

Chapter Five

ALFRED AND THE VIKINGS

THE Vikings terrified the Anglo-Saxons as much as they themselves had terrified the Britons centuries before. From beyond the seas the island was exposed once more to wave after wave of invaders, bent on pillage and plunder and destroying yet again a fragile civilisation. The story of this is dramatically told in the only history of the period, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which traces how these raids accelerated during the second half of the eighth century:

- '843. King Aethelwulf [of Wessex] fought at Carhampton against the companies of thirty-five ships, and the Danes [who were Vikings from Denmark] had the power of the battlefield.
- 851. Ealdorman Ceorl, with the men of Devon, fought with heathen men . . . made great slaughter and took the victory. The heathen men stayed over the winter, and that year three hundred and fifty ships came to the mouth of the Thames; they ruined Canterbury, put to flight Brihtwulf the Mercian king and his troops . . .
- 866. The [Viking] army went from East Anglia over the Humber's mouth to York in Northumbria. There was great discord in this people amongst themselves; they had overthrown their king, Osbriht, and had taken an unnatural king, Aelle . . . The kings were both killed and the survivors made peace with the force . . .
- 870. . . . In that year, St. Edmund the king [of East Anglia] fought against them and the Danes took the victory, killed the king, and overcame all the land. They destroyed all the churches they came to . . .
- 874. The force went from Lindsey to Repton and took winter quarters there. They drove the king [of Mercia], Burhred, over the sea, twenty-two years after he had had the kingdom; and they overcame all the land.'

These entries tell us how one by one the kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons were wiped out until there was only Wessex left, where a young man called Alfred came to

the throne in the year 871. During his reign which lasted almost thirty years, the advance of the Vikings was halted and the foundations of what was to become the kingdom of England were laid.

Alfred was born at Wantage in Berkshire in 849, the youngest son of King Aethelwulf, by his first wife Osburh. He had four elder brothers, all of whom became kings of Wessex before him. Alfred was a favourite child and although 'ignorant of letters' until later in life he was brought up both listening to and learning the poems loved by the Anglo-Saxons, poems which recited the brave deeds of warrior princes of the kind he would have aspired to become. Devoutly loyal to the church, Alfred was sent to Rome when he was only four where he was received with great honour by Pope Leo IV. Two years later he travelled there again, this time with his father, stopping on the return journey at the court of Charles the Bald, king of the Franks.

Throughout Alfred's early life there was constant disagreement about the succession to the kingdom of Wessex, for the crown did not automatically pass from father to eldest son. Who became the next king depended both on the power of the existing monarch and on the strength and competence of the contenders, be they his sons or brothers. But by the time that Aethelwulf's fourth son became king, it was agreed that his children should be passed over in favour of Alfred. By then the Viking menace was very great indeed, threatening Wessex with extinction.

The Vikings were not altogether the pagan savages that those writing the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* would have us believe. They were a people from Scandinavia, mainly Norway, Sweden and Denmark, whose life was working the land and fishing but who went on to attack and later settle in Britain, Northern France, Russia, Iceland and Greenland. They are even believed to have reached America. One of the key reasons for their restless voyaging was that their homelands no longer produced enough to support them. Another was the nature of their society which was one which glorified fighting. The Vikings were pagan, and believed that the gods rewarded fighters above all and that bloodshed and death in battle were the true paths to wealth and happiness. As a people they were endowed with a stupendous energy which made them fearless seafarers searching for trade and plunder across vast oceans. Each year bands of Vikings put out to sea, seeking out richer lands than their own to pillage, bringing home gold, silver and jewels. Their leaders were either kings or 'jarls' whose key role was to see that their followers were handsomely rewarded with booty.

And this indeed was what drew them to the British Isles wiping out as they went churches and monasteries, towns and villages, carrying from them any kind of valuable from a sacred vessel to a horse. Gradually, as they burnt and sacked the country, there was nothing left for them to take except the land. Their leaders began to divide

that up among their men, who then settled. In the main it was Norwegians in Scotland, Ireland and the Western Isles, while in England it was the Danes. At first they put in puppet Anglo-Saxon kings but gradually they began to replace these with kings of their own. We can easily trace where the Danes settled, areas of the country known as the Danelaw, by the endings to the place names. Whereas the Anglo-Saxon endings were 'hams' and 'tuns', that is 'homes' and 'towns', the Danes had their 'bys' and 'thorpes'.

The Danes had already made ferocious attacks on Wessex by the time Alfred succeeded his brother but in 878 they launched what they believed to be their final assault, which, if successful, would have meant that virtually the whole island would be in their hands. To achieve this they planned a surprise attack in winter when no one usually fought. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* takes up the story:

'... the [Danish host] went secretly in midwinter after Twelfth Night to Chippenham, and rode over Wessex and occupied it, and drove a great part of the inhabitants oversea, and reduced the greater part of the rest, except Alfred the king; and he with a small company moved under difficulties through woods and into inaccessible places in the marshes.'

This was on what was the Isle of Athelney near Taunton in Somerset. Protected by the swamps and floods which surrounded it, the king was able to plot his campaign. Messengers were sent out summoning the 'fyrd' or militia from Somerset, Wiltshire and West Hampshire, men who were all 'fain of him'. On the appointed day they met and defeated the Danes under their king, Guthrum, at Edington, going on after to lay siege to their fortress at Chippenham which they took. For the first time the Danish king sued for peace, swearing to depart from Wessex, and Guthrum and twenty-nine of his followers were baptised. This was the first turning of the tide.

The Danes, of course, held the north and East Anglia, but the kingdom of Wessex now gradually expanded to embrace all the southern Anglo-Saxons. In 886 Alfred captured London, which had been a part of the old kingdom of Mercia, putting it in the charge of Ethelred, an earldorman of the Mercians, who married Alfred's daughter. It was written of Alfred that 'all the English people that were not under subjugation to the Danes submitted to him.' In the peace Alfred made with Guthrum that year English and Danes were accepted as equals and for the first time there is reference to 'all the English race'. The Viking threat had created a common identity and a common cause which found expression in a common leader, the king of Wessex, who now began to be referred to as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons'.

Alfred was a man of quite extraordinary vision. He inherited the traditions of Anglo-Saxon Christian civilisation from the great age of the seventh century and re-



A tenth century cross from Middleton, Yorkshire, incorporating a pagan Viking warrior with his shield, helmet and axe. This is one of a series of crosses in Anglo-Scandinavian style.



launched them as the foundations of what in the following century was to be the kingdom of England. He realised that to create a realm which was stable, peaceful and civilised depended first on having good laws, which should apply to all the English, even those who were subjects of the Danes. He studied the laws made by the great Anglo-Saxon kings, including Offa of Mercia, and then issued his own:

'Then I, King Alfred, collected these together and ordered to be written many of them which our forefathers observed, those which I liked; and many of those which I did not like, I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and ordered them to be differently observed.'

Uniquely too, he believed that such a society needed not only good government, but learning of a kind which would not only be for clerics but for lay people. He himself was taught to read Latin late in life and he set up a school at his court for young nobles to learn to be literate so that they could play their role in the state. This was a great innovation. The need arose from the terrible devastation wrought to the country by the Danes when all the libraries and places of learning were destroyed. Alfred recounts:

'So completely had learning decayed in England that there were few men this side of the Humber who could apprehend their [Latin] services in English or even translate a letter from Latin into English, and I think that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot even recollect a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom.'

Alfred summoned scholars to his court from Wales, France and Ireland and together they set about translating some of the treasures of ancient Christian litera-

The Alfred Jewel, inscribed with Alfred's name, possibly the handle to a pointer used for following manuscript text. These were distributed by King Alfred with his copies of Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*.

ture into Anglo-Saxon. The king himself translated four books, including Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, a copy of which was sent to every bishop. This work described both the qualities and the duties of the clergy.

Laws and learning marched hand in hand with new measures to ensure the defence of the kingdom. Alfred realised that the Anglo-Saxons must develop sea power and so he ordered the construction of warships'. . . nearly twice as long as those of the Danes, and swifter and steadier and higher, some with sixty oars, some with more; not built after the Frisian manner nor after the Danish, but as seemed best and most useful to the king himself.'

Even more important was the building of a network of defended enclosures, 'burhs', in which men could seek safety along with their goods and cattle. These were strategically placed and were either on the site of old towns or carefully chosen to be new ones. We can trace many of them today in place names which end in 'borough'. No village was to be further than twenty miles from such a safe haven. The king also reorganised the militia, or 'fyrd', on a rota system so that half the men came at a time while the other half stayed behind to tend and harvest the crops.

Most of these reforms were in place by the time the next Viking army landed from the Continent in 892. During the previous decade Alfred had secured his position as 'king of the Angles and of the Anglo-Saxons'. This was celebrated in the biography which was written of the king's life and in the publication of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in which all the Anglo-Saxons were seen as sharing somehow a common history uniting them against the enemy, the Danes.

When they began their new attack on Wessex the Danes found that they could not succeed as before. Everywhere they went their army was impeded by the 'burhs' and by the Anglo-Saxon army which now remained active all the year round. For four years the Vikings harassed the English but they failed to achieve victory. In the end they were forced either to settle in parts of the country already occupied by the Danes or to leave.

Alfred died at about the age of fifty in 899. Little is known about his last years but they were no doubt spent in consolidating what he had begun and impressing on his son, Edward, the necessity that he should continue to build on his father's foundations and reconquer the land which was now called the Danelaw. It was not until seven hundred years later that Alfred began to be accorded the title 'the Great'. No one at the time regarded him as any better than any of the other outstanding Anglo-Saxon kings. Today, however, we can see more clearly than his contemporaries how much Alfred deserved the epithet accorded him by subsequent centuries.