

Episode 6: Vikings and the King of the English

Dates: 825-935

About a mile off the Northumbrian coast in the year 793, monks went about their daily routines in a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne. Unfortunately for the monks, this was not going to be a regular day.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle read:

“In this year fierce, foreboding omens came over the land of the Northumbrians, and the wretched people shook; there were excessive whirlwinds, lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky. These signs were followed by great famine, and a little after those, that same year on 6th ides of January, the ravaging of wretched heathen men destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne.”

A scholar in Charlemagne's court described the same:

“Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race ... The heathens poured out the blood of saints around the altar, and trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the streets.”

The monastery at Lindisfarne was founded about 160 years earlier in the 630s by Saint Aidan who came from Ireland as a missionary to the Anglo-Saxons. In 685, the great Saint Cuthbert spent his final years at the monastery as Bishop of Lindisfarne. The island, which today is called the “Holy Island” was decimated by Viking raids on that day in 793. This raid marks the beginning of a new era in Anglo-Saxon history, the Viking Age.

In this episode, we will pick up where we left off in Britain in episode 4. This puts us squarely in the era known as the “Viking Age” as our introduction foretells and discuss the legacy of one of the most famous English kings, Alfred the Great.

Why is this important?

- Legacy of Alfred the Great - he is called “the Great” for a reason. His political, religious, educational, and legal reforms mature the kingdom from the clan-based tribal society that still had significant influence on Anglo-Saxon society to something that begins to look more like the kingdoms of the late Middle Ages that we will review throughout the coming episodes. Alfred had one major thorn in his side: the Vikings.

- The Vikings, also referred to as Danes or Norseman, come from Scandinavia which, as we discussed in the beginning of episode 4, were the homelands of the Germanic tribes we've talked so much about including the Angles, Saxons, Franks, and Goths. The era historians refer to as the Viking Age runs from 793 (Lindisfarne) to 1066 (Battle of Hastings). While the bookends of this era align to historically British events, in this episode and the next we will see the impact of the Scandinavians in both Britain and France.

- Ecgberht to Alfred
 - Picking up from episode 4, we had the bretwalda Ecgbert of Wessex who ended the Mercian Supremacy by defeating them in battle in 825. His prominence would not last long, just four years, as Mercia regained its independence. Kingship was not necessarily hereditary at this time, but Ecgbert was able to make alliances and deals to secure the succession of the throne to his son Aethelwulf in 839.
 - Aethelwulf controls Wessex and Kent. His oldest son is given the Kingdom of Kent immediately. In 854, 15 years into his reign, he gives his daughter in marriage to the King of Mercia to strengthen relationships. He decides to make a pilgrimage to Rome in 855 and names his next eldest son Aethelbald as King of Wessex in his absence and his third son Aethelbert as King of Kent. His oldest son had already died. He had two more younger sons, Aethelstan and Alfred who had each been to Rome for education earlier. Upon King Aethelwulf's return to England, Aethelbald refused to relinquish Wessex; to avoid civil war, he gave up the west to Aethelbald, let Aethelbert retain the southeast, and ruled from the middle. He died in 858 followed closely by Aethelbald in 860 which placed Wessex and Kent back in the single hands of Aethelbert who ruled until his death in 865. None of Aethelwulf's sons so far had had any children, so the next oldest son, Aethelred is selected as the next king. Aethelred dies in 871 which puts us squarely in Episode 3 of Season 1 of The Last Kingdom.
 - Unlike the TV show, there was not a question of succession; there were no other male heirs making a claim, so the crown passed to Alfred, the fifth and youngest son of Aethelwulf (who should be called "father of kings" or something!)

- We now start the reign of Alfred the Great. For a TV series, The Last Kingdom does a pretty good job of historical accuracy. If you've watched that, and as you know from our opening, the number one issue facing Alfred's reign is the Vikings.
 - The Great Heathen Army
 - The Viking raids which started in the last 700s as noted in the opening continued into the 800s growing in size and scale. The threat under

Aethelwulf and his first two successors was limited to raiding and occasional battles. But, in 865, the Vikings (referred to as the “Danes” which encompassed Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians) raised a large army with the intent on settlement in Britain. According to some legends, the army was led by four brothers in response to the execution of their father by a Northumbrian king. From 865 until 878 the Danes were largely successful and gained territory and treasure. Alfred’s forces defeated them at the Battle of Edington in 878 and under the Treaty of Wedmore, the Danes agreed to stay out of Wessex and their leader, Gurthrum, converted to Christianity.

- Victory and Danelaw
 - This led to what is known as the Danelaw. The area under Danelaw (which simply means that it was led by the Danes and subject to their laws and customs) included southern Northumbria, eastern Mercia, East Anglia, and Essex. Alfred continued to rule over Wessex and Kent with western Mercia as a sub-kingdom.
- Legal Reforms
 - In the late 880s or early 890s, Alfred published the “Doom Book”. The word “doom” comes from the Old English word for “law” or “judgement”, so this book is really a book of laws. Alfred combined the codes of law that came from Aethelberht of Kent (recall him as the royal convert to Christianity in the early 600s), Ine of Wessex (from the late 600s and may have simply borrowed a later version of Kentish law), and Offa of Mercia (the most illustrious of all Mercian kings, who corresponded with Charlemagne during his rule in the late 700s). Alfred also included his translation and explanations of the Ten Commandments, modified laws and added new ones to his liking, and included a long introduction. This Law Book was not the first written code in Anglo-Saxon Britain, but it was the most comprehensive and had an influence that would help establish the Common Law system that emerged a few centuries later.
 - In addition, Alfred put great value in the notion of justice and practiced what he preached in his dispensation of justice and oversight of those who performed justice outside of his court.
- Language
 - Alfred promoted the formal use of the English language. The church and the law had remained Latin, but the knowledge of Latin by the common-folk or even ranks of nobility was getting poorer. Alfred set up court schools to teach in English, wrote his Doom Book in English,

and also embarked on one of his most ambitious projects in English as well.

- Anglo-Saxon Chronicles
 - That leads us to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. This documentation of the history of the Anglo-Saxons was developed in Alfred's court in English serving as an important source of history that survives to this day. Alfred had several copies made and had them distributed to monasteries across the realm with instructions for them to continue to add to the chronicles.
- Wessex hegemony
 - By the time of Alfred's death in 899, the Danes had been somewhat contained (more on that in a bit) and Wessex held primacy over the other remaining Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Mercia may have already been under de facto rule of Alfred's daughter Aethelflaed due to the incapacitation of her husband, Lord Aethelred. Spoiler alert for the final season of The Last Kingdom that she continues to rule as Lady of the Mercians after his death in 911 through the end of her life in 918. She joined with her brother Edward who continued Alfred's legacy upon rising to the throne in 899.
- His son Edward
 - Edward continues in his father's footsteps with victories over the Vikings and further solidifying Wessex as the base of power for the "King of the English"
 - As we noted, this is supported by his sister Aethelflaed who ruled Mercia successfully
 - Edward's reign continues until his death in 924; his sons become successive kings through 955 - his son Aethelstan bears special mention as a ruler who best continued the legacy of his grandfather, Alfred the Great. Edward had 14 children. Aethelstan helped arrange dynastic marriages for his sisters to the royal families on the continent. This gives us a good segue to bring you up to speed on the events on the continent.
 - First, his sixth child and third oldest daughter Eadgifu marries Charles the Simple possibly as early as the year 917 while Edward was still alive.
 - At the end of our last episode, we found Charles the Fat as the sole remaining adult male heir of Charlemagne which gave him control of the entire Carolingian Empire. This was not to last long; however, this time it was not due to death.
 - Charles the Fat was considered a weak ruler due to his lack of success in fighting off the Viking raids in France as well as

suffering from ongoing illness. A coup was led against him in 887 just two years after his consolidation of empire.

- It's just too much information to fit into this episode to explain all of the power grabs, but, sufficed to say, at least initially, the empire split into five separate kingdoms which were not reunited until the conquests of Napoleon.
- Now, remember that Charles the Fat was the only adult male heir alive in 885. There was another. And, guess what, his name was also Charles. He would go on to be known as Charles the Simple, and he was born in 879 to West Francian king Louis the Stammerer. Upon the exile of Charles the Fat, the West Franks elected the Count of Paris, Odo, to the throne. He ruled for 10 years until his death in 898 upon which Charles the Simple became king.
- During his early rule, he added Lotharingia to West Francia through the support of their noblemen. Around the same time, he made an arrangement with a Viking invader named Rollo. Rollo was granted the duchy of Normandy in return for his fealty and conversion to Christianity. He took a Frankish daughter (Gisela, who may have been a young daughter of Charles the Simple) as wife in the negotiations.
- When his first wife died without a male heir in 917, he married Eadgifu who bore him a son named Louis. However, Charles became unpopular and lost the support of his nobles. He fought against rebels, lost, was imprisoned, and died 6 years later in 929. Eadgifu and young Louis fled to Wessex and the court of Edward.
- The next daughter of Edward to discuss is Eadhild who marries Hugh, the Count of Paris
 - Hugh was the son of Robert who was the brother of King Odo of West Francia who we just briefly discussed. Robert had been given the title Duke of the Franks due to his military prowess and importance--recall that this was the title that Charles Martel took to signify his power over the Franks in Merovingian times.
 - After Charles the Simple was deposed, Robert was elected king but ruled for only a year before his death in battle in 923. Hugh was offered the crown at age 25 but passed it to Rudolf, the husband of his sister. Hugh married Eadhild in 926. He continued to amass power, land, and riches though they did

not have any children. Rudolf died in 936. We'll pick that story up next time.

- Finally, we will talk about Eadgyth and her marriage to Otto
 - When Charles the Fat was deposed of his rule, East Francia initially went to Arnulf who led the coup against Charles the Fat. He was an illegitimate son of one of our Carolmans in the last episode. We'll skip past the details until Henry the Fowler was elected King of East Francia in 919. Otto was born to Henry in 912, the same year in which Henry inherited the title Duke of Saxony. By the year 930, when Eadgyth married Otto, he was heir apparent to the throne of East Francia.
- So, as we end the year 935, Aethelstan, grandson of Alfred the Great is King of the English and the lands of the Danelaw are loyal to him. Louis, son of Charles and Aethelstan's sister Eadgifu are in exile in Wessex. Aethelstan's next sister Eadhild is married to the second most powerful man in West Francia and his other sister, Eadgyth, is married to the heir to the throne of East Francia.
- With the increasing talk of counts, dukes, and dynastic marriage, let's take a quick detour to feudalism
 - Roman origins via foederati and Roman villa system
 - In France
 - Feudalism, in its various forms, usually emerged as a result of the decentralization of an empire: especially in the Carolingian Empire in 8th century AD, which lacked the bureaucratic infrastructure necessary to support cavalry without allocating land to these mounted troops. Mounted soldiers began to secure a system of hereditary rule over their allocated land and their power over the territory came to encompass the social, political, judicial, and economic spheres. These acquired powers significantly diminished unitary power in these empires. However, once the infrastructure to maintain unitary power was re-established—as with the European monarchies—feudalism began to yield to this new power structure and eventually disappeared.
 - As our episodes progress, we are going to start hearing titles for individuals and areas of land that are evolutions of the Roman system and increasing aligned to the legal aspects of feudalism. In today's episode, we are going to focus more on the titles and general concepts of feudalism. In a future episode, we will dig more into how feudalism shaped the legal system, but that will be later on.

- The key concept to understand about feudalism is that it describes the general system and societal structure of the period. At a high-level, the king would grant lands to nobles in return for loyalty, military service, and some form of tribute. In turn, the nobility may further subdivide land to lower vassals who may have their own arrangements. At the bottom of this hierarchy would be serfs or peasants.
- Some of the titles of nobility would be dependent on the size or nature of the land grant or “fief”. It’s also worth noting that some of the land ownership had already evolved and aligned to this model, but in other cases it followed this notion of being a fief more explicitly. Let’s talk about some of these titles:
 - The lowest rank that you should be aware for now is that of “baron”. Barons held land title across one or more estates. Notably, this would be less territory than that which a Count would hold and within the Counts region; however, the baron may have received the land grant directly from the king.
 - Count - originally from the Latin word “comes” (*koh-meez*) which means companion and the title was used in Roman times for high-ranking officials (civil or military). The French likely developed first the notion of a county, that is, the territory over which a count presides. The equivalent of a Count in England is an “Earl” which itself may have partially been derived from “Ealdorman” which was used in the Anglo-Saxon era but may have come more from the Old Danish word “eorl”. Counties in Anglo-Saxon England were called “shires”.
 - Last for today is the Duke. A duke is sometimes but not always a member of the royal family and may rule over a duchy. A duchy in some cases has a degree of sovereignty. Duke comes from the Latin “dux” which dates back to the Roman Republic and was expanded as a key role in Diocletian’s reforms where the title was given to the military leader of a province.

Reading List

Podcasts

- The British History Podcast - <https://www.thebritishhistorypodcast.com/>
- The History of England - <https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/>

Video

Books

Meigs, Samantha A, and Stanford E Lehmberg. 2016. **Peoples of the British Isles : A New History. From Prehistoric Times to 1688**. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press. - <https://amzn.to/2SPYPIG>

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