exceeded the scope of this thesis and will not be undertaken. Consequently, I will restrain myself to depicting general tendencies.²⁹⁴

The different types bear witness to Christian motives as we find Cross types (*Crux* (991-997), *Small Crux* (996/997 ?), *Intermediate Small Cross* (997 ?), *Long Cross* (997-1003) and *Last Small Cross* (1009-1015) among Æthelred's coins, just like *Manus Dei* ('Hand of God') types (*First Hand* (979-985), *Second Hand* (985-991), *Benediction Hand* (c. 991). Especially the *Small Cross* coins reverted to the design of Edgar's reform thus invoking his peaceful regime. It is therefore not surprising that the *Last Small Cross* was produced in times of outstanding turmoil, when the desire for peace was most pressing.

The *Benediction Hand* type is remarkable as Æthelred is portrayed bare-headed but with a cross-sceptre on the obverse and the *Manus Dei* in a benediction blessing with a cross in the cuff²⁹⁵ on the reverse. Apparently the king was determined to stress his piety (after the period of youthful indiscretion discussed above?) and earn divine favour after the renewal of the Viking incursions. Like the *Agnus Dei* coins (see below) the *Benediction Hand* was only a temporary issue, the minting of which might have been triggered by a certain event. It is tempting to associate it with the Viking attack on Maldon but this assumption should be handled with care as we lack conclusive evidence.

If earning divine favour was the original intention, we see quite a different picture from 1003 onwards. The *Helmet* type depicts Æthelred not bare-headed or with his crown as sign of royalty but instead with a helmet. There can be no doubt that this type denotes the willingness for military response. Æthelred wanted his subjects to know that their king was not only their ruler by heritage who pursued a policy of paying tribute and hiring mercenaries, but that he was also determined to respond militarily with all necessary resolve – a 'monetary call to arms'.

Æthelred, just like his royal predecessors, exercised firm control of the monetary system as the coin laws evident in Æthelred's early legislation suggest (see *supra*). The fact that moneyers were appointed by the king and dies were cut

²⁹² See M. Dolley, 'An Introduction to the Coinage of Æthelred II', in *Æthelred*, ed. D. Hill, p. 118.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁹⁴ For an overview, chronology and discussion of the different types see e.g. Dolley, 'Coinage of Æthelred II', pp. 118-29 and Blackburn, 'Æthelred's Coinage', pp. 160-62.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Blackburn, 'Æthelred's Coinage', p. 161, pl. 8.6.

and distributed from authorized centres such as London, Winchester or York (probably for a fee payable to the Crown) bear witness to an ingenious system run by the royal government.²⁹⁶ The establishment of mints should be seen in the same light, as smaller mints were established to fill gaps in the network in order to implement a policy of firm royal control of the coinage.²⁹⁷ Moreover, it seems that Æthelred set up ‘emergency mints’, of which only Salisbury achieved lasting prominence and translated exposed mints to former Iron Age forts at Cadbury, Cissbury and *Eanbyrb* – which were refortified – to keep the coin production running and avoid loosing royal authority as a response to Viking attacks disrupting the flow of coins minted from certain boroughs.²⁹⁸

Peter Sawyer has shown that the England of Æthelred’s days was a wealthy country and that it might have been this wealth which enticed Scandinavian raiders to loot in the first place.²⁹⁹ His assumptions regarding the volume of coin production seem to be feasible and concur with Simon Keynes’ statement that the sums of tribute mentioned in the *Chronicle* might be adequate.³⁰⁰ Apart from that, there seems to be no indication of a steady level of devaluation due to the payments of tribute to the Vikings, but a series of rise and fall in the weight standard.³⁰¹ England did not ‘bleed to death’. Conclusively, the large number of coins produced in combination with the amounts found in Scandinavian hoards suggests that Anglo-Saxon England enjoyed indeed a highly efficient, productive and sophisticated monetary system, even though we would be mistaken to regard it a money economy.

The fact that under Æthelred the coinage prospered and the system inherited from King Edgar through Æthelred was handed down to their successors, shows that it was an expression of royal authority, of organized structures at governmental level even in times of political turmoil and impending anarchy. Æthelred’s coins in no way convey the impression that they were products of a weak king with his realm falling apart. To cite Michael Dolley: “Forged under Æthelred perhaps was a kingdom greater than its king.”³⁰²

²⁹⁶ Cf. Blackburn, ‘Æthelred’s Coinage’, p. 164.

²⁹⁷ Cf. M. Dolley and D. Metcalf, ‘The Reform of the English Coinage under Eadgar’, in *Anglo-Saxon Coins. Studies Presented to F. M. Stenton on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, ed. M. Dolley (London, 1961), pp. 148-49.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Dolley, ‘Coinage of Æthelred II’, p. 125 and Lavelle, *Aethelred II*, pp. 115-16. Apparently sacks of important boroughs seems to coincide with the introduction of new types issued from secure mints, cf. Lyon, ‘Some Problems’, p. 202 and n. 4

²⁹⁹ See Sawyer, ‘Wealth of England’, p. 145.

³⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 151-4; for Keynes’ statement see n. 109 above.

³⁰¹ Cf. V. J. Butler, ‘The Metrology of the Late Anglo-Saxon Penny: The Reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut’, in *Anglo-Saxon Coinage*, ed. Dolley, p. 211; for the metrology see also Dolley and Metcalf, ‘Reform of English Coinage’, p. 214 and Lyon, ‘Some Problems’, pp. 195-203.

³⁰² Cf. Dolley, ‘Coinage of Æthelred II’, p. 130.

The Agnus Dei Coinage of 1009

Standing out against the numerous issues is a remarkable new type produced at about the time of the arrival of Thorkell's army, being an example of Christian symbolism: on the obverse we do not find the king's portrait but a symbol of Christ, i.e., the Lamb of God, and on the reverse the figure of a dove, representing the Holy Spirit. But the significance of this issue is not only owed to its remarkable design but also to its great rarity.³⁰³ This gives rise to the question of whether the *Agnus Dei* issue was a substantive type or only a temporary production serving a particular purpose. It is undoubtedly remarkable that symbols with such a strong Christian connotation were used and the royal portrait dispensed with.

Simon Keynes gave a brilliant analysis of the coins' symbolism. According to him, it would have been obvious to any contemporary familiar with Scripture or church liturgy as a threefold invocation of the Lamb of God had been an integral part of attending mass.³⁰⁴ As evident from the Bible, the figure of the Lamb had a twofold connotation. Firstly, the sacrificial lamb of the liturgy, taking upon himself the sins of the world, thus delivering the people and bringing peace, and secondly, the Lamb of the Apocalypse, which holds the book at the Last Judgement after having led his followers to victory over their enemies.³⁰⁵ The image of the Dove (as derived from John I, 32) was an invocation of peace and referring to the peaceful nature of Christ.³⁰⁶

When we keep in mind the contemporary situation, this Christian symbolism seems to fit the pattern. The Enham legislation of 1008 and first and foremost VII Æthelred issued at Bath the following year reveal an apparent need for the Anglo-Saxons of repentance and confession of sins in order to avert further punishment and earn God's favour by doing penance.

Accordingly, it is not that important whether the *Agnus Dei* issue reflects a concern with the impending end of the world or the peace-bringing Lamb of God of the liturgy. It might be a combination of both, an expression of the deep affliction of the Anglo-Saxons who were harried by the apparent agents of divine anger.

In what way can we connect the desperate measures promulgated in VII Æthelred with the *Agnus Dei* coinage? Dr. Lawson suggested that the meeting-place of the council at King's Enham would provide us with both a semantic and a chronological connection. The place-name (*ean-bam*) signified as 'place where lambs are bred' and as the meeting took place at Pentecost (in the middle of May) there would have been plenty of lambs on the neighbouring hills.³⁰⁷ The dove as

³⁰³ Cf. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', pp. 190-91.

³⁰⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 191-92.

³⁰⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁰⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁰⁷ See Lawson, 'Homiletic Element', p. 576.

symbol of the Holy Spirit would have been appropriate as the meeting took place at Pentecost. Although the idea seems intriguing it might have been no more than wishful thinking. Keynes pointed out that particular aspects of the coinage could be better explained by the context of the late summer of 1009.³⁰⁸

The arrival of the Viking fleet prompted an emergency meeting of the king's council at Bath. The drafted law-code gives a notion of urgency for a concerted appeal to Christ. The *Agnus Dei* coinage (struck at a remarkably high weight standard) would have been in the spirit of the programme of prayer and the other measures evident in the Law-Code of 1009. I agree with Simon Keynes in that regard, as he claims that the new type had been yet another expression of absolute determination on the part of the royal government to overcome the immediate threat of another Viking army.³⁰⁹ The coinage in combination with a programme of prayer and the endorsement of the sanctity of St Edward should be seen as a concerted action, reflecting both hope and desperation, in order to win divine assistance to vanquish the Scandinavian invaders, as all measures of military response seemed to have availed nothing.

This issue appears to have been an emergency issue, struck at a limited number of mints and discontinued after a relatively short period. Those points would give force to the argument that there was no time to implement the scheme on a larger scale and that the *Agnus Dei* type was intended to be temporary. Moreover, again Prof. Keynes has made an interesting point in suggesting that the authorities had seen this issue as temporary from the start, as they had in mind the next regular issue, the *Last Small Cross*, for those types had a strong association with King Edgar and the inseparable notion of his peaceful reign.³¹⁰

Consequently, although the idea of a connection of the meeting at King's Enham and the *Agnus Dei* type might have carried a certain attraction, it seems more reasonable to regard it as product of an emergency situation triggered by the arrival of Thorkell's fleet. It bears witness to a king and his government determined to do whatever necessary in response to the renewed Viking threat. Maybe a national dissatisfaction with the defensive measure implemented so far prompted them to make a bid for divine assistance and unite the Anglo-Saxons, appealing to their Christian belief and encourage them in times of utmost despair not to abandon their faith as God was still on their side. When we assume the fabric of society to be flawed and fragile, the *Agnus Dei* coinage can be seen as another administrative attempt to mend the cracks in what was the body of the *Angelcynn*.

³⁰⁸ See Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 198; cf. also D. Metcalf, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Coin Finds 973-1086* (London, 1998), p. 217.

³⁰⁹ See Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 199.

³¹⁰ See *ibid.*

2. Ecclesiastical Sources: Ælfric of Eynsham

After having considered the secular sources of Æthelred's reign, I want to proceed with one of the most prominent ecclesiastical figures of his time: Ælfric of Eynsham. In the second section of my paper the effect of the Viking invasions on his works will be discussed, focusing – among other aspects – on his perception and concept of kingship.

Ælfric probably was one of the most distinguished scholars of his age if not of the whole Anglo-Saxon period.³¹¹ After having been trained as a monk under the tutelage of the great Benedictine Reformer Æthelwold at the Old Minster, Winchester, he was sent to Cerne Abbey/Dorset to serve as a masspriest and schoolmaster.

From those days originate his close connection to two important lay magnates, namely Æthelweard, ealdorman of the Western provinces (d. c. 998) and his son Æthelmær, who also had a close connection to the royal court, being the leading thegn from 994 to 1005, according to charter evidence.³¹² In 1005, however, Æthelmær retired from his duties at court and chose to live temporarily with the community of the newly founded abbey at Eynsham. Important in this regard is that Ælfric became the first abbot of the aforementioned abbey, presumably appointed at Æthelmær's instigation.³¹³ As Keynes has cogently argued, the question of whether these new circumstances made Ælfric change his mind and gave him the opportunity to be more outspoken in his views on the affairs of his time arises.³¹⁴

Ælfric's works are to be considered significant as source material for the reign of Æthelred, given the patronage and contacts he enjoyed. Prof. Gretsch pointed out correctly: "Mit anderen Worten: ungeachtet seiner klösterlichen Abgeschlossenheit, stand Ælfric in engem Kontakt mit führenden politischen und geistlichen Kreisen. Was er schrieb, hatte Gewicht."³¹⁵

³¹¹ For further information on Ælfric see Malcolm Godden's entry in the *ODNB*, I, 387-88.

³¹² Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 192, 209-10 and idem, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LXIII.

³¹³ Cf. idem, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 160.

³¹⁴ See *ibid.* Keynes remarks that Ælfric might not have been directly affected by Viking incursions during his time at Cerne, but that after his move to Eynsham/Oxfordshire he might have been exposed to greater danger on a regular basis.

³¹⁵ M. Gretsch, '*Laus et Corona Militum, / Iesu Tibi Certantium*. Heilige Kämpfer in England um die Jahrtausendwende' (forthcoming). Ælfric was also acquainted with bishop Wulfsgie of Sherborne, for whom he wrote a pastoral letter and other lay magnates, who cannot be identified with certainty; see p. 89 *infra*. We have to be careful, however, when we speak of 'Ælfric's views' as a lot of his writings have literary predecessors, thus possibly transmitting preconditioned mentalities.

2.1 Catholic Homilies and Early Works

During his time at Cerne Abbas he was extraordinarily productive, composing the first and second series of his *Catholic Homilies* (both dedicated to Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury), the *Lives of Saints*, a paraphrase of four of the seven books of the Old Testament and various other works.

It is remarkable that within this large bulk of his writings, Ælfric seems to be quite reticent as far as the Viking invasions of his days are concerned as well as about the quality of royal government. Traces of the impact of the Scandinavian raids are elusive in the first series of his *Catholic Homilies* (c. 990).³¹⁶ Its preface conveys the notion that Ælfric believed his era to be one of great affliction and turmoil in the face of the impending end of the world, thus leaving the Christians in a need to save themselves, aptly guided by clergymen like him. He reveals his motivation for writing the *Homilies* in the Old English preface: “for ðam ðe menn behofiað godre lare swiðost on þisum timan þe is geendung þyssere worulde.”³¹⁷

Throughout his working period at Cerne, he seems to be concerned with the spiritual well-being of the nation, stressing

the need to follow biblical example and to live one’s life in accordance with good Christian principles, in order to escape the punishment and deserve the protection of God.³¹⁸

Nevertheless, the Viking incursions seem to have made an impact on his writing as shown in the Latin preface to the second series of his *Homilies*³¹⁹ and more explicitly in the *Lives of Saints*, to which I will turn in a moment.

Against this background, the *Letter to Brother Edward* (written in the late 990s, allegedly by Ælfric), in which the author disapproved of Edward adopting the customs of heathen men – an insult that reverberates in Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* – his appeal to the councillors of the king to speak their minds³²⁰ in his *Homily for the Sunday after Ascension* (c. 1000) and the concern expressed in his *Letter to Archbishop Wulfstan* (c. 1002-1005) about bishops becoming too involved in secular affairs (such as judging thieves and robbers and neglecting their episcopal

³¹⁶ For the dates of Ælfric’s work see P. Clemoes, ‘The Chronology of Ælfric’s Works’, in *The Anglo-Saxons: Some Aspects of Their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickins*, ed. P. Clemoes (London, 1959), pp. 212-47.

³¹⁷ *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: the First Series: Text*, ed. P. Clemoes, EETS ss 17 (Oxford, 1997), p. 174, ll. 57-9; *Because men need good teaching more than anything else at this time, which is the end of the world.*

³¹⁸ Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 162

³¹⁹ See *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: the Second Series: Text*, ed. M. Godden, EETS ss 5 (Oxford, 1979), p. 1, ll. 13-14. The Vikings are called ‘pirates’, a term used by continental chronicles to refer to the Vikings ever since.

³²⁰ For this recurring image see also the *First Series* preface (Clemoes, *Catholic Homilies*, p. 176, ll. 114-19) and the works of Wulfstan, esp. *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*.

duties and being susceptible to bribery),³²¹ might reflect contemporary thinking. Apparently Ælfric's major concern were the Viking raids of the late 990s and the first years of the new millennium, which might have shaken the very fabric of the Anglo-Saxon state, leading to dissensions in every order of society and the breakdown of standards of behaviour.³²²

What can we deduce from the writings composed by Ælfric at Cerne about his opinion on the defence against the Vikings and his view on royal government and in particular the king? Even though I agree with Prof. Keynes that he did not voice overt criticism about Æthelred's regime – at this stage including his noble patrons³²³ – it is possible to get a glance at his concept of kingship and how the predicaments of his days had to be dealt with.

There is not much to be found in his *Catholic Homilies* concerning his idea of kingship. Ælfric's parable on kingship in the *Homily for Palm Sunday* has given occasion for much debate, but seen in its particular context, I, however, tend to side with Prof. Godden, who suggests it to be an “explanation for the subtle relationship of free will and divine grace in matters of spirit”³²⁴ and not so much a discussion of whether an anointed (*gehalgod*) king has the god-given right to rule as he pleases once he has been chosen as monarch, or whether a sacred king can be deposed of due to committed crimes³²⁵ (“ȝ hi ne magon his geoc. of heora swyran asceacan.”)³²⁶ Although this passage might appear to voice underlying criticism on tyrannical or absolutist kingship it tells us very little about Ælfric's attitude towards kingship.

His *Homily for Monday in Rogationtide* provides us with a clearer picture of kingship: “Cyninge gerist. rihtwisnyss and wisdom.”³²⁷ Furthermore, the king has to direct himself and his people well. Ælfric states that under such a wise king his people will prosper and be happy and victorious. He then juxtaposes this wise ruler with a “unwisne cyning,”³²⁸ whose people will suffer because of his *misraede* (‘misguidance’). This last remark in particular might allude to Ælfric's view on royal government, yet a pun on Æthelred's later epithet *unræd* would be anachronistic. In general I agree with Malcom Godden, who characterizes the homily as “remarkably hard-hitting on those in authority.”³²⁹

³²¹ See also D. Whitelock, ‘Archbishop Wulfstan, Homilist and Statesman’, in her *History, Law and Literature in 10th -11th Century England* (London, 1981), no. XI, p. 59.

³²² Cf. Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 163.

³²³ See *ibid.*, p. 162.

³²⁴ M. Godden, ‘Ælfric and Anglo-Saxon Kingship’, *EHR* 102 (1987), p. 913.

³²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*; see also M. Clayton, ‘Ælfric and Æthelred’, in *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, ed. J. Roberts and J. Nelson, King's College London Medieval Studies 17 (London, 2000) pp. 70-71.

³²⁶ Clemons, *Catholic Homilies*, p. 294, ll. 114-15; *And they cannot shake his yoke from their shoulders.*

³²⁷ Godden, *Catholic Homilies*, p. 183, ll. 93-94; *The King becomes justice and wisdom.*

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 98; *Unwise king.*

³²⁹ *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, ed. M. Godden, EETS ss 13 (Oxford, 2000), p. 519.

The concept of the ‘just king’ might draw on the Irish-Latin tract *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* in which the ninth abuse is a wicked king (*rex iniquus*). This tract seems to have provided a key text about kingship for Ælfric as he produced an Old English version at about the same time as his *Lives of Saints*.³³⁰

Ælfric depicts a king whose duties cover all aspects of the care for a Christian kingdom, including the protection of monasteries as well as just and wise governance of his people. It is remarkable that several provisions of the just king can be found in Æthelred’s later law-codes.³³¹ Of particular interest are the remarks that he should be advised by councillors “Wytran hym sceolan rædan [...] 7 fæstlice winnan wið onsigendne here. 7 healdan his eðel”³³² – a remark clearly directed at the Viking onslaught. The end of the account reads almost like a warning, as injustice seems to stem from ill counsel: “Wite eac se cyning [...] gif he rihtwisnyssse ne hylt [...] swa he bið eft genyþerad [...] under þam unrihtwisum. þe he unrædlice geheold.”³³³

A still later text, which apparently drew on *De duodecim abusivis*, is edited by Pope, who dates it to Ælfric’s Cerne period and claims that a particular passage “seems to be aimed at those in high station, including the king.”³³⁴ Ælfric again deals with the question of *ræd*, prompting that counsellors “sceolon cyðan heora word openlice, / [...] for ðan þe manega magon maran ræd findan / þonne ænlypige magon mid aenum gewille.”³³⁵ He goes on to claim that it befits a king to listen to his councillors (*witum*), and act “be heora ræde, na be rununge.”³³⁶ Those remarks seem to voice Ælfric’s concern with a king who rules without the advice of his nobles. Even though he does not criticize Æthelred directly, his claim that a king should not rule ‘according to whisperings’ strongly reminds one of the king’s alleged character trait of acting according to unspecified rumours presented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.³³⁷

Later on he exhorts the king to be prepared to sacrifice himself for his people as Christ did (ll. 58-61). James Earl argued that Ælfric was not talking about a king dying in battle, but rather a king like St Edmund,³³⁸ whose martyrdom is presented in the *Lives of Saints*. The preceding passage (ll. 48-54) identifies the king as

³³⁰ Cf. Clayton, ‘Ælfric and Æthelred’, p. 69.

³³¹ Cf. esp. the provisions of the Enham legislation. See pp. 68-72 *supra*.

³³² *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, ed. R. Morris, EETS os 29, 34 (London, 1867-68, printed as one volume), p. 303, ll. 1-4; *Counsellors must advise him [...] and fight resolutely against an as-sailing army and guard his homeland*.

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 303, ll. 15-19; *Let the king know, [...] that if he does not uphold justice [...], he will be brought down again [...] under the injustice which he with ill counsel upheld*.

³³⁴ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, I, 372.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 380, ll. 31-35; *Should make their word known openly [...], because many people are able to find greater advice than individuals can by means of their own will*.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 47; *According to their advice, not according to rumours*.

³³⁷ See O’Brien O’Keeffe, *MS C*, s.a. 1002 1015.

³³⁸ See J. W. Earl, ‘Violence and Non-Violence in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric’s “Passio of St. Edmund”’, *PQ* 78 (1999), p. 135.

“Cristes sylfes speligend” ‘Christ’s own vicar’, who as a pastor may protect his flock (i.e. his people) from the “onfeohtend[n]e here, / and him sige biddan æt þam soðan Hælende, / [...] swa swa ealle cyningas dydon þe gecwemdon Gode.”³³⁹ This passage sounds like a spiritual call to arms, where the king is to identify himself with the suffering Christ rather than fight with weapons against his enemies.³⁴⁰

Finally, his epilogue to *Judges* (c. 1000), testifies to Ælfric’s interest in the discussion of rulership, which he presents with the examples of the Israelites, the pagan Romans and Christian emperors. Once more he takes up the question of counsel when he alludes to the Roman emperors, who had a *witenagemot* each day.³⁴¹

The epilogue ends with a passage about Anglo-Saxon kings from the House of Wessex (thus Æthelred’s lineage) who had been victorious against their enemies by divine assistance. Alfred and Æthelstan are presented as courageous warrior-kings, who fought the Vikings and thus ensured peace for their people. When turning to Edgar Ælfric embarks on a royal panegyric, elevating him above all other kings. In contrast to the former kings he does not fight, but earns divine assistance to tame his enemies and have their peaceful subjugation because “arærde Godes lof on his leode gehwær, ealra / cininga swiðost ofer Engla ðeode.”³⁴² This passage might allude to Æthelred, as his most prominent predecessors on the English throne are presented in a victorious light. But whereas two of them fight against the Danes, Edgar overcomes his enemies without arms and the help of God alone – a clear indication of his role as secular figurehead of the Benedictine reform.³⁴³ Ælfric’s account of kingship in *Judges* is equivocal, as he praises English kings who fight but superelevates the non-violent approach of Edgar. However, what is most important and significant for all of them is the intervention of God on their side, thus portraying the victories of Anglo-Saxon kings as the manifestation of the rule of God in the world.

³³⁹ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, I, 381, ll. 51-54; *An attacking army and pray for victory for them from the true Saviour [...] like all the kings did who pleased God.*

³⁴⁰ Cf. E. John, ‘The World of Abbot Ælfric’, in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. P. Wormald et al. (Oxford, 1983), p. 312.

³⁴¹ See *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch: Ælfric’s Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*, ed. S. J. Crawford, EETS os 160 (Oxford, 1922; repr. London, 1969), p. 415, ll. 25-26.

³⁴² Crawford, *Heptateuch*, p. 417, ll. 83-4; *(He) raised up praise of God everywhere among his people, more than all other kings over the English people.*

³⁴³ The Benedictine reform was a monastic reform movement, sprung from continental centres like Ghent, Fleury and Cluny in order to renew and enforce the often neglected Rule of St Benedict as a consequence of a decline in monastic discipline and secularization of the clergy. In England the Benedictine movement was championed by Æthelwold (Bishop of Winchester), Dunstan (Archbishop of Canterbury) and Oswald (Archbishop of York); cf. *inter alia* M. Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 25 (Cambridge, 1999).

2.2 *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*

When turning to his *Lives of Saints*, a collection of hagiographical pieces and homilies, we get further glances at the concept of kingship presented by *Ælfric*. The dedicatees of this work were *ealdorman* *Æthelweard* and his son *Æthelmær*, members of the West-Saxon military aristocracy and thus responsible for the country's defence against foreign invasion (i.e. the Viking raids). Therefore, the *Lives of Saints*, being composed "at a time of developing military and social crisis in England,"³⁴⁴ might have been of special interest to them and through their transmission to other leading nobles of the country, if not *Æthelred* himself. Two pieces from this collection seem to deserve closer attention as they depict two former Anglo-Saxon Kings (*Oswald* and *Edmund*), who suffer martyrdom whilst defending their people against heathen armies – a topic of pressing contemporary concern, especially for the two aristocratic patrons of *Ælfric*.

In his account of St *Oswald*, modelled partly on *Bede's* account of the Northumbrian king in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, *Ælfric* does not focus on the king's military skills, but rather on his pious life and promotion of Christianity, the divine reward for which is *Oswald's* rule over Northumbria. Unswerving faith in God, not military strength, seems to be the overriding issue as *Oswald's* victory over the heathen king *Cædwalla* is achieved because "crīst hym gefylste to his feonda slege"³⁴⁵ although his forces were outnumbered. In his final battle against the Mercian king *Penda* *Oswald* is martyred whilst praying for the souls of his people as he realizes that the battle is lost. What are we to make of his example? *Oswald* is presented as a king who leads a pious and celibate life, whose military skills in defending his kingdom are secondary and who zealously promotes Christianity with the assistance of the holy bishop *Aidan*. What is striking in this regard is the absence of secular councillors (*witan*). This could be seen as a slight hint that a king in *Ælfric's* view has to direct his rule according to the rule of God and the advice of God's servants, i.e. the clergy, as man was fallible.

In contrast to the *vita* ('life') of St *Oswald*, the story of the East Anglian king *Edmund* is presented as a *passio*, which means that the martyrdom of the king is in the focus of the narrative.

Again *Ælfric* draws a clear picture of *Edmund's* royal qualities: wise, just, held in high esteem by his people and leading a life agreeable to God: "Es ist der *rex iustus* und *rex christianissimus*, der hier gezeichnet wird. Kämpferische Expertise wird nicht erwähnt."³⁴⁶ as Prof. *Gretsch* remarked.

³⁴⁴ E. G. Whatley, 'Hagiography and Violence: Military Men in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. C. D. Wright et al., Toronto Old English Series 16 (Toronto, 2007), p. 217.

³⁴⁵ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 4 vols., EETS os 76, 82, 94, 114 (Oxford, 1881-1900; repr. in two volumes 1966), II, 127, l. 16; *Christ helped him to the slaughter of his enemies*.

³⁴⁶ *Gretsch*, 'Heilige Kämpfer'.

Edmund is confronted with a Viking army (the *micel here* of Alfred's days) that ravages the country "swa swa heora gewuna is"³⁴⁷ – a very prominent phrase used by the Chronicler of the *Æthelredian Annals* as we have seen above.³⁴⁸ The Viking leader Hinguar (the historical figure Ivar 'the Boneless') dispatches a messenger who demands to share the kingdom's wealth and the submission to Hinguar as *under-kyning*. Like Oswald, Edmund does not seek the advice of secular councillors but turns to a bishop for advice, who wants him to yield to the messenger's proposal. The king, however, is prepared to fight for his people and perish in battle rather than surrender or flight. He stresses his faith in God and makes his submission dependent on Hinguar's conversion to Christianity. Finally, Edmund is seized by the Vikings, shot with arrows (an allusion to the archmartyr of Christendom, St Sebastian whose *Life* Ælfric had likewise included in his collection) and finally put to death by Hinguar beheading him. When the Vikings come to drag him away, Edmund puts down his weapons, mindful of Christ's example, when he commanded St Peter to fight against the Jews who were coming for him.³⁴⁹ After his death, Edmund's body is buried and henceforth works miracles and peace is restored to the oppressed people. It is striking that a wolf "wearð asend / þurh Godes wissunge"³⁵⁰ to protect Edmund's severed head and even carried it to the next village "swylce he tam wære."³⁵¹ Earl has drawn attention to the fact that it was important to realize the symbolism here.³⁵² The wolf could be seen as a symbol for the Vikings (Hinguar is styled *wulff*) who were tamed by the Christ-like behaviour of the martyred king, whose people enjoyed peace and prosperity later on. Furthermore Earl argued that the restoration of the head to the body recalled the image of the king restored as head of his people, working miracles and thus manifesting God's presence in the world. Edmund presents an example for Ælfric's theme of virtuous suffering (cf. also preface of the first series of the *Catholic Homilies*). The taming of the wolf might echo Æthelred's dealing with and subsequent conversion of Olaf Tryggvason. It cannot definitely be ruled out that, at least at this stage, Ælfric voices a positive comment on the king's non-military policy towards the Vikings.

Ælfric depicts Edmund as a pious Christian, a Christ-like king, achieving eternal glory by dying a martyr's death for his people in order to overcome his enemies. What seems to be an example of passive resistance cannot have been seen as appropriate for an Anglo-Saxon king given the Viking incursions of Ælfric's days. Magennis' comment that Ælfric presented his saints larger than life, living in a world not to be associated with the people's reality, might put the

³⁴⁷ Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, II, 316, l. 28; *As their custom is*.

³⁴⁸ See p. 52 *supra*.

³⁴⁹ See Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, II, 321-23, ll. 101-5.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 324, ll. 145-46; *Was sent by God's direction*.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, 326, l. 162; *As if he were tame*.

³⁵² See Earl, 'Violence and Non-Violence', p. 140.

problem in a nutshell.³⁵³ Therefore, it is not so much Ælfric's intent to present Edmund as literal model for contemporary kingship but rather as a 'warrior saint', who lives a God-fearing life and thus provides for the aristocracy a "Leitbild [...], dem sie sich durch ein gottgefälliges und göttesfürchtiges Leben zumindest anzunähern trachteten."³⁵⁴ Edmund's *passio* is instrumental for Ælfric's final message, claiming that there is still hope for the Anglo-Saxons as long as many saints like Edmund are buried and venerated in that country to strengthen the people's faith and manifest the presence of God by working miracles.³⁵⁵ What seems to have been an account of Ælfric's ideal of kingship can eventually be seen as an institutional promotion of the cults of saints in order to build up spiritual resistance and strengthen the national belief in God in the face of the Viking invasions.³⁵⁶

Apart from the two accounts of Anglo-Saxon kings there are further pieces, which present us with evidence of Ælfric's ideas of kingship and his view on the contemporary political situation.

A homily from the *Lives of Saints* called *De oratione Moysi* ('On the Prayer of Moses'), according to Malcolm Godden "one of the most politically charged of all Ælfric's writings,"³⁵⁷ provides us with valuable information. The military success of the Hebrews led by Joshua depended on Moses praying. The story offers a paradigm for the relations between military power and the Church. In lines 30-7 Ælfric stresses that the Christians should pray to God in every distress and at the same time exhorts his audience that if divine help is denied, it would be due to God being angered "mid yfelum dædum."³⁵⁸ Apparently, the Danish raids of the 990s were not the only problem for Ælfric, rather the consequence of other misfortunes which preceded them. Later on he invokes the peaceful reign of Edgar when monasteries were honoured and the clergy fulfilled their duties. He embarks on a series of events that happened after Edgar's reign, naming the overthrow of the monasteries and the contemptuous treatment of God's servants. As a consequence "us com to cwealm and hunger. / and siððan hæðen here us hæfde to bysmre."³⁵⁹ He links this exhortation to contemporary events as he draws on the Old Testament (Leviticus XXVI, 3ff.), where God warns Moses to follow his laws unless the people want to incur his wrath with the phrase "hit is swa ðeah swa gedon swyðe neah mid us. / nu on niwum dagum and

³⁵³ See H. Magennis, 'Warrior Saints, Warfare, and the Hagiography of Ælfric of Eynsham', *Traditio* 56 (2001), pp. 48-51.

³⁵⁴ Gretsche, 'Heilige Kämpfer'.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Cf. Magennis, 'Warrior Saints', p. 50.

³⁵⁷ M. Godden, 'Apocalypse and Invasion in Late Anglo-Saxon England' in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley*, ed. M. Godden et al. (Oxford, 1994), p. 133.

³⁵⁸ Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, I, 286, l. 35; *With evil deeds*.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., I, 294, ll. 154-55; *Pestilence and hunger came to us and then the heathen army had us to disgrace*.

undigollice.”³⁶⁰ These passages suggest that for Ælfric the impious behaviour of the Anglo-Saxons – which he likens to the Israelites, God’s chosen people – has incurred divine wrath. Blaming them for the misfortunes of the realm, rather than the king and government, is a recurring topic of his work.³⁶¹ In lines 240-72, however, he is critical of King David, whose people are destroyed because of his sins. This could probably allude to sins of Æthelred, the consequence of which were the Viking incursions.³⁶² Coming back to Alice Sheppard’s idea of salvation history and projecting it on Æthelred, this passage should not be read as a critique, but the reader should bear in mind that the course of events leads to the Kingdom of God, thus exculpating the king who has to fail in order to reveal God’s will. Nevertheless, I am aware that although her concept is intriguing, we need to tread Sheppard’s idea with the necessary care it deserves.

The overriding issue concerning the defence of the kingdom and Ælfric’s concept of rulership seems to be religious piety. In his summary of the *Book of Kings* the fates of good and bad kings always depend on their piety: those who turned to God were glorified and victorious in battle, those who turned away from God were put to shame and suffered defeat.³⁶³

The admonition not to forsake God is also shown in Ælfric’s account of the two kings Abdon and Sennes, who chose death instead of submitting to the heathen emperor Decius. The last bit sounds like an appeal to Ælfric’s audience: “Nimað eow bysne be ðam . þæt ge ne bugon fram criste / for ænigre earfoðnysse . þæt ge þæt ece lif habbon.”³⁶⁴ This account reminds us of Edmund’s and Oswald’s fate – two kings who epitomized unswerving belief and virtuous suffering.

Taking into consideration the accounts presented in the *Lives of Saints*, the impression we get of Ælfric’s attitude towards the pressing realities of his time and the role of kings is ambiguous. He does not completely rule out military response but a pacifist attitude based on Christian teaching and deep faith in God seems to predominate.

In his story of the Maccabees,³⁶⁵ a Hebrew people fighting an invading heathen force, Ælfric tries to reconcile both military action and Christian non-violence by dividing the population into three classes (ll. 812-17): *laboratores* (‘those who work’), *bellatores* (‘those who fight’) and *oratores* (‘those who pray’). The story of the Maccabees, seen in its historical context, clearly pays tribute to the

³⁶⁰ Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, I, 294, ll. 176-77. *But it has now very nearly happened to us, in recent times quite openly.*

³⁶¹ See *ibid.*, I, 292-96, ll. 133-77.

³⁶² Cf. Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 136.

³⁶³ See Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, I, 386, ll. 39-44.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 58, ll. 79-80; *Take example from this, that you do not turn away from Christ due to any difficulty, that you have the eternal life.*

³⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, II, 66-125; ll. 812-62 give a detailed account of the division of the classes and Ælfric’s treatment of the duties of the *oratores*.

contribution of the particular classes to the defence against the invasions.³⁶⁶ Ælfric at first takes a pacifist stand once more and claims that the events should not be seen in a literal way. His contemporary audience should use spiritual weapons against their enemies (ll. 690-93).³⁶⁷ Eventually, in the epilogue, he does not rule out a military solution and embarks on a discussion of wars, including the *bellum iustum* ‘just war’: “*Iustum bellum* . is rihtlic gefeoht wið ða reðan flot-menn . / oþþe wið oðre þeoda þa eard willað fordon.”³⁶⁸ In that way he specifies the duties of the ‘warriors’ of the realm, just as he assigns this role to the Maccabees being the *bellatores* of the Hebrews.³⁶⁹ This argument voiced by Magennis makes perfect sense when we keep in mind that the addressees of Ælfric’s work belonged to the Anglo-Saxon *bellatores*. Moreover, by defining the *oratores*, his predomination with the non-intervention of the clergy in secular affairs – an indicator for the breakdown of contemporary society in the face of the Viking onslaught as seen *inter alia* in his *Letter to Brother Edward* becomes clear.

The doctrine of ‘just war’ in order to defend the country was deemed acceptable by Ælfric and his contemporaries, although there was “some lingering sense of guilt incurred by those who participated in such a war,”³⁷⁰ which again points to a pacifist attitude. Several other pieces in the *Lives of Saints* dealing with non-resistance and the question of faith instead of military warfare are mingled with notions of active resistance. What is to be gained from this conclusion? In my opinion Lees has made two interesting comments on the problem. First, she claims that this collection is

a medium within which Ælfric increasingly contests and debates the political issues of his own time, though always from the perspective of his desire for the rule of God.³⁷¹

followed by her statement that

The objects of the past worthy of veneration furnish ways of understanding and intervening in the historic present through emphasizing chastity, the moral virtues of the ruling classes, and the importance of the priestly caste.³⁷²

³⁶⁶ Cf. Magennis, ‘Warrior Saints’, p. 41.

³⁶⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ Skeat, *Lives of Saints*, II, 114, ll. 708-9; *Iustum bellum is just war against the cruel sea-men or against other people who wish to destroy our land.*

³⁶⁹ Cf. Magennis, ‘Warrior Saints’, p. 42.

³⁷⁰ M. Godden, ‘Ælfric’s Saints’ Lives and the Problem of Miracles’, *Leeds Studies in English* ns 16 (1985), p. 96; see also, J. E. Cross, ‘The Ethic of War in Old English’, in *England before the Conquest*, ed. Clemons and Hughes, pp. 269-82.

³⁷¹ C. A. Lees, *Tradition and Belief: Religious Writing in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Medieval Cultures 19 (Minneapolis, MN, 1999), p. 95.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* thus present an approach to deal with contemporary affairs, but it predominately emerges to be a concept suggestive of spiritual warfare. Ælfric wants to provide the *godre lare* he had postulated in the preface to his *Catholic Homilies* to overcome the pressing predicaments. At the end of the day we are left with the conclusion that from early on in his career Ælfric is closely engaged with contemporary social and political issues and is critical of what happened around him. He sensed a deteriorative tendency permeating every layer of society, including those in high positions – namely the king and his *nitan/ealdormen* – with the consequence of divine punishment in the form of the Scandinavian invaders. The *Lives of Saints* might not have been intended as *speculum principis* ('mirror for princes'), but its treatment of rulership, and that of kings in particular, conveys the impression of implicit criticism of the royal government. Ælfric makes a stand that a solution for the current troubles has to be sought in spiritual guidance (advice) derived from the examples of faithful Christians who overcame their difficulties by strong belief in God.

2.3 Ælfric's Later Works

With reference to our initial question of whether we can detect a difference in Ælfric's works after being appointed abbot at Eynsham, it is necessary to turn to his later works, dating from c. 1005 until his death, thus covering a period of approximately five to ten years.³⁷³ Simon Keynes remarked that Ælfric's voice "is harder to hear from Eynsham because the texts are fewer, and less familiar, and, frankly, because of all the noise generated by Archbishop Wulfstan."³⁷⁴ Even so his oeuvre still provides us with useful information. Besides his *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham* (c. 1005), providing a guide to the monastic life and drawing on the *Regularis Concordia*,³⁷⁵ Ælfric directed three tracts on Christian teaching in the vernacular to laymen. One of these tracts, the so-called *Treatise on the Old and New Testament* (c. 1005-6), addressed to a certain Sigeweard,³⁷⁶ deserves special attention. In this piece he undertakes a reinterpretation of the Old Testament story of Judith, of which he had written a prose rendering while still at Cerne. In the latter version military and political implications become apparent, when Ælfric tells his addressee that he had translated the *Book of Judith* into English "eow mannun to bysne, þæt ge eowerne / eard mid wæpnum bewerian wið /

³⁷³ Cf. Clemons, 'Chronology', p. 245.

³⁷⁴ Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 163.

³⁷⁵ This was supposed to be the single-most important document of the Benedictine Reform in England; see L. Kornexl, 'Regularis Concordia', *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 389.

³⁷⁶ For discussion of his identity see Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 164, n. 65.

onwinnendne here.”³⁷⁷

One can detect a clear shift in tone and readership. In his tract he is addressing a wider audience (‘eow’) and especially Sigeward – presumably a *bellator* by Ælfric’s definition.³⁷⁸ It seems as if Ælfric takes a more belligerent stand than hitherto. This is underscored by his account of the Maccabees, who “wunnon mid wæpnum þa swiðe / wið þone hæðene here”³⁷⁹ with divine assistance. Apart from that Ælfric stresses that their leader Macchabeus did not want to incur God’s anger and pleaded with the Lord for help and then fulfilled those words with mighty deeds. This is quite significant as Ælfric redefines the concept of divine wrath: it is no longer a consequence of the peoples’ sins, mistreatment of the clergy and monasteries, but instead of failing to honour a promise to defend the country.³⁸⁰ This is remarkably different from the pieces in his early works. He takes those responsible for defending England up on their promise and reminds them of their duties. Later on, Ælfric impresses on Sigeward the need for *witan* to consider which of the three pillars of the throne is broken (*bellatores*, *oratores*, *laboratores*) and mend it immediately.³⁸¹ In my opinion it is an unmistakable appeal for every man to consider and fulfil his duty to support the king and royal government in the face of the Viking raids.

Another item of interest is Ælfric’s tract known as *Wyrðwriteras* of uncertain date,³⁸² in which he tries to address “some nobleman of influence, hoping to reach the king himself and his chief ministers” as Pope has remarked³⁸³ and engages the theme of military delegation. He provides the reader with a list of kings and emperors who had lightened the burden of command by choosing “him sylfum to fultume, / ealdormen under him”³⁸⁴ as he states that “an man ne mæg æghwar beon, and ætsomne / ealle þing aberan, þeah ðe he anweald hæbbe.”³⁸⁵ Ælfric stresses that the king should stay away from the battlefield in order not to weaken his country and being able to take care of other business.³⁸⁶ Consequently, Theodosius stays at home to pray for his generals’ success (ll. 73-77) as does

³⁷⁷ Crawford, *Heptateuch*, p. 48, ll. 777-80; *As an example for you people, that you should defend your country with weapons against the invading army.*

³⁷⁸ Cf. Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 140.

³⁷⁹ Crawford, *Heptateuch*, p. 49, ll. 786-87; *Won with weapons fiercely against the heathen army.*

³⁸⁰ Cf. Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 142; he remarks that this theme reminds one of Offa’s statement in *The Battle of Maldon*, lamenting that those who spoke bravely in the meadhall would not fight when the battle was be at hand, see D. Scragg, ‘The Battle of Maldon’, in *Battle of Maldon*, ed. Scragg, p. 27, ll. 198-201.

³⁸¹ See Crawford, *Heptateuch*, pp. 71, ll. 1204-7.

³⁸² Cf. Clemoes, ‘Chronology’, p. 244, who dates it c. 1002-5, while Pope (*Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 726) dates it to the period of Ælfric’s abbacy. As both provide the possibility of assigning it to 1005, I am discussing it among his later works.

³⁸³ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 726.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 728, ll. 6-7; *Himself to assistance, ealdormen under him.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 4-5; *One man cannot be everywhere and bear all things together, although he has the rule.*

³⁸⁶ Cf. Sheppard, ‘Noble Counsel, No Counsel’, p. 406.

Moses, who prays for Joshua when he was sent against the Amalekites (ll. 87-94). But the best example is provided by King David. When he is almost killed in battle his leading *thegns* turn to him: “Ne scealt ðu næfre heonon forð / mid us to gefeohte, þinum feore to plyhte, / þelæste þu adwæsce Israhe[ll]a leohtfæt.”³⁸⁷ Given all his alleged negative character traits, Æthelred was still the rightful and consecrated king of the Anglo-Saxons. His death in battle might have been disastrous in the contemporary circumstances as his second marriage to Emma might have subsequently been followed by a succession crisis similar to the situation after Edgar’s death. With the Scandinavian armies at the door of the English kingdom, political turmoil would have turned out to be disastrous for the nation. Bearing that in mind, a reading of *Wyrðwriteras* as a plea for the king to refrain from engaging the Vikings in battle himself cannot be ruled out.

Nevertheless, the question arises of whether the delegation of councillors and the absence of the king from the battlefield had been on Ælfric’s mind to be the primary theme of this piece. If indeed it was a plea to implement a policy of delegation, it would have been an inappropriate one, as Mary Clayton remarks,³⁸⁸ for the *Chronicle* provides us only with three instances where the king actually takes the field himself.³⁸⁹ Pauline Stafford argues that Ælfric had been pleading for a king who knows how to choose good deputies instead of leading his armies in person, thus advocating or even defending Æthelred’s policy of delegation.³⁹⁰ Simon Keynes argued in a similar way in 1980,³⁹¹ but has treated the topic again more recently, not being sure what *Wyrðwriteras* really does signify.³⁹² Defending Æthelred’s policy of delegation would have stood to reason as it was primarily the duty of the *ealdormen* to raise *fyrds* and defend their territory.

If there is veiled criticism of Æthelred’s policy it is not so much directed at the need to appoint generals, but rather at their quality.³⁹³ M. K. Lawson strikes the same chord when claiming that *Wyrðwriteras* had not been a response to criticizing the king for not leading his armies into battle but rather an “implied criticism of his choice of generals, who are not after all, known to have been particularly successful.”³⁹⁴

Perhaps Ælfric was indeed choosing a negative attitude towards the king’s policy, consequently exhorting him to share political responsibility by appointing carefully- chosen *ealdormen*. This would have been a fitting response to Æthelred’s

³⁸⁷ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 729-30, ll. 47-49; *Never henceforth shall you go with us to battle, your life to endanger, lest you extinguish the light of Israel.*

³⁸⁸ Clayton, ‘Ælfric and Æthelred’, p. 84.

³⁸⁹ See O’Brien O’Keefe, *MS C*, s.a. 1000, 1009, 1014.

³⁹⁰ See P. Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: a Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London, 1989), p. 14.

³⁹¹ See Keynes, *Diplomas*, p. 207.

³⁹² See idem, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 165.

³⁹³ Cf. Clayton, ‘Ælfric and Æthelred’, pp. 84-85.

³⁹⁴ Lawson, ‘Homiletic Element’, p. 572, n. 3.

practice of appointing very few *ealdormen*, even when their predecessors had died, and choosing high reeves as direct agents of his dominion instead.³⁹⁵ One of these ‘natural’ successors to an ealdormanry would have been Æthelmær, Ælfric’s patron, when his father died in c. 998. He finally was appointed to that post later in Æthelred’s reign (c.1012) and had remained one of his closest advisers hitherto.³⁹⁶ Yet, this post had been vacant for about 14 years. Could it have been possible that Ælfric had the promotion of an apt and pious *ealdorman*, namely his benefactor Æthelmær, on his mind when he wrote this tract? It is hard to tell, but one is inclined to doubt that, as Pope points out that the primary message of the abbot’s work had been that the realm’s well-being depends on God and that ultimately all guidance and defence must come from him,³⁹⁷ referring to the final lines:

Ure wissung and ure waru sceal beon of Gode, / and we scelon secan æt
Gode sylfum urne ræd / mit anrædum mode, and on eornost sprecan, /
þæt ure behat beon þe we behatað Gode / fæste and getreowe, trumran
þonne stanweall.³⁹⁸

I agree with Simon Keynes, who has argued that one could sense a notion that this wall, symbolizing the bond between God and the English people, “had been crumbling.”³⁹⁹

We can detect a growing sense of unease in other works of Ælfric’s Eynsham period. In his *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham* it seems as if he fears the danger of the king abusing his dominion over religious houses, and in the *Second Homily for the Feast of a Confessor*, which might be seen as a condemnation on Ælfric’s side of the notorious ‘palace revolution’ in 1006,⁴⁰⁰ the abbot provides his audience with scriptural examples for people who have transgressed the laws of God and thus incurred His vengeance.

Referring to Peter Clemoes, one of Ælfric’s major achievements at Eynsham was his set of *Temporale Homilies*, which he reissued with further revisions and some additional material,⁴⁰¹ while at the same time he once again turned to some of his *Catholic Homilies* in order to revise and extend them.⁴⁰²

An addition to the *Homily for the Second Sunday after Easter* is striking as Ælfric remarks that “Gesælig bið folc þ̅ fela witan hæfð gif hi riht wyllað and rædfæste

³⁹⁵ Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 197-98, n. 163 and Stafford, ‘Reign of Æthelred’, p. 29.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 197-98, n. 163.

³⁹⁷ See Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 726.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 731-32, ll. 95-99; *Our guidance and our defence shall come from God and we shall seek our counsel from God himself with zealous determination, and speak in earnest, so that our vow, which we gave to God, might be strong and true, truer than a stone-wall.*

³⁹⁹ See Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 165.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 166 and Clemoes, *Catholic Homilies*, p. 36.

⁴⁰¹ See Clemoes, ‘Chronology’, pp. 227-33.

⁴⁰² Cf. Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 164.

beoð.”⁴⁰³ It is not hard to detect Ælfric’s opinion of the English councillors and thus the king who appoints them. Notwithstanding this, his *Homily for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost* has two significant passages. In the first he lashes out at the English for having failed to keep God’s laws and the way they made “eall-niwe gesetnyssa,”⁴⁰⁴ which were running contrary to God’s laws and those of the *witan* who were before them.⁴⁰⁵ The second passage likens the people who abandon their faith in Christ to those Anglo-Saxons who submit to the Danes, do the devil’s work and thus betray their own people to death.⁴⁰⁶ It is quite possible that contemporary events prompted Ælfric to compose this passage: the betrayal concerning the English fleet in 1009 and the subsequent arrival of the intimidating fleet (or fleets) lead by Thorkell.

Ælfric seems to be more outspoken on political issues from his vantage point at Eynsham. His duty (and of the clergy in general) not to remain silent becomes quite clear in his ‘outburst’ in the *Sermo de die Iudicii*:

Nu is hit gyt wyrse on urum timan, / þæt we ealle suwiadð, and unriht gæð
forð / openlice and digollice, and we embe ne hogiað / [...] we ne durran
nu to þam gedyrstlæcan, / þæt we Cristenum cyninge oððe Cristenum folce
/ Godes beboda and Godes willan secgan.⁴⁰⁷

What are we then to conclude from this survey of Ælfric’s works? A clear interest in contemporary political events is quite evident from the very beginning. Ælfric was interested in providing good teaching and pastoral guidance for the English when confronted with the Viking invasions. But even if those works leave a notion of criticism of those responsible for defending the country and the people for their lack in faith, his primary intention was not a literal call to arms, no *realpolitik*, but spiritual guidance. His work is permeated with a pacifist undertone and an appeal to follow Christian teaching and call on the laws of God in times of distress and predicament. Concerning kingship, Ælfric seems to contradict himself, struggling with his understanding of Christian teaching and the presence of God in the world on the one hand and the pressing realities, which confronted the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons on the other. Maybe his amalgamation of

⁴⁰³ For the original text, from Ælfric’s homilies, First Series, no. XVII, see Clemoes, *Catholic Homilies*, pp. 313-16; for the additional passage in various manuscripts see *ibid.* pp. 133 and 535-42, esp. 540, ll. 167-78; *Happy is the people that has many councillors, if they desire what is right and will be resolute.* (ll. 174-75).

⁴⁰⁴ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 520, l. 101; *All new laws.*

⁴⁰⁵ See *ibid.*, II, 519-20, ll. 98-107; Wulfstan echoes this theme in his *Sermo Lupi*.

⁴⁰⁶ See Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 521, ll. 132-39; Godden (‘Apocalypse’, p. 138) dates the homily to around 1009.

⁴⁰⁷ Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 598, ll. 180-88; *Now it is still worse in our times that we are all silent and injustice goes on, openly and secretly and we do not care about it [...] we do not dare now to presume that we reveal God’s commands and God’s will to a Christian king or Christian people.* Pope (p. 585) admits difficulties in dating this homily but regards it later than 1000.

individual Christian non-violence and collective violence of Christian states and their leaders can be attributed to the legacy of one of the late antique church fathers, St Augustine of Hippo, as Whatley has argued.⁴⁰⁸ Ælfric's voice might have been heard through his influential patrons, but I would discard the idea, referring to Earl,⁴⁰⁹ that Ælfric's non-violent attitude, evident throughout his writings, was responsible for the king's policy towards the Vikings in the 990s.

It is hard to tell whether Ælfric's standpoint changed dramatically after he became abbot of Eynsham. He does not seem to have been among the most prominent members in the king's council,⁴¹⁰ but to assign to him a sense of dissatisfaction or detachment from those factions being influential after Æthelmær's absence from the court and the 'palace revolution' in 1006 as Keynes suggests,⁴¹¹ appears to be too far-fetched, even though it cannot be ignored. What is paramount, however, is the nature of his later works. Ælfric seems to be more outspoken on political issues, no longer treating them with topical reference on the level apparent in his early works. One can feel the pressing need to call out he must have felt when the crisis surmounted and the Viking raids of 1006-7 and 1009-1012 were dreadful reality.⁴¹² His intention was to maintain the spiritual well-being of the country, urging the people and those in authority to act – even in a more belligerent manner. Despite all that he never loses his focus that the only solution for contemporary afflictions could be true faith and the grace of God, which even the designated *bellatores* needed to fulfil their duty. Ælfric's concept of rulership can be defined in such terms. He never voices overt criticism directed at the king, but rather wants to remind him of his duties as *Cristes speligend*, being responsible for his subjects and the welfare of his kingdom. Eventually even the consecrated monarch was accountable to God, his success dependent on his faith and piety: a role model for the concept of pastoral (or theocratic) kingship featuring so prominently in the thoughts of the Benedictine reformers.

One thing appears to be certain: the Viking raids made a deep impact in the last decade of the tenth century, reflected in Ælfric's early writings, especially his *Lives of Saints*. After being appointed to Eynsham and against the background of the deteriorating situation, he voiced his opinion more openly. Whether his detachment from the royal court was the main reason is debatable, but it could have facilitated this change in attitude. Ælfric was aware of the seriousness of the situation, thus urging, if not blaming, the English rather than the Danes.⁴¹³ The Vikings raids were seen as a consequence of human failure and sins. Divine

⁴⁰⁸ See Whatley, 'Hagiography and Violence', pp. 224-26 and 229-30.

⁴⁰⁹ See Earl, 'Violence and Non-Violence', p. 136.

⁴¹⁰ See Keynes, *Atlas of Attestations*, Table LXI. He never attested a charter.

⁴¹¹ See idem, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 169.

⁴¹² Ælfric might not have experienced the most severe atrocities wrought by Thorkell's fleet as he might have been dead by 1010.

⁴¹³ Cf. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', p. 170.

deliverance was only to be obtained through true faith and pious behaviour, both provided by the *godre lare* in Ælfric's works.

3. From Wulfstan to *Maldon*: Witnesses Not to Be Neglected

The sources dealt with in this chapter are but a small selection of the material which the reign of Æthelred provides for the interested readership. I have chosen those pieces as they are probably the most prominent literary works of the period which seemed appropriate to illustrate characteristic features evident in the sources of Æthelred's reign.

3.1 *Wulfstan's Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*

The first source I want to turn to is written by one of the most prominent and influential protagonists of the last fifteen years of Æthelred's reign, who continued to remain in high office after the Danish Conquest: Archbishop Wulfstan of York. The former bishop of London came to special prominence when he was elevated to the archbishopric of York in 1002, a see which he held in plurality with Worcester till 1016. He features as a prominent figure, important counsellor and composer of law-codes as we have seen above. Working as "Homilist and Statesman"⁴¹⁴ as Dorothy Whitelock put it, Wulfstan's influence is reflected in his works, which reach from some forty homilies to works on political theory (*Institutes of Polity*) to several legislative pieces, produced for both Æthelred and Cnut, and the fact that the 'Northern Recension' of the *ASC* bears the mark of his supervision.⁴¹⁵

The work with which he achieved lasting prominence, however, is his *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*, comprising a compelling mixture of apocalyptic themes, the sins of the English and the atrocities of the Vikings with the threat of Danish Conquest looming dreadfully on his mind. My decision not to include this text in the chapter dealing with ecclesiastical sources is based on my assessment of the *Sermo* not primarily as an ecclesiastical piece of general pastoral guidance, being influenced by the Benedictine reform and monastic revival, but rather as 'sermon-like' work of political significance, which was written in a particular context to serve certain intentions which were not comprehensively religious in nature.

The *Sermo Lupi* is to be found in three different versions (short, medium and long), which are preserved in five different manuscripts, dating from the first

⁴¹⁴ Whitelock, 'Homilist and Statesman', p. 42.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', pp. 172-77, for a discussion of the Latin tract 'De Tribulationibus' being an alleged source of inspirations for his works.

quarter of the eleventh century to the closing 25 years of the twelfth century.⁴¹⁶

Although the date of its composition had been a matter of debate, the scholarly consensus, including Dorothy Whitelock and Dorothy Bethurum, has settled for 1014.⁴¹⁷ There might have been an earlier version of the *Sermo* as dates such as 1009 and 1012 could be suggested as the result of interpreting manuscript evidence and subject matter as argued by Prof. Keynes⁴¹⁸ but those assumptions must remain hypothetical as “there is not the slightest evidence for such a version.”⁴¹⁹

With regard to the different versions, the question of their order must remain unsolved for now. The three versions differ in length and content. Whereas the short version runs about 131 lines, making no mention of Viking incursions whatsoever and includes a unique passage on Æthelred being driven into exile, the medium version (178 lines) drops this passage and adds a lengthy passage on the activities of the Vikings, while the long version similarly remains silent about Æthelred’s exile, but elaborates on the sins and wrongdoings of the English people. This version concludes with a reference to the work of the 6th-century British monk Gildas – *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* – comparing the conquest of England by the Anglo-Saxons as a consequence of the sins of the Britons with the contemporary situation, thus giving the long version a particular urgency and rhetorical force. Under the given circumstances in-depth discussion of the order cannot be undertaken. The debate centres around the argument that either the short version was the first, as Wulfstan had the habit of reusing his works and expanding upon them or the long version being the original with the other versions being abridgements.⁴²⁰

For my part, I have not come to a conclusion. Both interpretations have the same degree of probability and follow a cogent argumentation. Nevertheless, I tend to regard the longest version as the original one – or at least being closest to it – as I think Wilcox’s theory on the sermon being preached at York in February 1014 is more than intriguing, although Simon Keynes has deemed it to depend on a chain of assumptions.⁴²¹ The sermon appears to have been composed in the

⁴¹⁶ For the different versions and manuscripts see Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, pp. 1-5 and Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, pp. 1-6 and 22-24.

⁴¹⁷ See Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 6 and Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, pp. 101-4 and 356; see also the discourse on the sermon in S. Hollis, ‘The Thematic Structure of the *Sermo Lupi*’, *ASE* 6 (1977), 175-95; Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 151-52; J. Wilcox, ‘The Wolf on Shepherds: Wulfstan, Bishops, and the Context of the *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*’, in *Old English Prose: Basic Readings*, ed. P. Szarmach (New York, 2000), pp. 408-12, with idem, ‘Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos* as a Political Performance: 16 February 1014 and Beyond’, in *Wulfstan*, ed. Townend, pp. 375-96, all based on the underlying dating of 1014.

⁴¹⁸ See Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, pp. 208-13.

⁴¹⁹ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 6.

⁴²⁰ Cf. Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 144.

⁴²¹ See Wilcox, ‘Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi*’, pp. 375-96; Keynes, ‘An Abbot, an Archbishop’, p. 205, for the objection.

heat of the moment on a special occasion, which does not necessarily contradict the outcome of a closer survey that several literary sources and models can be identified for a sermon of this nature.⁴²² The short version clearly stands in the tradition of Wulfstan's apocalyptic homilies and does not reflect the political circumstances of the last years of Æthelred's reign in the way the long version does. Moreover, the fact that it appears with the heading *Larspell* ('sermon') in a manuscript datable to the last quarter of the 12th century, seemingly decontextualized, shows that the message of this apocalyptic sermon was regarded to be useful and worth transmitting even 150 years later.⁴²³ My discussion of the *Sermo Lupi* will be based on the longest version, as contained in British Library, Cotton Nero A.i (I), a manuscript of the early eleventh century, which was apparently annotated in Wulfstan's own hand, thus suggesting his supervision and approval of that version.⁴²⁴ This version provides us with the most detailed account and best reflects the circumstances under which it was written, showing powerful rhetoric. The initial rubric runs as follows:

SERMO LUPI AD ANGLOS QUANDO DANI MAXIME PERSECUTI
SUNT EOS, QUOD FUIT ANNO MILLESIMO XIII AB INCARNA-
TIONE DOMINI NOSTRI IESU CHRISTI⁴²⁵

It could be argued – as Keynes has done – that a reference to a year where the English were persecuted most by the Vikings does not comply with 1014, but rather with 1009 and the afflictions caused by the arrival of Thorkell's fleet.⁴²⁶ Keynes surely has a point here, but his remark assumes a factual statement on Wulfstan's part. In my opinion Wulfstan might have just wanted to convey the notion of 1014 being a year of severe persecution which it surely could have been in the perception of his contemporaries. By exaggerating the year's significance the archbishop intended to put the seriousness of the situation before the eyes of his audience/congregation and call for determination to withstand the invaders as one, always bearing in mind that the threat of Danish rule had not been averted for good. The term *ANGLOS* is conspicuous, just as if the archbishop used it to stress the unity of the *Angelcynn* as opposed to the *DANI*. Wulfstan chose his words carefully in order to make clear that this sermon was preached to the Anglo-Saxons at a particular moment, explaining its historical positioning.⁴²⁷

Wulfstan deals with various issues in the *Sermo*. The first section (ll. 1-25) builds an apocalyptic environment by exhorting the people:

⁴²² Cf. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', pp. 205-7.

⁴²³ Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Bodley 343; cf. Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, p. 5 and Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 3.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Godden, 'Apocalypse', p. 144.

⁴²⁵ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 47; *The Sermon of the Wolf to the English, when the Danes persecuted them most, which was the year 1014 of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

⁴²⁶ See Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop', pp. 212-13.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Godden, 'Apocalypse', p. 158.

ðeos woruld is on ofste, 7 hit nealæcð þam ende, 7 þy hit is on worulde aa swa leng swa wyrse, 7 swa hit sceal nyde for folces synnan ær Antecristes tocyme yfelian swyþe.⁴²⁸

The image of sin is important to Wulfstan's work. He remarks that there had been manifold sins and misdeeds among the English which have brought about divine wrath. For this he embarks upon a lengthy enumeration of the wrongdoings (ll.136-45), after he had already given an account of various afflictions, which in his perception were the result of *Godes yrre* 'God's anger' (ll. 102-32). He also links the political events of the period to this topic as he explains the long period of English defeats to be grounded in divine anger about the sinful Anglo-Saxons whereas the Vikings are victorious through God's consent (ll. 113-15). According to this concept, English defeat was not due to the failure of royal government or the king, but instead the outcome of neglecting Christian duties and committing misdeeds on the part of the English. Sin has corrupted the Anglo-Saxons, making the boundaries of this Christian people and the Scandinavian invaders blur as Wulfstan admonishes the people for adopting 'heathen' practices.⁴²⁹ Important in this regard is also the factor of *scamu* 'shame'. For Wulfstan, the Anglo-Saxons had to perform *dædbot* 'repentance' in order to overcome their problems. According to Alice Cowen, Wulfstan's focus was on the public sphere (he repeatedly uses the first person plural). Sin could be tackled only at the level of the community through united repentance and sharing of (God's) laws. This might reflect his desire to build a 'holy society', also evident in his law-codes and the *Institutes of Polity*.⁴³⁰ Cowen further argues that Wulfstan had expressed the relationship of sin and society through the concept of shame. In the eyes of the archbishop, one essential feature of the Viking invasions seems to have been their quality of shaming the English.⁴³¹ Additionally, shame is not only the consequence of the peoples' sins, but also part of the problem, as the Anglo-Saxons are ashamed of atoning for their misdemeanour, thus further incurring God's wrath. The most striking passage with regard to shame is the account of the husband who is looking on passively while his wife is gang-raped by the Vikings (ll. 116-20). Cowen pointed out that the impotent body of the *thegn* and the abused body of his wife figured for the wounded body of the nation as a whole – Wulfstan exhorted the Anglo-Saxon for showing passivity before violence.⁴³² What we have here might be an appeal to the English to act – not only with atonement, but with arms.

⁴²⁸ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 47; *This world is in haste end it draws to the end, and therefore in the world things go from bad to worse, and so it should out of necessity greatly deteriorate for the sins of the people before the coming of Antichrist.*

⁴²⁹ See *ibid.*, ll. 85-93. This motif is also to be found in Ælfric's *Letter to Brother Edward*. See p. 80 *supra*.

⁴³⁰ See Cowen, 'Byrastas and *bysmeras*', p. 405.

⁴³¹ See *ibid.* p. 406.

⁴³² See *ibid.*, pp. 407-8.

Wulfstan feels the bonds of society breaking apart, not only the bonds between father and son, but also of lords and their people. *Ungetrymþa* ‘disloyalties’ become a recurring image in matters of church and state. He stresses that it was “*ealra mæst hlaforðswice*”⁴³³ that a man betrays his lord’s soul. Wulfstan takes this point one step further when he remarks that it had been a great treachery to betray his lord to death or drive him from the land, both of which had happened in England, by giving the example of Edward (‘the Martyr’). Compared to the original version, the reference to Æthelred’s exile was apparently omitted. Even so, it is necessary to complete the preceding sentence syntactically, as pointed out by Prof. Whitelock.⁴³⁴ This clause might have been excluded due to political reasons. I tend to side with Wilcox and Godden, whose argumentation favoured an omission in the context of the year 1014, when Wulfstan apparently strove to achieve a reconciliation between Æthelred and his people on the occasion of the king’s return from exile. He left out the passage in question in order not to give the whole enterprise a difficult start as it were those same people whom Wulfstan tried to convince and unite behind Æthelred who had formerly exiled their king from England. This would also fit into the context of *scamu* mentioned above as the *witan* should overcome their feeling of shame and act according to what was right.⁴³⁵

The archbishop further bemoans the both treatment and inappropriate behaviour of the clergy and the church. Church dues had not been paid and men generally had not observed church services, thus greatly angering Almighty God. He criticizes that God’s laws had not been properly observed – even despised – and that the laws of the people had deteriorated. Furthermore, he complains of *ungylða* ‘taxes’ (l. 59), probably referring to the introduction of the *Danegeld*, which had been introduced in 1012 to pay Æthelred’s Viking mercenaries. Nevertheless, Wulfstan does not seem to have been critical of King Æthelred. When assigning base laws and *scandlice nydgylð* ‘shameful tribute’ (l. 109), the latter of which by 1014 seems to have been seen with dismay among the population, to divine wrath incurred by the peoples’ misdemeanours, Wulfstan exculpates the king for pursuing such a policy.

One passage that gives the sermon its particular urgency and force is Wulfstan’s reference to Gildas,⁴³⁶ in which he recalls the conquest of England by the Anglo-Saxons. He blames it on the manifold sins of the British, with their lawlessness and injustice. He goes even further and advises the English to take this example for a warning as “*wyrðan dæda we witan mid Englum þonne we mid*

⁴³³ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 56; *The greatest of all treacheries*; his use of *hlaforðswice* for ‘treachery’ shows also his ambition to stress the dimension of lordship.

⁴³⁴ See e.g. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 931, n. 4 and idem, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 6;

⁴³⁵ Cf. Wilcox, ‘Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi*’, pp. 386-88; Godden, ‘Apocalypse’, p. 150.

⁴³⁶ Much of this passage is literally translated from a letter written by Alcuin after the sack of Lindisfarne in 793. See Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 933, n. 6.

Bryttan ahwar gehyrdan.”⁴³⁷ This passage alone must have raised fear and indignation and shaken up the English. He also criticizes the cowardice of the British clergy for having often neglected their pastoral duty to instruct the people. Wulfstan appeals to the Anglo-Saxon clergy not to follow such an example, but simultaneously acknowledges that the requirement to cry out in order to guide his flock extended to himself.⁴³⁸ This statement might also be directed at a secular audience, reflecting on possible ill-counsel or *unrad* of Æthelred’s *witan* and prompting them to change their course.

Wulfstan’s intention, however, was not to condemn his people, but rather to give an explanation of the contemporary afflictions and set down guidelines on how to avert this fate as apart from exhorting the people and bringing their wrongdoings before their eyes he generates hope among his audience. Right from the beginning, he stresses that the Anglo-Saxons needed improvement, i.e., that every man had to work hard to obtain divine favour, whereas hitherto he had merited those miseries through his misdeeds and urges the need to honour God’s laws and pay church dues (ll. 15-25). He takes up this topic at the end where he tries to incite the Anglo-Saxons: “Ac utan don swa us þearf is.”⁴³⁹ The archbishop admonishes his audience to atone for their misdeeds and henceforth love God and follow His laws, reminding them that they all would have to await the Last Judgement, and uphold loyalty without treachery among themselves in order to “geearnian us þa mærpā ȝ þa myrhða þe God hæfð gegearwod þam þe his willan on worolde gewyrcað.”⁴⁴⁰ This does not necessarily appear to be a vision of the rewards in the next life but could also refer to the contemporary situation: victory over the Danish invaders for recognizing the errors of one’s way and lead a life pleasing to God. The urgency of his message cannot be mistaken when he points out earlier: “Ac la, on Godes naman, utan don swa us neod is, beorgan us sylfum swa we geornost magan, þe læs we ætgædere ealle forweorðan.”⁴⁴¹ Here Wulfstan appeals with forceful rhetoric to the Anglo-Saxons to react and stand as one to overcome dissensions, as only together they would be able to defend their country against the Viking invaders.

The *Sermo Lupi* appears to be a masterpiece of Wulfstan’s, composed at a time

⁴³⁷ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 66; *Worse deeds we know of the English than we have heard of anywhere among the Britons.*

⁴³⁸ Wulfstan’s concern with the duties of bishops is a recurring feature of his work. In this regard it is of special interest that the various versions of the *Sermo Lupi* in the manuscripts are often accompanied by such reflection on bishops instructing the people. The section “Be þeodwitan” in Cotton, Nero A.i. ends with a personal statement of self-reflection on this issue, being followed immediately by the *Sermo Lupi*. See Wilcox, “The Wolf on Shepherds”, pp. 406-12.

⁴³⁹ Whitelock, *Sermo Lupi*, p. 66; *And let us do what is necessary for us.*

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67; *Earn for ourselves the glories and the joys which God has prepared for those who do his will in the world.*

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65; *But lo, in God’s name. Let us do as is needful for us, save ourselves as best as we can, lest we all perish together.*

when Anglo-Saxon England faced the renewed threat of invasion. When we assume that he wrote this sermon after Æthelred's return, his intention could only have been to unite the Anglo-Saxons and mount support for Æthelred, as he was aware of the fragile situation. He made use of the mood of elation but also pursued greater ends. Patrick Wormald argued:

If Wulfstan began as a millennial homilist, he was soon a great deal more. From 1014 at least, his oeuvre aimed to reorder society such that it would never again merit the punishment meted out by God in that grim year [...] Wulfstan's books were blueprints for a People of God.⁴⁴²

The *Sermo Lupi* has to be treated in the same vein. Wulfstan intricately combined the inner convictions as a man of God and spiritual leader of the *Angelcynn* after the death of Ælfheah with his office as statesman who had to react to a pressing political challenge.

Malcolm Godden has taken the discussion of the sermon to a new level. He claimed that Wulfstan's use of Old Testament parallels suggested "the cyclic repetition of divine punishment and repentance," which implied divine anger with the chosen people, rather than any reference to an apocalyptic setting.⁴⁴³ Godden goes on to argue that in the Old Testament the Israelites had enjoyed exclusiveness as His chosen people and that even if they were conquered by a heathen people they nevertheless remained chosen.⁴⁴⁴ If we take this into consideration, Wulfstan might have pursued a twofold strategy with the sermon: on the one hand he tried to mount resistance and generate unity among the Anglo-Saxons to face the Viking threat, but at the same time constructed a mindset in which after an eventual Danish Conquest the English could still regard themselves as God's chosen people who had to live a pious and God-pleasing life to assert their claim and one day be rewarded. With his incorporation of the Gildas passage Wulfstan might have created an atmosphere of acceptance of the invaders as he – consciously or not – draws a parallel between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons who had arrived in England as heathens and finally established themselves as a Christian people favoured by God, thus paving the way for a possible amalgamation of the two peoples. This was far from being unlikely, for it had happened before since Alfred's days: the invaders of old had become part of the Christian people of the Anglo-Saxons in the course of centuries. The sermon was intended to provide the ideological basis for a smooth transition towards yet another amalgamation of both Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians.

In my opinion Wulfstan was prepared to both ends: he wrote the *Sermo Lupi* to encourage the English to fight, gaining victory through adopting his ideal of a

⁴⁴² P. Wormald, 'Archbishop Wulfstan and the Holiness of Society', in *Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. Pelteret, p. 208.

⁴⁴³ See Godden, 'Apocalypse', p. 155.

⁴⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 156.

'holy society', but at the same time was aware of the fragile situation after Æthelred's return from exile when the Vikings were still present in England. Therefore, he was also prepared for defeat and cleverly laid the ideological foundations for a subsequent living together of both nations with the result of yet another Christian society that would live according to God's law. The fact that he – until his death – became the chief advisor of Cnut fits the pattern and is probably one major reason for the peaceful and prosperous reign of the Anglo-Danish king.

3.2 *The Battle of Maldon*

When looking at the *Chronicle* account of the battle of Maldon we are provided with sparse information about the event even though this encounter must have been crucial to the state of mind of the Anglo-Saxons. When their then chief *ealdorman* and his force were annihilated they must have realized their vulnerability to renewed Viking onslaughts. The prominence the battle and in particular the brave general Byrhtnoth have gained subsequently was due very much to an anonymous heroic poem of 325 lines: *The Battle of Maldon*.

Although it is impossible to establish the exact date and origin of the poem, it might have been written in the late tenth or early eleventh century in the East Anglian region, Essex or Kent.⁴⁴⁵

Central themes of the poem are the courageous *ealdorman* and his loyal retainers, who even after the death of their leader boldly fight and meet their deaths, thus providing a prime example for bonds of lord- and kinship. This is sharply contrasted with the cowardice shown by those, who on Byrhtnoth's death take the flight – a behaviour completely unacceptable within the heroic code.

The *ealdorman* of Essex is presented as a bold warrior, who fulfils his duty as commander and lord, constantly encouraging and arranging his men and urging them forward. It appears that his behaviour boosts the morale of the troops. Byrhtnoth is portrayed as a worthy lord who maintains his lordship ties through courageous behaviour. This strongly contrasts with the implied criticism posed by the *Chronicle* with regard to the king and his apparently treacherous *ealdormen* and the disintegration of national allegiance in the face of the Viking attacks. The question of loyalty features prominently in the poem. Byrhtnoth resembles the ideal general and his unswerving allegiance to the king is constantly stressed. When the Viking messenger comes to negotiate terms of surrender, Byrhtnoth makes a defiant and heroic speech:

⁴⁴⁵ See Scragg, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 32 and n. 15.

Þæt her stynt unforcuð	eorl mid his werode,
Þe wile gealgean	eþel þysne,
Æþelredes eard,	ealdres mines
folc and foldan. ⁴⁴⁶	

In the course of his speech, he forcefully opposes the messenger's offer to buy peace with tribute (*gafol*) in order to protect the people, regarding it as "to heanlic" 'too shameful' (l. 55b). At first sight, this could be seen as expressing an ideal of honour to defend one's country and people as well as an implied criticism of Æthelred's policy of buying off the invaders. John Damon, however, has argued for a closer look which reveals that

the poet has Byrhtnoth suggest tribute and peace accord (*gafol* and *gese-man*) as proper reactions to defeat, although inappropriate as a means of resolving conflict.⁴⁴⁷

According to that reading, the king's *gafol* policy is seen as a reasonable action after defeat, especially if we keep in mind the outcome of the battle. Considering Byrhtnoth's loyalty to his king, such criticism would be out of place, as he is described as "Æþelredes þegen" 'Æthelred's *thegn*' (l. 151b) and "Æþelredes eorl" 'Æthelred's earl' (l. 203a). Alice Sheppard made an intriguing remark in this regard by pointing out that the Maldon poet digressed from traditional conventions of heroic poetry and does not define Byrhtnoth by referring to his lineage or outstanding deeds, but in terms of his relationship to his king.⁴⁴⁸

His heroic death in battle is described in a remarkable way. Whereas his men die gloriously after having displayed their courage and loyalty to their lord, Byrhtnoth's end is partly reminiscent of martyrdom. Wounded and unarmed he looks up to heaven and is slain by "hæðene scalcas" 'heathen warriors' (l. 180b). There has been much debate about the Christian background of the poem and its possible interpretation as a saint's life or allegory⁴⁴⁹ and certainly a Christian or hagiographical undertone could not be ruled out completely, although I regard Paul Cavill's comparison to the death of Christ too far-fetched.⁴⁵⁰ Byrhtnoth's remark that "God ana wat / hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote"⁴⁵¹ underlines the

⁴⁴⁶ Scragg, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 20, ll. 51-54a; *that here stands an earl of unstained reputation with his company, who intends to defend this homeland, the kingdom of Æthelred, my lord's people and his country.*

⁴⁴⁷ Damon, 'Advisors for Peace', p. 61.

⁴⁴⁸ See Sheppard, 'Noble Counsel, No Counsel', p. 415.

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. H. Gneuss, 'Die Battle of Maldon als historisches und literarisches Zeugnis' in his *Language and History in Early England*, Collected Studies Series 559 (Aldershot, 1996), no. IX, p. 9 and n. 12.

⁴⁵⁰ See Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, p. 122. He remarks that there were twelve named retainers of Byrhtnoth in the poem which resemble the disciples of Christ. Furthermore, like Christ, the *ealdorman* dies between two unimportant people.

⁴⁵¹ Scragg, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 22, ll. 94b-95b; *God alone knows who will be allowed to control the place of slaughter.*

religious element in the poem. With regard to the ideal of men dying with their lord in battle, the so-called *comitatus* ideal referred to by the Roman historian Tacitus in his *Germania*, which was quite frequent in heroic poetry, this Christian element appears to be rather odd and inappropriate. Roberta Frank has cogently argued that the *Maldon* poet had rather been inspired by a literary tradition than a contemporary code of conduct⁴⁵² and concludes, with reference to contemporary continental sources, that the poem

peers not backward through the mists to Germania, but just around the corner, to an eleventh century Europe in which the profession of warrior was a way of achieving religious perfection and a martyr's crown.⁴⁵³

Following this argumentation *The Battle of Maldon* was no purely heroic poem, which should only display an ideal of bold and courageous defence and loyalty to one's lord, but at the same time combines it with a religious notion, not dissimilar to the idea of the *miles Christi* ('soldier of Christ'), that can be detected in Ælfric's works as well (e.g. his account of St Martin in the *Lives of Saints*).

Nevertheless, the theme of loyalty and fulfilling one's oaths in contrast with cowardice in the face of danger features prominently in the poem. When Byrhtnoth dies the poet records that the sons of Odda were "ærest on fleame" 'first on flight' (l. 186b), a phrase reminiscent of the account of the chronicler. Godric is singled out and criticized for abandoning his lord (ll. 186-90) and later on the poet goes continues:

earh Oddan bearn, wende þæs formoni man, on wlancan þam wicge, forþan wearð her on felda scyldburih tobrocen. ⁴⁵⁴	Us Godric hæfð, ealle beswicene: þe he on meare rad, þæt wære hit ure hlaford; folc totwæmed,
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One cannot avoid thinking of the *ASC*, as like the individual *ealdormen* (e.g. Ælfric and Eadric) in that account betrayal in the poem is personalized, thus making it all the more severe. The image of a military leader abandoning his men followed by crumbling morale and eventual defeat is one of the main topics in the *Chronicle*. In the last few lines of the poem (320-25) another Godric is presented as a virtuous and bold warrior, who dies fighting and is explicitly distinguished from his treacherous counterpart.

⁴⁵² See R. Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in *The Battle of Maldon*. Anachronism or *Nouvelle Vogue*?' in *People and Places*, ed. Wood and Lund, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁵⁴ Scragg, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 28, ll. 237-42a; *Us Godric has all betrayed, the cowardly son of Odda: too many men believed, when he rode away on that horse, on that noble steed, that it was our lord; therefore the army on this field became divided, the shield-wall broken.*

In the face of national turmoil in England during this period, the poem becomes a battle-cry against the Danes, coming close to propaganda in order to unite the people against their enemies. The speech of Byrhtnoth's old retainer Byrhtwold after his lord's death is exemplary:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
 mode sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
 [...] A mæg gnornian
 se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.⁴⁵⁵

This indeed would have been a fitting appeal to contemporaries to show courage, standing as one loyal to their lord (Æthelred) to overcome the Scandinavian invaders, even if their courage and resolve had been shaken by the series of defeats, as presented in the *ASC*. The mentioning of resistance despite diminishing strength sounds like the situation in the closing years of Æthelred's reign and the horrors brought about by the Viking armies of Tostig and Thorkell. Contributing to that notion is the crossregional loyalty displayed in the poem as Wilcox has argued⁴⁵⁶. When the Anglo-Saxons were at the brink of defeat, an appeal to national resistance and loyalty to the king, overcoming regional disparities (reflected in the *ASC* s.a. 1010, where it is recorded that the shires would not help one another), would have been fitting to a national scheme of defence.

The poem appears to be another battle-cry for resistance, stressing the question of loyalty to one's lord in contrast to those cowardly forsaking him. Byrhtnoth is portrayed as willing to fight and die for king and country. I concur with Prof. Gneuss when he claims that the poem had been regarded by contemporaries

als Lebenszeugnis eines vorbildlichen ealdorman und Christen, der Land und Leute ebenso wie Klöster und Kirchen vor den heidnischen Angriffen zu schützen sucht.⁴⁵⁷

The poet did not only want to create another piece of heroic poetry, of *Gefolgschaftsdichtung*, but also conceived the struggle in religious terms. *The Battle of Maldon* thus perfectly fits into that period when the Anglo-Saxons were struggling to uphold their ideals of lordship and mount a concerted effort against the Vikings despite their military inferiority, merging traditional heroic values with the question of faith and piety, to win divine assistance in a perceived struggle of Christians against heathens. It reflects the pressing political need to create a united

⁴⁵⁵ Scragg, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 30, ll. 312-16; *The spirit must be the firmer, the heart the bolder, courage must be the greater, as our strength diminishes [...]. He will have cause to mourn forever who thinks of turning away from this battlegame now.*

⁴⁵⁶ See Wilcox, 'Battle of Maldon', p. 33 and n. 16.

⁴⁵⁷ Gneuss, 'Die Battle of Maldon', p. 64.

kingdom by claiming a common Germanic heritage with a great past and ideals of loyalty to king and God.⁴⁵⁸

3.3 *The Old English Promissio Regis*

Finally, I am going to draw attention to an Old English text, which consisted of a translation of the threefold promise made by Anglo-Saxon kings at their coronation in the tenth and eleventh century and two paragraphs on the duties of kingship, apparently addressed to king and people on a special occasion.⁴⁵⁹

Despite the fact that there has been much scholarly discourse (Liebermann, Stafford, Wormald, Clayton), date and author have not been identified with certainty. According to the text itself, it was copied letter by letter from a document the archbishop of Canterbury, Dunstan (959 – 988), had given to the king on the occasion of his consecration at Kingston. Thus, the possible king in question must have been either Edward or Æthelred.⁴⁶⁰

Regardless of date and authorship, the text does not appear to have been used at a coronation and rather refers to a ceremony in the past, in which the present monarch had been consecrated as king. Mary Clayton seems to have a point when she remarks that it might have been a sermon, which was addressed to a king and the people in order to remind both of the promises which had been made by the ruler at his coronation.⁴⁶¹

Important in considering this text is of course its apparent lacking of a proper ending and the fact that it is preserved in two manuscripts of the second half of the eleventh century, produced in the scriptorium of Leofric of Exeter.⁴⁶² Keeping that in mind we cannot be sure to what degree our preserved text represents the original, if any. The text can be divided into three sections: an introductory sequence, followed by the threefold royal promise, and two sections concerning the duties of kingship.

The coronation oath of the *Promissio* encompasses the preservation of peace, the suppression of crimes and unrightful actions and finally, a promise to command mercy and justice in the king's judgements in order to please God and

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. G. Caie, 'The Shorter Heroic Verse', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. H. Aertsen and R. H. Bremmer Jr. (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 93.

⁴⁵⁹ For an edition of the text see *Memorials of Saint Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury: Edited from Various Manuscripts*, ed. W. Stubbs, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores, or Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland During the Middle Ages* (Rolls Series) 63 (London, 1874; repr. Nendeln/Liechtenstein, 1965), pp. 356-57 and. M. Clayton, 'The Old English *Promissio regis*', *ASE* 37 (2009), pp. 148-49.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Robertson, *Laws of the Kings of England*, p. 40; Edgar's coronation took place at Bath and it is not certain where Edward was crowned, leaving us with Æthelred's coronation, which was celebrated at Kingston.

⁴⁶¹ See M. Clayton, '*Promissio regis*', p. 131.

⁴⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 96.

achieve eternal mercy. With reference to Mary Clayton's analysis, the translation of the promise suggests a conflation of both Anglo-Saxon coronation *ordines*.⁴⁶³

The following section deals with consequences for the king if he fulfils his promise and the disastrous outcome for his people if he fails to do so. The text then continues with a direct appeal to the king ("Eala leof hlaford"⁴⁶⁴ 'O beloved Lord') to protect himself and a reminder that he as a shepherd has to lead his people and would be accountable for his rule at the Last Judgement.

As I have mentioned previously in my chapter on Ælfric, the dependence of a kingdom's welfare on the behaviour of its king is derived *inter alia* from the Hiberno-Latin tract *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*. Both Ælfric and Wulfstan used the ideas of *rex iniquus* promulgated in that tract⁴⁶⁵ in their works. The invocation of the image of the king as shepherd draws on the long tradition of pastoral kingship featuring prominently in Anglo-Saxon England in texts of Gregory the Great, Alcuin and gaining new momentum with the Benedictine reform under Edgar,⁴⁶⁶ although the majority of the texts speaking of shepherds do that with regard to the clergy (i.e. priests and bishops). Mary Clayton has pointed out that in vernacular texts only Ælfric and Wulfstan speak of the king as shepherd.⁴⁶⁷ The description of the king as leading his people to the Last Judgement shows that the office was seen as a spiritual one. Again, this motif originally invoked by Gregory the Great is adapted by Ælfric and Wulfstan.⁴⁶⁸ The *Promissio Regis* is unique in this regard, as the leader of the people is not a bishop or priest, but a king.

The final section shows a distinguished similarity to the description of the king's justice in the ninth abuse of *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*. Among the provisions are the protection of the weak (as seen in his law-codes)⁴⁶⁹ and the concluding reference to councillors and representatives:

and ealde. and wise. and syfre him to geþeahtherum hæbbe. and rihtwise
mæn him to wicnerum sette. for þan swa hwæt swa hig to unrihte gedodð
þurh his aful. he sceal ealles gescead agyldan on domesdæg.⁴⁷⁰

Those lines fit perfectly with the reign of Æthelred when they are read as an

⁴⁶³ See Clayton, 'Promissio regis', pp. 112-13. For the different versions of the coronation oath, see J. Nelson, 'The Second English Ordo,' in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Nelson, History Series 42 (London, 1986), pp. 361-74.

⁴⁶⁴ Clayton, 'Promissio regis', p. 148.

⁴⁶⁵ See Godden, *Catholic Homilies*, p. 183, ll. 96-99; Morris, *Old English Homilies*, pp. 296-304; Die „Institutes of Polity: Civil and Ecclesiastical“: ein Werk des Erzbischofs Wulfstan von York, ed. K. Jost (Bern, 1959), I.5 (p. 42), I.11 (p. 47), II.13 (p. 47).

⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Clayton, 'Promissio Regis', pp. 120-1.

⁴⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

⁴⁶⁹ *Supra.*

⁴⁷⁰ Clayton, 'Promissio regis', p. 149; *And old and wise and temperate should he set him as counsellors and appoint righteous men as officers because, whatsoever they do unjustly by means of his might, he must give a reckoning on Judgement Day for all of it.*

exhortation of the monarch to follow this example. The importance of the king drawing on the advice of good counsellors, a recurring image in the sources we have encountered in this paper, possibly alludes to the notorious Eadric Streona and other influential men of rank and file, while the reference to the king's officers can be connected to Æthelred's measure to appoint shire-reeves as his personal representatives of power.

With regard to the author, the *Promissio Regis* had been attributed to Dunstan or Byrhtferth.⁴⁷¹ Pauline Stafford and Mary Clayton considered the authorship of Archbishop Wulfstan, but either dismissed it (Stafford) or could not provide conclusive evidence.⁴⁷² Whatever the case, at least the last two sections of the text show similarities in vocabulary, tone and subject matter with the works of Wulfstan, as noted by Patrick Wormald, who remarked that "the idiom, though not the language, is already that of Wulfstan."⁴⁷³ Even if he was not the author, which is not unlikely as the ideas and concepts incorporated in the *Promissio* originate from other sources, he drew on those ideas in his works. It is also possible that the composer of the text saw Wulfstan as a literary model, but this is a matter of speculation.

Nevertheless, the tone of the *Promissio Regis* suggests that it was composed for an important occasion. The text reads as if written in a time of turmoil. It seems to have been a pressing need to remind the king and his subjects of the duties of kingship and his promises made at the coronation. It is an intriguing idea to connect the text with the events after Æthelred's return from exile in 1014, when the bond between the king and his people was renewed on a seemingly contractual basis.

It generally appears to be written in the same atmosphere of both predicament and hope, which can be detected in the closing decade of Æthelred's reign. Possibly it has to be seen in the same vein as *VIII Æthelred*, bearing witness of an effort to maximise the nation's strength, recollect the ideals of pastoral kingship and appeal to king and people to make a fresh start, learn from former wrongdoings, and act with the conscience of duty and tradition as good Christians, in order to mutually deal with the threat posed by the Viking conquest of Anglo-Saxon England.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Clayton, 'Promissio regis', pp. 94-95 and 131-32.

⁴⁷² See *ibid.*, pp. 132-43, who discusses various elements in favour and against Wulfstan's authorship. Liebermann (*Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle, 1903-16), III, 145), pointed out that the text was in parts very close to *Institutes of Polity* and *Napier L* (a homily), while Robertson (*Laws of the Kings of England*, p. 41) detected similarities with *V* and *VI Æthelred*, two law-codes bearing the mark of the archbishop.

⁴⁷³ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, p. 448, n. 119.

III. Æthelred or *Un-ræd*: A Reconsideration of Anglo-Saxon England on the Eve of the Danish Conquest

The French historian Marc Bloch once remarked that causations cannot be taken for granted, but need to be carefully searched for. This is what I have attempted to do in this paper with regard to the reign of Æthelred, which saw the Danish Conquest of Anglo-Saxon England. The eventual fate of the English had in the past been closely connected with the person of the king, who appeared to be weak, inactive, violent and first and foremost ill-counselled. This verdict on Æthelred, based on the account of a chronicler writing after the catastrophe of conquest had already struck the English, should not be considered to be the complete truth, as it seems too harsh and simple in my opinion.

The sources from the reign of King Æthelred do not provide us with a homogenous picture of disaster, seeing Anglo-Saxon England sliding towards eventual defeat. Even the critical account of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not appear to be so deep-rootedly defeatist if analyzed thoroughly. Its criticism, if any, is never voiced overtly and remains a matter of interpretation, as I have argued. The majority of the sources do not show a genuine incompetence of Æthelred's part, but instead are indicators of a well-organized Anglo-Saxon state with working government and administration even during times of great turmoil.

Only after taking all sources into consideration is it possible to come to a well-balanced verdict on the situation in Anglo-Saxon England, for when analyzed individually, the sources might not tell the whole truth.

In my opinion the source material does show a common denominator, but it is not one of criticism and desperation, but one of hope, resolve and united resistance. Explanations are given for the course of events. The actions of the king and his royal government are contemplated on a theoretical and factual basis, not straightforwardly criticized, but analyzed. It was not the intention of the chronicler, Wulfstan or Ælfric to condemn Æthelred, but to provide guidance for the Anglo-Saxons, including the king, and mount spiritual and military resistance. If indeed we are to detect underlying exhortations, they ought not to be regarded as criticism for criticism's sake, but as a means of making people aware of certain grievances and digressions from the right path in order to provide an example the addressees should learn from.

Unity and loyalty are themes which become recurring *topoi* in the literary sources. Anglo-Saxon England and its people were not bound to be defeated. Contemporaries were aware of the dangers the Vikings posed and did their utmost to overcome this external threat. Once again the Anglo-Saxons were drawn together by a common adversary and had it not been for the internal factionalism and regional separatism, problems which did not genuinely arise during Æthelred's reign but had troubled Anglo-Saxon monarchs ever since, the

English might have averted their eventual fate.

Especially in the last decade of Æthelred's reign, Archbishop Wulfstan was a very important figure, being the spiritual leader of the *Angelcynn* – at least after Ælfheah's martyrdom – and at the same time functioning as an important political adviser and statesman. The full scale of his influence in secular and religious affairs may not have been discovered so far and would be a fascinating task for a future research, as according to the source material (at least the literary sources), he seems to have shaped the perception of the contemporary situation to a considerable degree. The Viking attacks have always been also perceived in a religious context: a struggle between Christianity and the heathens (although by that time a great part of the Vikings had been christianized). This sharpened the self-perception of the Anglo-Saxons with regard to their way of life. Evident from the literature is an intention to provide spiritual guidance for the English, making them reconsider their previous behaviour. The overriding notion was one of a flawed fabric of society, which needed to be amended and improved in order to overcome this dangerous situation. Ælfric's and Wulfstan's works should be seen as 'godre lare' to remind the Anglo-Saxons of their nationhood, by stressing history and religious aspects. Pastoral guidance in order to build a better (holy) society, which is pious and pleasing to God, is reflected in their works without setting aside the pressing political challenges of their days. By responding to real dangers with appeals of unity and loyalty as well as simultaneously guiding their flock in order to stress Christian ideals, their works became an effective rallying cry for spiritual and military resistance.

Æthelred might not have been the most apt representative of the royal House of Wessex, but there is sufficient source material to abandon one-sided criticism once and for all. Neither of the sources bluntly blames the king personally, and those showing signs of such criticism do not do so without conveying – at least on an implicit level – a more balanced view. Æthelred was still their rightful and consecrated king and the voices of his reign show an unswerving loyalty to the idea of a rightful Anglo-Saxon king from the House of Wessex. Even so, we can detect a stress on the duties of kingship against which Æthelred's reign had to be measured. In that regard, the literary sources reflect to a certain extent an ideal of how things should be by referring directly or implicitly to contemporary or past events, which more often than not functions as examples of how not to handle things: a theoretical debate on principles in the face of a very real threat, with the aim of providing a blue-print to aid future decision-making.

It would be unjustified to view Anglo-Saxon England in Æthelred's time as a country falling apart under the Viking onslaught. The people were aware of the dangers posed by the Scandinavian attackers, but did their very best to collectively respond to the situation. We can detect something of a national awareness of crisis but without the notion of downright panic. Figures in high and prominent offices tried to mend apparent tendencies of chaos, breakdown and separatism,

realising the error of their ways and trying to evoke a common nationhood based on history and religion, i.e. to prepare the *Angelcynn* for what possibly can be termed their final stand with their rightful ruler leading them to eventual victory. Æthelred might not have been the best for his job, but he tried to fulfil the people's expectations and hopes which they had of him as best as he could and "held his kingdom with great toil as long as his life lasted."⁴⁷⁴ First and foremost, the records of royal government show that he aptly responded to the kingdom's day-to-day business, providing us with a picture of a monarch who did his best to secure his kingdom and prevent it from disintegrating and asserting his authority. What we can deduce from the sources is an absolute determination to overcome the threat by a set of military and spiritual measures. When the situation aggravated and the military response had not brought about the intended results we can detect a clear shift towards 'spiritual rearmament' and pastoral guidance to assist the efforts of resistance hitherto.

But when England was on the brink of conquest, all efforts could not have availed anything, as in times of crisis personal interests of those in high office were an obstacle not to be overcome by the Anglo-Saxon king. In many cases Æthelred's choice of generals more often than not might not have been the best, and as his strength diminished and the kingdom was in danger of collapse, his trust in certain men close to him might have been questionable. Nevertheless, we have no justification whatsoever to blame Æthelred for the eventual conquest and reinforce his undeserved epithet *unrad*. To learn from his example, from both its positive and negative aspects, is one of the central messages of the source material. Anglo-Saxon England may have been conquered, but the voices from the past do not attest to desperation and defeatism, but instead emanate resolve and hope that this fate could still be averted or reverted.

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⁴⁷⁴ ASC s.a. 1016.

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