



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE LIFE OF
KING ALFRED

Asser

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

This edition published 2023
by Living Book Press
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ISBN: 978-1-76153-094-4 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-095-1 (softcover)

First published in around 1200.

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Asser's
The Life of King Alfred



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*To my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, the
worshipful and pious ruler of all Christians in the
island of Britain, Asser, least of all the servants
of God, wisheth thousandfold prosperity for both
lives, according to the desires of his heart.*

PREFACE

The issue of Stevenson's long and eagerly expected edition of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* has provided an opportunity to supply the ever increasing number of the great king's admirers with a more satisfactory rendering into English of this, perhaps the most precious document, notwithstanding all its faults, for the comprehension of his life and character.

The authenticity of the *Life* was impugned by Thomas Wright in 1841, by Sir Henry Howorth in 1876–77, and by an unknown writer in 1898, and it had become somewhat the fashion to regard it as a production of a later period, and therefore entitled to but little credence. The doubts as to its authenticity have been satisfactorily dispelled by the two eminent scholars who have most recently discussed the difficulties, Plummer and Stevenson.

The former, in his *Life and Times of Alfred the Great*, Oxford, 1902, says (p. 52): "The work which bears Asser's name cannot be later than 974, and the attempt to treat it as a forgery of the eleventh or twelfth century must be regarded as having broken down. I may add that I started with a strong prejudice against the authenticity of Asser,

so that my conclusions have at any rate been impartially arrived at.' The latter, in his noble edition (Oxford, 1904), remarks (p. vii): 'In discussing the work I have attempted to approach it without any bias for or against it, and throughout my endeavor has been to subject every portion of it to as searching an examination as my knowledge and critical powers would permit. The net result has been to convince me that, although there may be no very definite proof that the work was written by Bishop Asser in the lifetime of King Alfred, there is no anachronism or other proof that it is a spurious compilation of later date. The serious charges brought against its authenticity break down altogether under examination, while there remain several features that point with varying strength to the conclusion that it is, despite its difficulties and corruptions, really a work of the time it purports to be. This result is confirmed by the important corroboration of some of its statements by contemporary Frankish chroniclers. Thus the profession of belief in its authenticity by such eminent historians as Kemble, Pauli, Stubbs, and Freeman agrees with my own conclusion.'

Notwithstanding their general rehabilitation of the work, however, neither critic is prepared to trust it implicitly. Plummer says (p. 52): 'On the whole, then, Asser is an authority to be used with criticism and caution; partly because we have always to be alive to the possibility of interpolation, partly because the writer's Celtic imagination is apt to run away with him.' And thus Stevenson (p. cxxx): 'The work still presents some difficulties. Carelessness of

transcription may possibly explain those that are merely verbal, but there still remain certain passages that lay the author open to the charge of exaggeration, such as his mention of gold-covered and silver-covered buildings, if that be the literal meaning of the passage, and his statement that Alfred might, if he had chosen, have been king before his elder brother Æthelred, with whom, it is clear, he was on most intimate terms.'

The style of the book is not uniform. The passages translated from the *Chronicle* are simpler, while in the more original parts the author displays an unfortunate tendency to a turgid and at times bombastic manner of writing. Indeed, it displays, in many passages, the traits of that Hesperic Latinity which, invented or made fashionable in the sixth century, probably by a British monk in the southwestern part of England, was more or less current in England from the time of Aldhelm until the Norman Conquest. This Hesperic, or Celtic, Latinity has been compared to the mock euphuism of Sir Piercie Shafton in Scott's *Monastery* (Professor H. A. Strong, in *American Journal of Philology* 26. 205), and may be illustrated by Professor Strong's translation into English of certain sentences from the *Hispērica Famina*, the production, as it is believed, of the monk referred to above: 'This precious shower of words glitters, by no awkward barriers confining the diction, and husbands its strength by an exquisite balance and by equable device, trilling sweet descant of Ausonian speech through the speaker's throat by this shower of words passing through Latin throats; just as countless

swarms of bees go here and there in their hollow hives, and sip the honey-streams in their homes, and set in order, as they are wont, their combs with their beaks.’

With the passage just quoted may be compared an extract from chapter 88 of Asser, the translation of which is given below (pp. 49, 50): ‘Ac deinde cotidie inter nos sermocinando, ad hæc investigando aliis inventis æque placabilibus testimoniis, quaternio ille refer-tus succrevit, nec immerito, sicut scriptum est, “super modicum fundamentum ædificat justus et paulatim ad majora defluit,” velut apis fertilissima longe lateque gronnios interrogando discurrens, multimodos divinæ scripturæ flosculos inhianter et incessabiliter congregavit, quis præcordii sui cellulas densatim replevit.’ Such Latin as this is difficult to translate into satisfactory English. If one renders it literally, the result is apt to look rather absurd; and beyond a certain point condensation is impracticable, or else misrepresents the original, faults and merits alike.

Hitherto there have been three translations of Asser into English—that by J. A. Giles in Bohn’s *Six Old English Chronicles*, London, 1848; that by Joseph Stevenson in *Church Historians of England*, Vol. 2, London, 1854; and that by Edward Conybeare, *Alfred in the Chroniclers*, London, 1900. As the basis of my work I have taken the translation of Giles, sometimes following it rather closely, and at other times departing from it more or less widely.

The reader familiar with the traditional Asser will miss some matter with which he is familiar, such as the story of Alfred and the

cakes, that of the raven-banner of the Danes, etc. These are derived from interpolations made in the manuscript by Archbishop Parker, which modern critical scholarship has at length excised. For all matters regarding the manuscript, the earlier editions, etc., as well as for copious illustrative notes on the text, the reader is referred to Stevenson's edition.

Insertions made in the text by Stevenson, on what he considers sufficient grounds, are indicated by < >. The chapter-divisions and -numbering are Stevenson's; the chapter-headings mine. Where modern forms of proper names exist, I have not hesitated to adopt them, and in general have tended rather to normalize them than scrupulously to follow the sometimes various spellings of the text. The notes have almost always been derived from Stevenson's edition, whether or not explicit acknowledgment has been made, but now and then, as in the case of the long note on chapter 56, are my own.

Yale University

JULY 4, 1905

ASSER'S LIFE OF KING ALFRED

1. **Alfred's Birth and Genealogy.**¹—In the year of our Lord's incarnation 849, Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, was born at the royal vill of Wantage, in Berkshire (which receives its name from Berroc Wood, where the box-tree grows very abundantly). His genealogy is traced in the following order: King Alfred was the son of King Æthelwulf; he of Egbert; he of Ealhmund; he of Eafa; he of Eoppa; he of Ingild. Ingild and Ine, the famous king of the West Saxons, were two brothers. Ine went to Rome, and there ending the present life honorably, entered into the heavenly fatherland to reign with Christ. Ingild and Ine were the sons of Cœnred; he of Ceolwald; he of Cutha²; he of Cuthwine; he of Ceawlin; he of Cynric; he of Creoda; he of Cerdic; he of Elesa; <he of Esla;> he of Gewis, from whom the Welsh name all that people Gegwis³; <he of Wig; he of Freawine; he of Freothegar;> he of Brond; he of Beldeag; he of Woden; he of Frithowald; he of Frealaf; he of Frithuwulf; he of Finn<; he of> Godwulf; he of Geata, which Geta the heathen long worshiped as a god. Sedulius makes mention of him in his metrical *Paschal Poem*, as follows:

¹ Based on the *Chronicle* under 855.

² MS. *Cudam*. So always, but see the *Chronicle*.

³ Bede, *Eccl. Hist.* 3. 7: 'The West Saxons, formerly called Gewissae.' Plummer comments in his edition, 2. 89: 'It is probably connected with the "visi" of "Visigoths," meaning "west," and hence would indicate the western confederation of Saxon tribes;... "Gewis" is probably an eponymous hero manufactured out of the tribe-name.' The *gw* of *Gegwis* is a Welsh peculiarity (Stevenson).

If heathen poets rave o'er fancied woe,
While in a turgid stream their numbers flow—
Whether the tragic buskin tread the stage,
Or waggish Geta all our thoughts engage;
If by the art of song they still revive
The taint of ill, and bid old vices live;
If monumental guilt they sing, and lies
Commit to books in magisterial wise;
Why may not I, who list to David's lyre,
And reverent stand amid the hallowed choir,
Hymn heavenly things in words of tranquil tone,
And tell the deeds of Christ in accents all my own?

This Geata was the son of Tætwa; he of Beaw; he of Sceldwea; he of Heremod; he of Itermod; he of Hathra; he of Hwala; he of Bedwig; he of Scaef⁴; he of Noah; he of Lamech; he of Methuselah; he of Enoch; <he of Jared>; he of Mahalalel; he of Kenan⁵; he of Enosh; he of Seth; he of Adam.

2. Genealogy of Alfred's Mother.⁶—The mother of Alfred was named Osburh, an extremely devout woman, noble in mind, noble also by descent; she was daughter to Oslac, the famous cupbearer of King Æthelwulf. This Oslac was a Goth by nation, descended from the Goths and Jutes—of the seed, namely, of Stuf and Wihtgar, two brothers and ealdormen. They, having received possession of the Isle of Wight from

⁴ MS., *Stev. Seth* (but Stevenson suggests *Scaef* in his variants, referring to the *Chronicle* under 855).

⁵ MS. *Cainan*, but see Gen. 5. 12 in R. V.

⁶ Partly from the *Chronicle*, but the whole account of Alfred's father and mother is original.

their uncle, King Cerdic, and his son Cynric their cousin,⁷ slew the few British inhabitants whom they could find in that island, at a place called Wihtgaraburg⁸; for the other inhabitants of the island had either been slain or had escaped into exile.

3. The Danes at Wicganbeorg and Sheppey.⁹—In the year of our Lord's incarnation 851, which was the third of King Alfred's life, Ceorl, Ealdorman of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the heathen at a place called Wicganbeorg,¹⁰ and the Christians gained the victory. In that same year the heathen first wintered in the island called Sheppey, which means 'Sheep-island,' situated in the river Thames between Essex and Kent, though nearer to Kent than to Essex, and containing a fair monastery.¹¹

4. The Danes sack Canterbury.¹²—The same year a great army of heathen came with three hundred and fifty ships to the mouth of the river Thames, and sacked Dorubernia, or Canterbury,¹³ <and also London> (which lies on the north bank

⁷ From the *Chronicle* under 530 and 534.

⁸ Unidentified.

⁹ From the *Chronicle*.

¹⁰ Possibly Wigborough, in the parish of South Petherton in Somersetshire (Stevenson).

¹¹ Minster in Sheppey, founded by St. Sexburh in the seventh century; it disappeared during the Danish ravages (Stevenson).

¹² From the *Chronicle*.

¹³ *MS.* Cantwariorum civitatem; *Chron.* Cantwaraburg.

of the river Thames, on the confines of Essex and Middlesex, though in truth that city belongs to Essex); and they put to flight Beorhtwulf, King of Mercia, with all the army which he had led out to oppose them.

5. Battle of Aclea.¹⁴—Having done these things there, the aforesaid heathen host went into Surrey, which is a shire situated on the south shore of the river Thames, and to the west of Kent. And Æthelwulf, King of the Saxons, and his son Æthelbald, with the whole army, fought a long time against them at a place called Aclea,¹⁵ that is, ‘Oak-plain’; there, after a lengthy battle, which was fought with much bravery on both sides, the most part of the heathen horde was utterly destroyed and slain, so that we never heard of their being so smitten, either before or since, in any region, in one day¹⁶; and the Christians gained an honorable victory, and kept possession of the battle-field.

6. Defeat of the Danes at Sandwich.¹⁷—In that same year Æthelstan and Ealdorman Ealhere slew a large army of the heathen in Kent, at a place called Sandwich, and took nine ships of their fleet, the others escaping by flight.

¹⁴ Based upon the *Chronicle*.

¹⁵ Stevenson is inclined to reject this customary identification with Oakley, in Surrey.

¹⁶ The source—the *Chronicle*—says: ‘And there made the greatest slaughter among the heathen army that we have heard reported to the present day.’

¹⁷ From the *Chronicle*.

7. **Æthelwulf assists Burgred.**¹⁸—In the year of our Lord’s incarnation 853, which was the fifth of King Alfred’s life, Burgred, King of the Mercians, sent messengers to beseech Æthelwulf, King of the West Saxons, to come and help him in reducing to his sway the inhabitants of Mid-Wales, who dwell between Mercia and the western sea, and who were struggling against him beyond measure. So without delay King Æthelwulf, on receipt of the embassy, moved his army, and advanced with King Burgred against Wales¹⁹; and immediately upon his entrance he ravaged it, and reduced it under subjection to Burgred. This being done, he returned home.

8. **Alfred at Rome.**²⁰—In that same year King Æthelwulf sent his above-named son Alfred to Rome, with an honorable escort both of nobles and commoners. Pope Leo at that time presided over the apostolic see, and he anointed as king²¹ the aforesaid child²² Alfred in the town, and, adopting him as his son, confirmed him.²³

¹⁸ Mainly from the *Chronicle*.

¹⁹ The ‘North Welsh’ of the *Chronicle*.

²⁰ Based upon the *Chronicle*.

²¹ *MS.* in regem.

²² *MS.* infantem.

²³ ‘A letter from the pope to Alfred’s father, regarding the ceremony at Rome, has been fortunately preserved for us in a twelfth-century collection of papal letters, now in the British Museum.... The letter is as follows: “*Edeluulfo, regi Anglorum* [marginal direction for rubricator]. <F>ilium vestrum Erfred, quem hoc in tempore ad Sanctorum Apostolorum limina destinare curastis, benigne suscepimus, et, quasi spiritalem filium consulatus cingulo <cinguli *emend. Ewald*> honore vestimentisque, ut mos est Romanis consulibus, decoravimus, eo quod in nostris

9. Other Events of 853.²⁴—That same year also, Ealdorman Ealhere with the men of Kent, and Huda with the men of Surrey, fought bravely and resolutely against an army of the heathen in the island which is called Tenet²⁵ in the Saxon tongue, but Ruim in the Welsh language. At first the Christians were victorious. The battle lasted a long time; many fell on both sides, and were drowned in the water; and both the ealdormen were there slain. In the same year also, after Easter, Æthelwulf, King of the West Saxons, gave his daughter to Burgred, King of the Mercians, as his queen, and the marriage was celebrated in princely wise at the royal vill of Chippenham.

10. The Heathen winter in Sheppey.²⁶—In the year of our Lord's incarnation 855, which was the seventh of the aforesaid king's life, a great army of the heathen spent the whole winter in the aforesaid island of Sheppey.

11. Æthelwulf journeys to Rome.²⁷—In that same year the aforesaid worshipful King Æthelwulf freed the tenth part of all his kingdom from every royal service and tribute,

se tradidit manibus” (Stevenson). The *Chronicle* has: ‘... consecrated him as king, and took him as bishop-son.’ See p. 29.

²⁴ Based upon the *Chronicle*.

²⁵ Thanet.

²⁶ From the *Chronicle*.

²⁷ Based upon the *Chronicle*.

and offered it up as an everlasting grant to God the One and Three, on the cross of Christ, for the redemption of his own soul and those of his predecessors. In the same year he went to Rome with much honor; and taking with him his son, the aforesaid King Alfred, a second time on the same journey, because he loved him more than his other sons, he remained there a whole year. After this he returned to his own country, bringing with him Judith, daughter of Charles, King of the Franks.²⁸

12. Rebellion of Æthelbald.²⁹—In the meantime, however, whilst King Æthelwulf was residing this short time beyond sea, a base deed was done in the western part of Selwood,³⁰ repugnant to the morals of all Christians. For King Æthelbald, Ealhstan, Bishop of the church of Sherborne, and Eanwulf, Ealdorman of Somerset, are said to have formed a conspiracy to the end that King Æthelwulf, on his return from Rome, should not again be received in his kingdom. This unfortunate occurrence, unheard-of in all previous ages, is ascribed by many to the bishop and ealdorman alone, since, say they, it resulted from their counsels. Many also ascribe it solely to the insolence of the king, because he was headstrong in this matter and in many other perversities, as I have

²⁸ Charles the Bald.

²⁹ Original.

³⁰ Comprising Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall.

heard related by certain persons, and as was proved by the result of that which followed. For on his return from Rome, Æthelwulf's son aforesaid, with all his counselors, or rather waylayers, attempted to perpetrate the crime of repulsing the king from his own kingdom; but neither did God suffer it, nor did the nobles of all Wessex consent thereto. For to prevent this irremediable danger to Wessex of a war between father and son, or rather of the whole nation waging civil war more fiercely and cruelly from day to day, as they espoused the cause of the one or the other,—by the extraordinary clemency of the father, seconded by the consent of all the nobles, the kingdom which had hitherto been undivided was parted between the two, the eastern districts being given to the father, and the western to the son. Thus where the father ought by just right to have reigned, there did his unjust and obstinate son bear rule; for the western part of Wessex is always superior to the eastern.

13. Judith's Position in Wessex.³¹—When Æthelwulf, therefore, returned from Rome, the whole nation, as was fitting, so rejoiced³² in the arrival of the ruler that, if he had allowed them, they would have expelled his unruly son Æthelbald, with all his counselors, from the kingdom. But he, as I have

³¹ Chiefly original.

³² From the *Chronicle*.