

"Between the Fortunate Thief and the King":
Re-examining the Literacy of King Alfred in
Asser's Life of King Alfred

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Asser's *Life of King Alfred* has always presented problems for historians. It often seems to contradict other oral and written records; some of the stories, taken as history, make little sense; and it comes off as poorly written, too. Instead of being a fascinating insight into the life and works of King Alfred, it mostly provides a source of conflict and confusion. Many questions can be asked: Why is it so disorganized? Why is it merely a scattering of personal anecdotes amongst entries from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*? How did Alfred create so many translations—translations of very high quality, which infer a natural familiarity with classical Latin concepts and figures—if he was illiterate until ten years before his death?

These questions are made more complicated by the history of the manuscript. The parchment manuscript was certainly not written by Asser himself; it was "the work of more than one hand". On top of that, the manuscript was lost to a fire in 1731;¹ all that remains are modern facsimiles, notes, and a series of medieval references to the work. Errors could certainly have crept in.

Perhaps it is time to re-examine Asser's work. Looking at it as a finished tale, the one Asser intended to create, leads to the questions above. What if the *Life of King Alfred* we have today wasn't Alfred's original intention? Taking Asser's work as a rough draft—a collection of

1 Keynes and Lapidge, *Notes: Asser's Life of King Alfred*, p. 223.

notes and stories that he intended to go back and finish later—could answer many of these questions.

Creation of a Draft

The following section is a piece of imaginative historical fiction, written with the intent of explaining how this idea of the rough draft might have come to exist, and how it might have survived the many centuries between Asser's time and the present. All of it is possible and fits the known facts; however, as with many historical mysteries from the period, the holes filled by the fiction are often much larger than the facts themselves.

After accepting the position of Bishop of Sherborne around 893,² Asser left King Alfred's side, where he'd spent most of the last three years. He traveled to the bishopric that summer and began his reign. At this point, he likely thought to himself that he would like to write about Alfred's life, once the king died; possibly intending to write a hagiography for what he hoped would be the cult of Alfred, or maybe just a text fleshing out the *Chronicle*.

Knowing that he'd like to write this story someday, he didn't want to risk forgetting the stories he'd accumulated over his years

² The Introduction states that "Asser's succession to the see of Sherborne can thus be dated no more closely than between 892 and 900." (Keynes and Lapidge, Introduction to *Alfred the Great*, p. 48). For the purposes of this fiction, I am having him ascend in 893 to give him an additional reason to leave Alfred's side for good.

with Alfred. With this in mind, Asser sat down with a stack of wax tablets and a copy of the recent annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. He translated the relevant pieces of the *Chronicle*, taking notes on the events of Alfred's life, and added his own anecdotes from the king's life. This rough outline would suffice as a reminder of the full stories he hoped to tell later, once Alfred had passed away and there wouldn't be more events to add to the life.

Unfortunately, the requirements of his duties as bishop kept him busier than he'd intended. When Alfred died in 899, Asser thought of that stack of wax tablets, but decided they would have to wait until he had the time to write the story as he felt it ought to be written.

After Asser's death in 909, the various writings found in his study were moved to the library, including a series of loosely bound wax tablets. The tablets stayed there for a hundred years or so, when a group of scholars—possibly led by Byrhtferth of Ramsey—took an unnumbered stack of tablets³, attempted to sort out what order they should go in, numbered the chapters, and transcribed the story of King Alfred into a parchment manuscript.⁴ The manuscript copy of that

3 Some wax tablets from ancient Greece and Rome survive in legible condition to the present day; therefore, they could easily survive the time between Asser and Byrhtferth. The University of Michigan Papyrus Collection contains images of several of the surviving wax tablets (see links in the Works Cited section).

4 The manuscript was likely produced by a group of scholars (or scribes), since the now-lost manuscript is described by the paleographer Humphrey Wanley in 1721 as "not written by one hand, but by several and much about the same time, according to the custom of writing books of old". See Keynes and Lapidge's notes on *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, p. 224. I speculate that the group may have been led by Byrhtferth of Ramsey in recognition of, but in contrast to, the idea that the

rough draft then passed through several hands, eventually arriving in the library of Robert Cotton. Robert Cotton's library was transferred to Essex House in 1712, and then to Ashburnham House in 1730, where it was listed as "lost, burnt, or interely spoiled" in a fire on the morning of 23 October 1731.⁵

One Tablet Out of Place

One of the greatest challenges to Asser's version of King Alfred's life is the idea that Alfred miraculously learned to read and write Latin in one day, but that day didn't come until 887, twelve years before Alfred's death. As Alfred P. Smyth puts it:

"If we see Alfred as a middle-aged student struggling with vocabulary and metaphor, then we incline to interpret his digressions as precocious attempts of a self-taught rustic, striving to think things out for himself and grasping at apparently homely metaphors in his struggle to make sense of his text. . . . If on the other hand, we accept that this exceptional man who translated such difficult philosophical works into the vernacular, and who adapted the texts of his authors so drastically, had been familiar with these authors from his youth . . . reveals not a man

Life of King Alfred was an elaborate forgery created by Byrhtferth. See Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*.

5 Keynes and Lapidge, *Notes: Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. 223-225.

who is struggling to secure his own intellectual grasp, but rather a master, who is in such complete control of his subject, that he wishes to impart the meaning of his exemplar in the fullest possible way."⁶

For scholars like Smyth, only a man educated from youth could produce the understanding of classical culture shown in Alfred's translations. Asser's idea of a king who came to education late in life doesn't match with the Alfred seen in his translations: "a scholar of long-standing, who got his ideas from books."⁷

Given the history of the manuscript, however, it's possible that Asser was misunderstood. The challenged paragraph, chapter 87, reads as follows:

*Eodem quoque anno saepe memoratus Ælfred,
Angulsaxonum rex, divino instinctu legere et interpretari
simul uno eodemque die primitus inchoavit. Sed, ut
apertius ignorantibus pateat, causam huius tardae
inchoationis expedire curabo.*⁸

Keynes and Lapidge translate this chapter as:

It was also in this year that Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, first began through divine inspiration to read [Latin] and to translate at the same time, all on one and

⁶ Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 568.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁸ *Asserius de Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*, ed. Stevenson, p. 73.

the same day. But in order that this process may be understood more clearly by those who are uninformed, I shall take pains to explain the reasons for this late start.⁹

The first notable thing about this chapter is that it never gives an absolute date—they only say "*eodem quoque anno*" (in that same year). If the Asser manuscript is a transcription of an unnumbered rough draft, it's certainly possible that chapter 87 was on one tablet, and that that tablet was out of place in the stack. That year could have been much earlier in life; probably not as a child, since Asser does mention the "late start", but not necessarily in late adulthood, either.

The other problem solved by chapter 87 being out of place is that it doesn't have to be paired with the chapters following it; chapters 88-90, when combined with the miraculous start described in chapter 87, create the image of the bumbling scholar that Smyth so objects to. These chapters are also chronologically problematic: in them, Alfred is described as carrying a "little book which he constantly carried on his person, and in which were written the day-time offices and some psalms and certain prayers."¹⁰ He collected the items into the book back in chapter 24—in 866, when Alfred was 18!¹¹

⁹ Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, tr. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

If we move chapter 87 to around that point—when Alfred was collecting pieces of the Latin Mass into books and studying them closely, and complaining about the lack of "good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons"¹²—a very different picture of Alfred's scholarly nature begins to emerge. No longer a bumbling middle-aged man, Alfred becomes someone who came slightly late to Latin letters (age sixteen or eighteen would be somewhat late for a classical boy), as the chapter states, but could still be far more comfortable with them than someone who came to learning at age 39.

This also just makes sense; chapters 87-90 feel out of place in context with the surrounding chapters. According to Keynes and Lapidge, these chapters fall outside of the two parts of Asser's life; chapters 1-86 detail Alfred's life, while chapters 90-106 discuss the quality of his rule.¹³ However, chapters 87-89 don't really form a bridge between them; it's more like they were misplaced from their correct location.

Looking at the chapters before and after chapters 87-90, one realizes just how out of place they seem to be. Chapter 85 deals with the death of Charles the Fat and the fight over his throne; chapter 86 contains a sentence about the Viking army and about

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹³Keynes and Lapidge, Introduction to Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, p. 55.

alms of King Alfred for Rome; and chapter 91 describes Alfred's disease. It seems more likely that the later scribes had the tablet for chapter 87 out of place, and mixed Asser's anecdotes about Alfred's little books in with the chapter on his miraculous learning.

As for Asser's anecdote about teaching Alfred "a fuller understanding of passages of Holy Scripture,"¹⁴ the whole thing is somewhat curious. Asser's motive behind the section could be quite simple; if Alfred is a great and holy king—and especially if Asser wants to eventually make the case that Alfred should be a saint—then it is no small credit to Asser if he is the one that helped bring Alfred to understand and study Scripture. But this makes little sense; casting aside the whole question of the rough draft and the nature of Alfred's literacy, it's impossible to imagine that, before Asser came along, no one in Alfred's life had shown him a Bible and explained to him the importance of the Holy Scripture—especially when Alfred already had "certain psalms" collected in his "little book" twenty-one years earlier¹⁵.

What's to be done about this anecdote, then? One option is that Asser heard the story and claimed it as his own to increase his role in Alfred's learning. Lapidge would not find this at all surprising,

¹⁴ Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, tr. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75. While Alfred's miraculous learning of Latin in chapter 87 may have been out of place, the anecdote about teaching Scripture would have to have happened during the late 880s or early 890s if Asser was actually there.

since he wrote, "As is often the case with authors whose overall command of Latin is insecure, Asser took care to embellish his prose with learned looking words of various sorts."¹⁶ If Asser embellished his prose in such a way to make himself sound more intelligent, then it shouldn't be surprising if he embellishes his stories to make himself sound more important. Regardless of Asser's intention, the lack of a final draft makes understanding his purpose difficult.

The one other difficult piece of this puzzle over Alfred's literacy is the transition to the next chapter. The first sentence of chapter 91 seems to refer back to chapters 89-90 by referring again to the thief on the cross who recognized Jesus; this could show that these chapters really do belong where they are. The other possibility is that when the later scholars put chapters 87-90 together where they now are in the manuscript, they added the sentence. Deleting that sentence from chapter 91 would cause it to start, "From his twentieth year until his forty-fifth (which is now in course) he has been plagued continually with the savage attacks of some unknown disease . . ." ¹⁷ This matches more closely the other chapters which mention dates; many of them begin the chapter by giving the date—for example, from chapter 84, "In the year of the

¹⁶ Keynes and Lapidge, Introduction to *Alfred the Great*, p. 54. Also quoted in Smyth's *Alfred the Great*, p. 302.

¹⁷ Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, tr. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 101.

Lord's Incarnation 882 (the thirty-ninth of King Alfred's life) . . ."¹⁸

As a result, it makes more sense to assume the chapter originally started with the sentence giving the years, and the later scholars added the line about being "transfixed by the nails of many tribulations"¹⁹ in order to attempt to make chapters 87-90 fit better with the surrounding text.

After careful analysis, chapters 87-90—which originally seemed to cast Alfred as a man who came to letters late in life, under the tutelage of the bishop Asser—actually look very different. Chapter 87, which shows the miracle of Alfred learning to translate in a day, could go anywhere else in the book; this chapter probably belongs back around chapter 24, placing it around Alfred's eighteenth year. Chapters 88 through 90, which talk about Asser creating a book of favorite Scripture passages for Alfred, could have happened as described, although not necessarily at that exact part of Alfred's life; they refer to the book that Alfred always carried around (first described in chapter 24), and says that they created another like it that Alfred also always carried around from then on. However, this probably wasn't Alfred's first experience with Latin Scripture; that part was likely an embellishment on Asser's part. Chapter 91 starts with a transition sentence to link it with 88-90;

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 101.

it's certainly possible that transition sentence was invented later. All of this helps explain this section in a book about a man that even Asser claims was of "excellent intelligence" and "great enthusiasm for the pursuit of learning."²⁰ Smyth and other scholars who argue with the literal presentation of Alfred's literacy in Asser's account would likely feel more comfortable with the Alfred found beneath the literal subtext in this new re-examination; instead of a bumbling scholar who came to understand Latin late in life, we now see a man who pursued knowledge from childhood and was still fascinated enough late in life to relive those early pursuits with Asser in between fighting Vikings and fighting off disease.

Other Evidence for a Rough Draft

Asser's Life of King Alfred presents other problems which would be answered if the work was simply an unfinished rough draft. The ending of the *Life* and the pieces of the *Chronicle* contained within are two examples of such problems.

Perhaps the most obvious is the ending of the work, or the lack thereof: Chapter 106, the last chapter in the work, not only ends without concluding the *Life*, it ends without even concluding the idea it was formulating. The last sentences describe how many of the elders in Alfred's day wished they could have been better

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 99.

educated, and "considered the youth of the present day to be fortunate, who had the luck to be instructed in the liberal arts."²¹ The last sentence of Asser's work reads, "But I have explained this concern for learning how to read among the young and old in order to give some idea of the character of King Alfred."²² Obviously, the life is unfinished; it ends six years before Alfred's death. But beyond that, it seems that not only is the life unfinished, but the chapter itself is unfinished.

Asser's work quotes several times from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In some cases, this directly relates to King Alfred; for example, chapter 72 reads, "In that same year the Viking army, which had settled in East Anglia, broke in a most insolent manner the peace they had established with King Alfred."²³ However, many times, the *Chronicle* is quoted without regard to Alfred at all, and no attempt is ever made to tie it into Alfred's life. For example, Chapter 20 talks about the Vikings laying waste to Kent, but this happens five years before Alfred takes the throne.

Perhaps the most telling example of this is in Chapter 21, which quotes from the *Chronicle* two years later, and ends with Asser noting, "Among such terrible wars and in year-by-year reckoning, I think I should return to that which particularly inspired

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

me to this work: in other words, I consider that some small account . . . of the infancy and boyhood of my esteemed lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, should briefly be inserted at this point."²⁴ The book begins with two chapters on Alfred's parentage and genealogy, then continues with 19 chapters of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and it is only at this point that Asser feels he should place "some small account" of Alfred's boyhood. It's impossible to say whether this would have been cleaned up in a more final draft, but it seems likely that whatever life of King Alfred would have been written later would have focused more on Alfred's life and less on the external events during his childhood. Perhaps Asser planned on collecting more stories on Alfred's childhood, and then tying them into the *Chronicle* (for example, Chapter 7 could have told of the events of the year 853, and then said "In that same year, the fifth of the king's life, Alfred first received instruction in his prayers," or some similar event).

In any case, both the beginning and the end of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* are exceedingly rough, and the rest of it is of similar quality. Whether quoting extensively from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, telling anecdotes about Alfred, or simply ending in the middle of the chapter, Asser's work comes off as rough, unpolished, and unfinished. Asser comes off as being "without any mastery of

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 74.

prose style. His sentences are frequently long and sprawling, . . . his syntax unclear and his exposition garbled."²⁵ Two other possibilities exist: that Asser was not up to the task, or that he simply didn't care and didn't put any effort into writing the *Life*. Neither of these really make sense; he was a bishop and a scholar close to Alfred, and "helped Alfred to translate Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*,"²⁶ all of which seems to imply that he was both competent and close to Alfred, and his continual praise leaves "no doubt that all the praise and admiration was deeply felt."²⁷ If Asser was competent and if he cared deeply about Alfred, that leaves only the possibility that this draft is simply unfinished.

Conclusion

Scholars have had many problems with Asser's *Life of King Alfred* over the years. Its prose is rough; it quotes extensively from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, including many completely irrelevant passages; and it ends in the middle of King Alfred's life, just to name a few issues. Perhaps the most strenuous objection has come from scholars like Alfred P. Smyth, who take issue with (among other problems) the literal version of how Asser presents Alfred's scholastic interests and Asser's version of assisting Alfred in

²⁵ Keynes and Lapidge, Introduction to Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, p. 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

pursuing those interests. However, further analysis shows that the rough nature of Asser's work actually helps answer these concerns; Asser's versions could be out of place in the *Life*, and sometimes overstated or embellished a bit, but still basically true.

The danger that comes from the rough draft hypothesis is that it starts to seem possible to either explain away any problem with the work by simply highlighting the rough nature of the piece, then saying that either Asser never finished the section, or the later scribes and scholars edited or misunderstood it. One must be careful to find evidence in other parts of the work, and the scholar should always be aware that they're revising history by being yet another re-interpreter of Asser's work.

However, re-examining Asser's work is not without merit. The work, as it stands, does pose a number of questions and problems. Viewing it as a rough draft, examining how that draft is constructed, and noting the problems and mistakes in that construction allows one to find solutions to many of those problems; and through that, we can hopefully come closer to the truth of the lives of both Asser and King Alfred.

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<<http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap/k12/materials/wax.html>>

(contains a link to more examples of surviving wax tablets)

Along with Asser's biography of King Alfred (and an incredibly extensive amount of footnotes) there are also translations of religious and philosophical books. All of them "for different reasons" serve to add another layer of information about King Alfred, and the author shares a wealth of knowledge with the readers. While interesting, it is not what I would call a historical page-turner. Don't count on reading this in one or two sittings. Alfred the Great (848/849 - 26 October 899) was King of Wessex from 871 to c. 886 and King of the Anglo-Saxons from c. 886 to 899. He was the youngest son of King Æthelwulf of Wessex. His father died when he was young, and three of Alfred's brothers, Æthelbald, Æthelberht and Æthelred, reigned in turn before him. After ascending the throne, Alfred spent several years fighting Viking invasions. He won a decisive victory in the Battle of Edington in 878 and made an agreement with the Vikings, creating the Danelaw. Alfred, King of England, 849-899. Publisher. Boston, New York : Ginn & company. Copyright-evidence. Evidence reported by alyson-wieczorek for item asserslifeofking00asseiala on August 1, 2007: visible notice of copyright; stated date is 1906. Copyright-evidence-date. 20070801183928.