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**Æthelstan, “King of All Britain”:
Royal and Imperial Ideology in Tenth-Century England**

**By
Shane Bobrycki**

Professor Eric Goldberg, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree in Bachelor of Arts with Honors
in History

WILLIAMS COLLEGE

Williamstown, Massachusetts

April 16, 2007



Figure 1: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 183, iv (King Æthelstan with St. Cuthbert)

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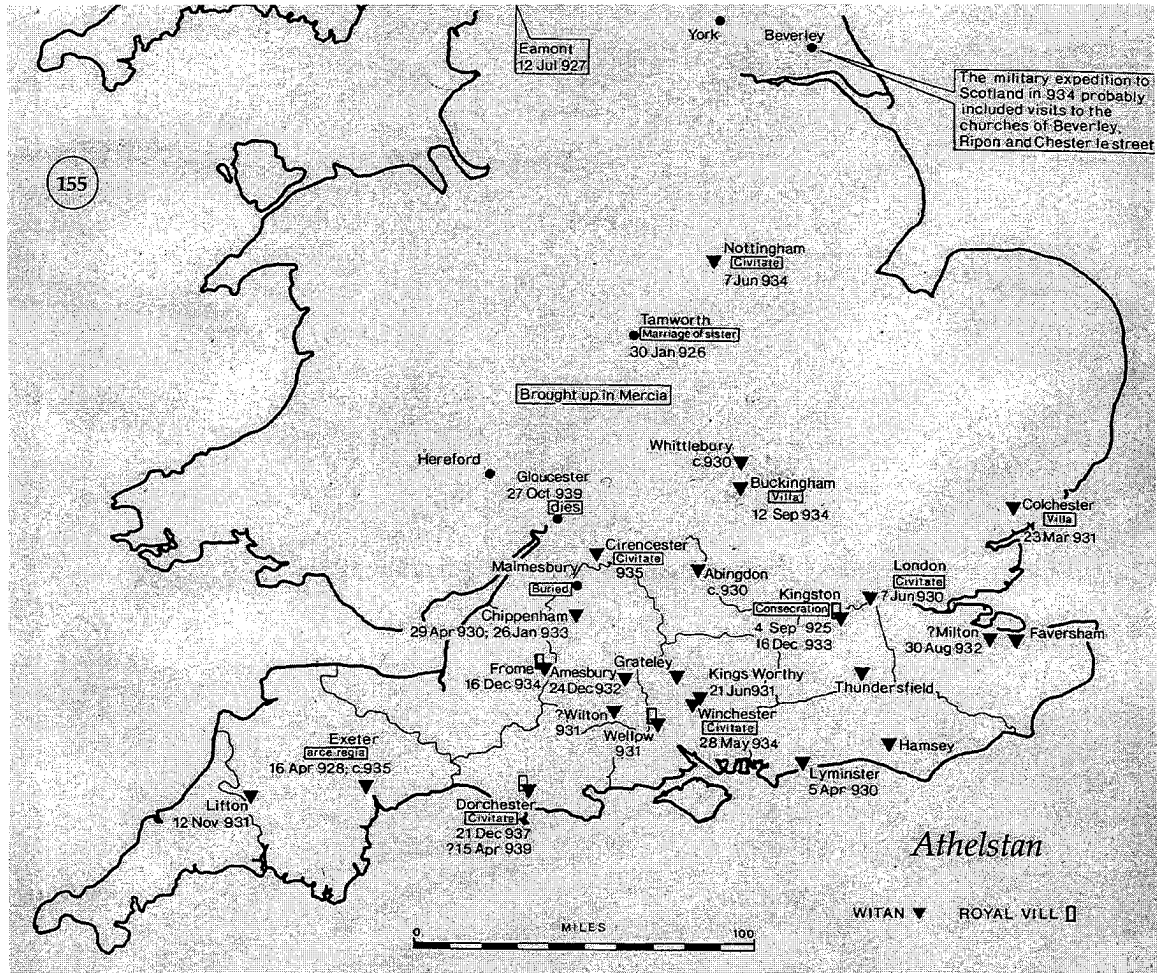
*For Anna,
with love, gratitude,
and awe.*

ABBREVIATIONS

(I-VI) As.	Æthelstan's Law Codes, I-VI, printed in F. Liebermann, ed. <i>Die Geetze der Angelsachsen</i> . 3 vols. Halle: Niemeyer, 1903-1916; and, with English translation, in F.L. Attenborough, ed. and trans. <i>The Laws of the Earliest English Kings</i> . New York: Russell, 1963; cited by heading and section number.
<i>Arm.Pryd.</i>	Ifor Williams and Rachel Bromwich, eds. <i>Armes Prydein: The Prophecy of Britain from the Book of Taliesin</i> . Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972.
ASC	Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, printed in Charles Plummer, ed. <i>Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, with supplementary extracts from the others: a Revised Text</i> , 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-9; Translation in <i>EHD</i> , no. 1; cited <i>sub anno</i> (s.a.) and by MS sigla (A-G).
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i> .
Asser	William Henry Stevenson, ed. <i>Asser's Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904; cited by chapter.
AU	Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ed. and trans. <i>The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)</i> . Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983; cited <i>sub anno</i> (s.a.)
<i>Batt.Brun.</i>	Alistair Campbell. <i>The Battle of Brunanburh</i> . London: Heinemann, 1938.
<i>Chron.Æthel.</i>	Campbell, A. <i>The Chronicle of Æthelweard</i> . London: Nelson, 1962.
CS	Birch, Walter de Gray Birch. <i>Cartularium Saxonicum: a Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History</i> , 3 vols. London: Whiting, 1885-1893; cited by number.
EH	Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, <i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.
EHD	Dorothy Whitelock, ed. <i>English Historical Documents, Volume 1: c. 500-1042</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i> .
GP	N.E.S.A. Hamilton, ed. <i>Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi de Gestis Pontificum Anglorum</i> . Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint, 1964.

- GR R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, eds. *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum*, vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; cited by book, chapter, and section.
- Heimskringla* Erling Monsen and A. H. Smith, ed. and trans. *Heimskringla or the Lives of the Norse Kings by Snorre Sturlason*. New York: D Appleton and Company, 1932.
- HSC Ted Johnson South, ed. *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: A History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of his Patrimony*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2002.
- Keynes and Lapidge 1983 Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, eds. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*. New York: Penguin, 1983.
- Lib. Vit.* Simon Keynes, ed. *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1996, cited by folio.
- MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica
- PASE Nelson, Janet and Simon Keynes, directors. *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England: A comprehensive biographical register of recorded inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England (c.450-1066)*. <http://www.pase.ac.uk/>.
- S Sawyer, P.H. *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* London: Royal Historical Society, 1968. Cited by number.
- SEHD Florence Elizabeth Harmer, ed. *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914.
- Stenton 1971 F. M. Stenton. *Anglo-Saxon England*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Symeon HR Thomas Arnold, ed. *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, vol 2: Historia Regum*. London: Longman, 1885.
- Symeon *Libellus de exordio* David Rollason, ed. and trans. *Symeon of Durham: Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, Ecclesie (Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham)*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2000.

ÆTHELSTAN'S ENGLAND



D. Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), no. 155.

COINS¹



Figure 2: Early Coins (diademed bust, *top three*; two-line, *bottom three*)

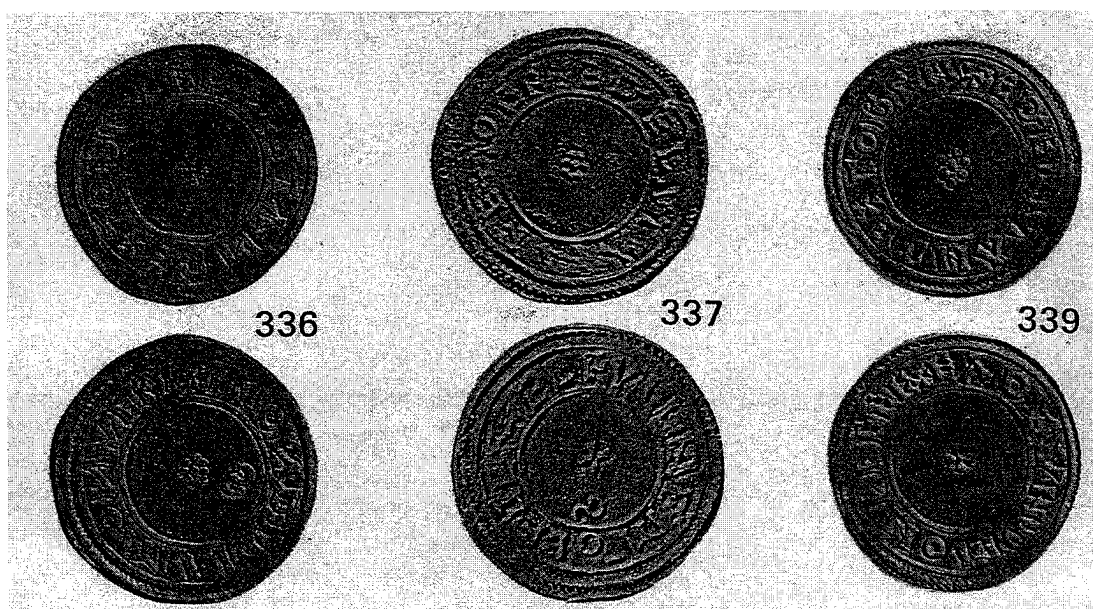


Figure 3: Mercian rosette coins

¹ All from C.E. Blunt, "The Coinage of Athelstan, 924-939," *British Numismatic Journal* 42 (1974): 35-159, plates.

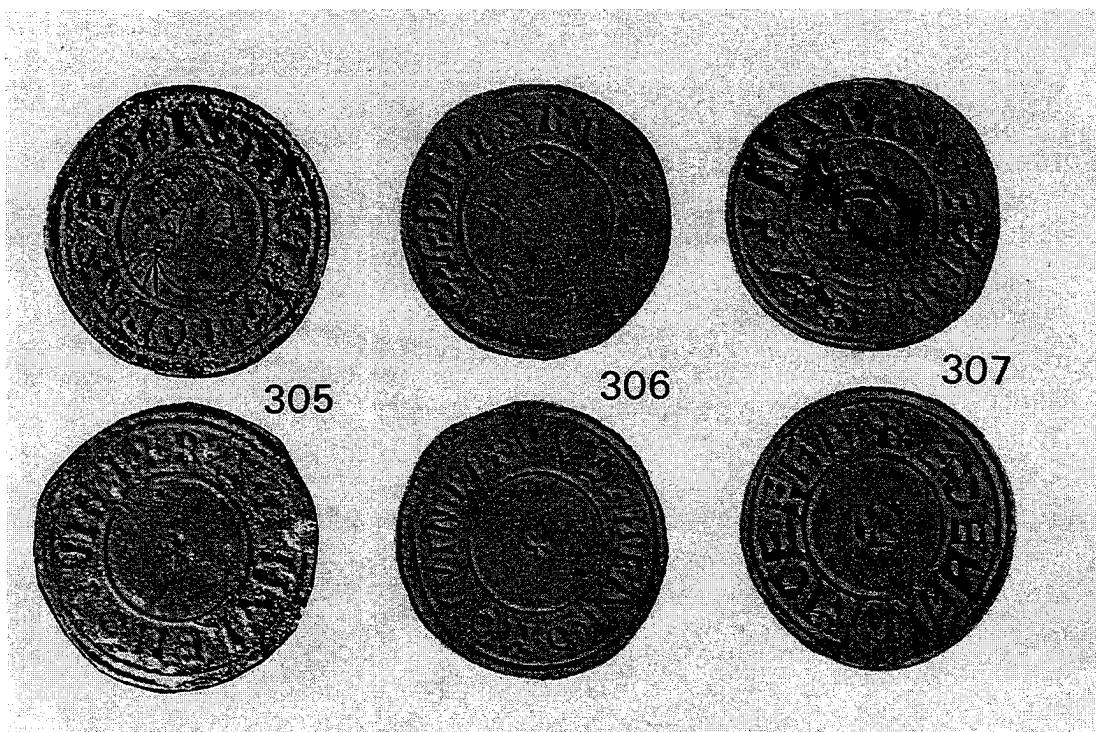


Figure 4: Best of Both Worlds (crowned bust coins with *rex totius Britanniae* legends)

Figure 5: cross type (ÆDELSTAN REX TO BRI)



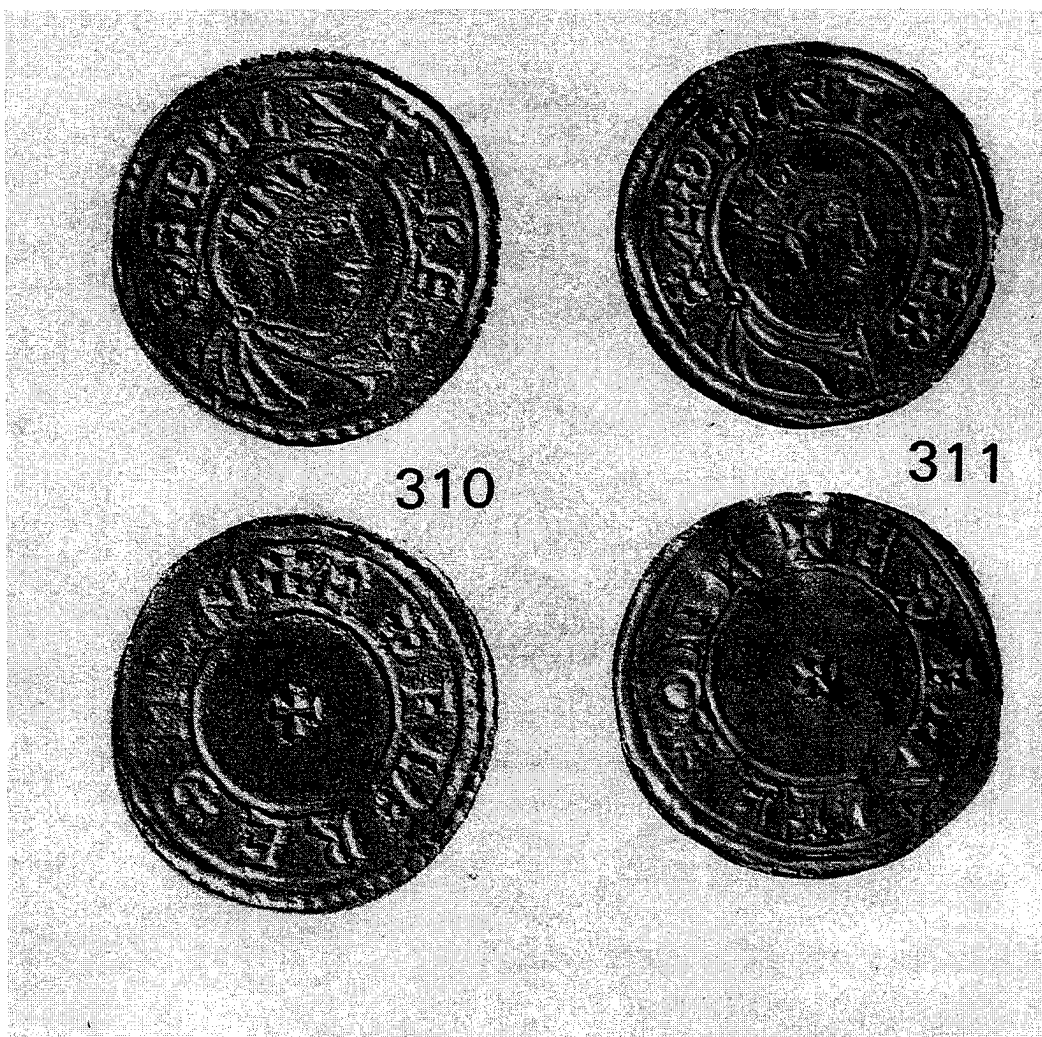


Figure 6: crowned bust coins

INTRODUCTION
ÆTHELSTAN, “KING OF ALL BRITAIN”

On June 7, 934 the Anglo-Saxon king Æthelstan (r. 924-939) held a great assembly at Nottingham. In attendance were the luminaries of his kingdom: king’s thegns, ealdormen of both Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian descent, over a dozen bishops, the archbishops of Canterbury and York, and at least three Welsh subkings, all with their respective retinues. This vast crowd had convened eleven days earlier at Winchester, 160 miles to the south, whence they had traveled. The king was on his way to war against Constantine II, king of the Scots, who had ruled in the north since the reign of Æthelstan’s father Edward. The exact reasons for this expedition remain unclear, but it seems that Constantine had broken an oath of allegiance which he had sworn to Æthelstan in 927. In the late spring of 934 Æthelstan, having raised an army and a fleet, headed north to bring the king of Scots to heel.

At the Nottingham assembly, where he must have spent some time discussing military matters, the king granted “a certain piece of land of no small size in the place which the inhabitants call Amounderness” (in modern-day Lancashire) to the Church of St. Peter at York.¹ A charter recording and authorizing this grant was drawn up, and the most important attendees attested their consent in strict hierarchical order. Æthelstan was the first, “corroborating and subscribing” as “king endowed with the holy rule (*ierarchia*) of special privilege,” followed by Archbishop Wulfhelm of Canterbury and then Archbishop Wulfstan of York, the recipient of the grant. Next were the three Welsh kings Hywel of Deheubarth, Morgan of Glywysing and Gwent,

¹ S 407: “quandam non modicam telluris particulam...in loco quem solicolae Agemundernes vocitant.”

and Idwal Foel of Greater Gwynedd, “consenting and subscribing” as sub-kings (*subreguli*). After these were the bishops, then the ealdormen (*duces*), followed by the king’s thegns (*ministri*), and finally, according to the archivist who copied the charter down, many other *milites*² whose names he did not record. The charter served as an opportunity to assert Æthelstan’s power and status in writing; thus, he is expansively described as “king of the English, raised by the right hand of the Almighty, which is Christ, to the throne of the kingdom of all Britain.”³

This lofty title, mirrored in charters, coins, poems, depictions, and chronicles, is a classic expression of Æthelstan’s royal ideology at its height. Æthelstan was a powerful king. He ruled over almost all of modern-day England, an unprecedented achievement. But he could also compel autonomous kings in Britain—Welsh, Scottish, and Norse alike—to trek hundreds of miles to honor, advise and fight for him. And when they did not submit, he had the power to force them to. He had vast estates to grant to subordinates and riches to make generous donations to churches and foreign allies. He was well aware of his own power, and portrayed himself as a king of the English people, but also as an emperor in the mold of Charlemagne, a ruler over all the peoples of the island of Britain, and justified in that rule by God.

This thesis examines how King Æthelstan legitimized and systematized his claims of power and status through a royal ideology, how that ideology emerged, what it consisted of, and how it manifested itself in his kingship and diplomacy. In doing so, this thesis questions some of the teleological assumptions which dominate

² A term which means “soldiers” or, in this context, “thegns.” Cf. Loyn, H. R. “Gesiths and Thegns from the 7th to the 10th Century,” *EHR* 70 (1955), 543

³ “Æðelstanus rex Anglorum, per omnipotentis dextram, quae Christus est, totius Britanniae regni solio sublimatus”

the scholarship on Æthelstan. Scholars traditionally downplay Æthelstan's imperial claim to rule the peoples of the "kingdom of all Britain," while emphasizing his royal claim to rule a "kingdom of the English" that roughly corresponds to the historical borders of modern England. This teleological approach misunderstands the intentions of Æthelstan's ideology apparent from the sources that survive. More generally, this study makes the case for a sophisticated, centralized royal ideology in tenth-century England, one which was ultimately effective in legitimating both imperial and royal pretensions, and attempts to dispel the myth that pre-modern institutions automatically preclude ambitious or complex political systems.

Anglo-Saxon England to 934

The emergence of Æthelstan's royal ideology, however, can only be explained in its proper context. After all, heady as the claims underlying this ideology often were, they were based on claims of rulership over lands and peoples. These claims had their origin in the stormy events of the ninth and early tenth centuries, when Wessex went from being one of several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain to the main power on the island. Three events mark out this transition: the Viking invasions of the ninth century, the West-Saxon resistance to these invasions under his grandfather Alfred the Great, and the West-Saxon expansion into Danish-ruled England under his father Edward.

Scandinavian Vikings began to raid sporadically in Western Europe during the late eighth century. By the middle of the ninth century, scattered raiding parties had given way to large armies that were semi-permanently based on inlets or rivers. The

indigenous kingdoms offered some successful resistance, but the Vikings' mobility and resilience, as well as their constant reinforcement from Scandinavia and the Continent, diminished the effect of their victories.⁴ In 865 an enormous Danish force, the "great army," landed in East Anglia, initiating (in the words of historian Frank Stenton) "a momentous change in the character of the Danish attacks upon England" that threatened "the whole fabric of English society": the arrival of an army that intended to conquer and settle.⁵

The "great army" and its offshoots moved up and down the island of Britain, conquering and partitioning one kingdom after another. By the late 870s Wessex was the only independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom left standing. East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria had all fallen to various contingents of the army.⁶ Finally, in 878 a Danish force under Guthrum arrived at the West-Saxon royal estate of Chippenham, and, according to the *Chronicle*, "the people submitted to them."⁷ It seemed as if the Viking conquest of Anglo-Saxon England was complete. But shortly after Easter in the same year, Alfred the Great (r. 871-899), king of the West Saxons, emerged from his court in exile at Athelney, won a stunning victory against the Danes at Edington, and thereby saved Anglo-Saxon society from conquest and permanent alteration.⁸ The defeated King Guthrum converted to Christianity, taking the baptismal name of "Æthelstan,"⁹ and returned with his army to East Anglia, which became a part of what

⁴ Stenton 1971, 244. For example, in 851 a Danish army which had stormed Canterbury and London and defeated the Mercian king Beorhtwulf was defeated by the West Saxon king Æthelwulf at *Aclea*; *ASC*, s.a. 851; trans. *EHD*, 173.

⁵ Stenton 1971, 245-6.

⁶ Cf. H.R. Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 56-57.

⁷ *ASC*, s.a. 878.

⁸ *ASC*, 74-77; trans. *EHD*, 179. Cf. Stenton 1971, 255-257.

⁹ For the christening of Guthrum, see *ASC*, s.a. 890; trans. *EHD*, 184: "In this year...the northern king, Guthrum, whose baptismal name was Æthelstan, died." Cf. also *Chron. Athel.*, 47. *Æthelstan*, meaning

would later be known as the Danelaw (the region of England controlled by the Danes and influenced by Scandinavian law, customs, and culture).

King Alfred is justly famous for rescuing Anglo-Saxon England from total Viking conquest. Guthrum's defeat gave him breathing room to transform his kingdom into a state capable of holding its own against the Danes.¹⁰ Alfred improved West-Saxon defenses in three major respects: first, by reorganizing the army,¹¹ second, by developing a navy,¹² and third, by establishing a system of *burhs* (fortified towns which came to serve as the strategic, defensive, and economic focal points of Alfred's kingdom). Alfred captured London in 886, whereupon, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, "all the English people that were not under subjection to the Danes submitted to him."¹³ Alfred entrusted the city to his ally and subordinate, Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia, who soon after married the king's daughter, the formidable Æthelflæd.

By the 880s Alfred had received the formal submission of several Welsh kings. Under various pressures—Norse, Welsh, and even Anglo-Saxon—several

"noble stone" (*æþele + stan*) in Old English, was a relatively common name in ninth- and tenth-century England. Alfred's older brother Æthelstan (and thus our Æthelstan's great-uncle) had been king of Kent, Essex, Surrey, and Sussex under their father Æthelwulf from 839 until his death in the early 850s. It is tempting to think of this departed *ætheling* as the inspiration for Guthrum's new name, though there is no way of knowing for sure. During the reign of our Æthelstan, several important men—secular and ecclesiastical—shared a name with their sovereign, greatest among them Æthelstan "Half King," ealdorman of East Anglia. PASE documents 66 Æthelstans total during the Anglo-Saxon period (597-1042). There, our Æthelstan is classified "Æthelstan 18."

¹⁰ See P. R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998) for a comprehensive biography.

¹¹ According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in 893 Alfred "divided his army into two, so that always half its men were at home, half on service, apart from the men who guarded the *burhs*." *ASC*, s.a. 894; trans. *EHD*, p. 185.

¹² Perhaps with the help a ship-scot (*scypgesceot*) similar to that used by later kings to raise funds for a navy. Cf. Warren C. Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon military institutions on the eve of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 114. This navy's "long ships" were built according to Alfred's own design, according to *ASC*, s.a. 897; trans. *EHD*, p. 189.

¹³ *ASC*, 80-81; trans. *EHD*, 183.

Welsh leaders offered King Alfred their submission for his protection. It is difficult to say how much direct power Alfred held over these kings, or even over Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia for that matter. Asser, the king's biographer, claims that the Welsh kings and Æthelred had the same relationship with Alfred, "namely, that in every respect [they] would be obedient to the royal will."¹⁴ Yet English Mercia remained largely autonomous during Alfred's reign; its nobility was distinct from the West Saxon, and Æthelred and Æthelflæd continued to issue charters independently.¹⁵ The main signs of Mercian subordination, not insignificant, were the title used by its lord Æthelred on charters (*ealdorman* or *dux*, terms typically implying service to a given king) and Alfred's ability to mint coins in his own name in parts of Mercia.¹⁶

Practical subordination, in any case, may have been less important than ideological absorption. The interests of Mercia and Wessex were close enough (and had been for some time¹⁷) that the two polities might have marched together even without a formal hierarchical relationship. Alfred was not simply interested in being an overlord for the time being. Instead, he wanted to unite the Mercians and the Saxons as one ideological polity. His ideology of a political unity of all English-speaking peoples, *Angelcynn* in Old English and *gens Anglorum* in Latin, as opposed to a temporary alliance, was something fairly novel on a political level—although it

¹⁴ *As. Life*, c. 80.

¹⁵ It also bears note that the Welsh kings of Glywysing and Gwent submitted to Alfred in order to escape the *vis et tyrannis* of Ealdorman Æthelred. *As. Life*, c. 80.

¹⁶ For the subordinate nature of the *ealdorman* in Alfred's time, see H.R. Loyn, "The Term *Ealdorman* in the Translations Prepared at the Time of King Alfred," *EHR* 68 (1953): 513-25. For the Alfred's control of Mercia through coinage, see Simon Keynes, "King Alfred and the Mercians," in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century*, ed. Mark A.S. Blackburn and David N. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 1-46.

¹⁷ Cf. *ASC*, s.a. 853 (854 C, 852 E); trans. *EHD*, 174.

had ancient precedents in literature and religion.¹⁸ In his charters and in the biography by Asser, Alfred was called “king of the Anglo-Saxons” (*rex Angulsaxonum*).¹⁹ This term was meant to express the unity of the two main “English” kingdoms brought together by King Alfred, Wessex and Mercia—a reference to the assumed origins of the English-speaking peoples among the Angles and the Saxons. *Angelcynn* would prove a lasting ideological contribution to English history, the foundation upon which Alfred built his “kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons” and upon which Æthelstan would build his own “kingdom of the English.”

Alfred’s ideology of *Angelcynn* demanded an incorporated Mercia, if the new political unit was to be joined under a single leader. And if Ealdorman Æthelred was willing to give Alfred the ideological rights to his kingdom, regardless of the actual power, all Alfred had to do was to create a suitable mythology. This he did, in the words of Sarah Foot, by “manipulating the history of the Anglo-Saxon people to create among his own subjects a sense of cultural and spiritual identity, by invoking a concept of Englishness, particularly dependent on the Christian faith.”²⁰ Yet an expansive ideology can only go so far with a kingdom on the defensive. It was not until Alfred’s son Edward’s aggressive reign that the ideology of *Angelcynn* began to have lasting repercussions.

¹⁸ See especially Sarah Foot, “The making of Angelcynn: English identity before the Norman Conquest,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series 6 (1996): 25-49. See also Patrick Wormald, “Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*” in Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins, eds., *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 99-129.

¹⁹ See Simon Keynes, “King Alfred and the Mercians,” in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century*, ed. Mark A.S. Blackburn and David N. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 1-46.

²⁰ Foot, “Angelcynn,” 37. In the preface to his laws, for instance, Alfred finds his legal roots not just with Ine (one of the most celebrated kings of his realm’s heartland, Wessex), but also with Æthelberht (the foundationally Christian king of his realm’s major incorporated province, Kent) and Offa (the former hegemon of his subject state, Mercia), twice employing the *angelcynn* formula to describe kings who represented historically separate entities.

Edward's reign (899-924) saw the physical conquest of most of the Danelaw, then under the decentralized control of what remained of the great army (each faction centered on a given forts or town).²¹ Edward continued his father's ideology of *Angelcynn*; in extant charters he referred to himself as *rex Angul-Saxonum*, "King of the Anglo-Saxons," further consolidating the title that Alfred concocted to describe his combined kingdom. After defeating a rebellion led by one of Alfred's nephews (who had joined forces with the Danes of Northumbria and East Anglia), Edward worked to break down the Danelaw one town at a time. This was a laborious process, involving the systematic taking and building of fortresses, in which he was greatly aided by the similar work of his brother-in-law Æthelred and his sister Æthelflæd, who assumed full control of Mercian when her husband died in 911.²² For the first time since the invasions began the Anglo-Saxons were on the offensive. When Æthelflæd died in 918, Edward hastened to Tamworth, the Mercian capital, and had the Mercian nobles pledge oaths to him, displacing his niece Ælfwyn. His reign thus saw the official merger of Mercia and Greater Wessex into one kingdom. It was an uneasy assimilation. Nevertheless, it appears that Edward worked to integrate these regions (and probably certain regions of East Anglia) into West-Saxon administrative practice, in particular the division of land into "shires." In 920 he received the "submission" of several kings of the north, including Ragnald, the Norse king of York, although historians have generally recast this event as simply an optimistic

²¹ For Edward's career, see Stenton 1971, 319-339.

²² The nature of her power is attested in several Celtic annals, which call her "queen." A Welsh chronicle calls her "Ælfled regina" (Harl. M.S. 3859, *s.a.* 917) and the Annals of Ulster calls her "Eithilfleith, famosissima regina Saxonum" (the most famous queen of the Saxons) (AU, *s.a.* 917). Cf. J.E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales: From the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1912), p. 331. See Stenton 1971, 319-339 for Edward's conquests.

Anglo-Saxon account of a border agreement.²³ Edward died four years later, at Farndon near Chester. According to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, he had come there to suppress a Mercian revolt.²⁴

The Reign of Æthelstan, 924-939

This then was Æthelstan's inheritance: the fruits of a difficult set of victories and the emergence of a new "kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons" united by an ideology of *Angelcynn*, but held together more by necessity than tradition. As this necessity diminished along with the Danish threat, the need for a political ideology, a systematized way of effecting in reality an ideal vision of society, emerged. Unfortunately for our understanding of how Æthelstan handled his inheritance, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* becomes unaccountably scanty between 924 and 939. We can only know the basics.²⁵ Æthelstan acceded to the throne with difficulty, becoming king in Mercia in 924 while his younger (but allegedly more legitimate) brother Ælfweard assumed the throne in Wessex. Ælfweard scarcely had assumed power when he too died, and Æthelstan was recognized as king in Wessex—perhaps on the condition that he recognize the successional legitimacy of Ælfweard's younger uterine brother, Edwin. It was not until September 4, 925 that Æthelstan was actually consecrated king of Wessex at Kingston-upon-Thames. Consecration was a complicated process involving inaugural rituals such as anointment, crowning, and

²³ *ASC*, s.a. 920; On the nature of the "submission" see especially Michael R. Davidson, "The (Non)Submission of the Northern Kings in 920," in *Edward the Elder*, 200-211; but also Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: Arnold, 2002), 199-200.

²⁴ *GR*, ii.133.1.

²⁵ See Stenton 1971, 339-359.

enthronement; and there is evidence to suppose that Æthelstan's consecration was novel in several ways.

For the remainder of his reign, Æthelstan pursued an ambitious policy of expansion and alliance-building. Shortly after his consecration, he married his sister to the Norse king of York, Sictric, who converted for the occasion. Not long after, he married another sister to the rising Frankish star, Hugh the Great, leader of the Robertians in France. When Sictric died in 927, Æthelstan used the opportunity to claim York as his own and march with a formidable force to the north. There, he conquered York from Sictric's son and brother, and furthermore received the submission of the autonomous leaders of the north: Constantine II of Scotland, Eogan of Strathclyde, and Ealdred of Bamburgh—a submission worthier of the name than that of 920. Shortly before or after, he also secured the submission and tribute of the kings of Wales.

Around this time Æthelstan began to describe himself in charters as “king of the English” (*rex Anglorum*) and, soon after, as “king of all Britain” (*rex totius Britanniae*), titles representing Æthelstan's novel royal and imperial claims respectively. Here we ought to distinguish carefully between royal and imperial kingship in early medieval thought. In the language of early medieval Western kingship, kings were defined by the *gens*, or “people,” they ruled, while emperors (following Carolingian tradition) were described according to multiple *gentes*, “peoples” (with or without subordinate kings of their own).²⁶ Thus, Pepin III was *rex*

²⁶ Karl Leyser, “*Thephanu divina gratia imperatrix augusta*: Western and Eastern Leadership in the Later Tenth Century,” in *The Empress Theophano: Byzantium and the West at the Turn of the First Millennium*, ed. Adelbert Davids (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-27, p. 9; Janet

(*gentis*) *Francorum*, “king of (the people of) the Franks,” while his son, the emperor Charlemagne, was *rex (gentium) Francorum et Langobardorum*, “king of (the peoples of) the Franks and Lombards.” Æthelstan’s “kingdom of the English” fit the first pattern exactly, although his claim that there was a single “English” kingdom from Wessex to Northumbria was itself unprecedented. Æthelstan’s imperial “kingdom of all Britain” was more unusual in that it combined an unprecedented claim of authority with an unusual geographical formulation (*rex totius Britanniae*).²⁷ We know from Æthelstan’s late royal style that he saw this imperial claim as a kingship of peoples.²⁸ But even then precedent was slim at best.

In 929-30 Æthelstan married yet another sister to Otto, future Holy Roman Emperor and the son of King Henry I of Germany. In 933, Æthelstan’s half-brother Edwin died at sea; after his death Æthelstan’s other half-brothers (from Edward’s third wife), Edmund and Eadred, began to rise to prominence. In 934, Constantine II rebelled against the submission of 927, perhaps with Viking instigation, and Æthelstan responded with his successful campaign against the king of Scots and (most likely) his ally Eogan of Strathclyde, resulting in the northern rulers’ humiliated submission. In 936, Æthelstan orchestrated the return of Louis “d’Outremer,” his nephew and the scion of the Carolingian house, to West Francia, where he became king. In the same year he helped the young Breton prince Alan

Nelson, “Kingship and Empire,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought*, c. 350-c. 1450, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 211-251, pp. 211, 214-15.

²⁷ Although some kings were idiosyncratically described by regions even in the early Middle Ages: e.g., the “King of Kent” (*rex Cantiae*).

²⁸ S 441 (Group 4): *basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium* (“industrious *basileus* of the English and of all surrounding *gentes* round about”); *basileus* is a Greek imperial title which Æthelstan’s scribes adopted in his late charters.

Barbetorte establish a foothold in Viking-infested Brittany with ships and possibly men.

In 937 he faced his greatest threat yet when Constantine and Eogan allied with Olaf, Sictric's brother and the main Norse claimant to the throne of York, attacking Æthelstan's kingdom with a large army. The attack may have been carried out with the collusion of Æthelstan's supposed subjects in the Northern Danelaw. Æthelstan marched north and defeated his enemies at *Brunanburh*, allegedly the bloodiest battle in England until Hastings.²⁹ After this, it seems he enjoyed his hegemony without difficulty for the last two years of his reign, in which his diplomatic* titles reach a new apex of ornamentation. In these final years, Æthelstan seems to have devoted himself particularly to pious actions, giving away many relics and books to religious foundations. One of his last political actions was to send a fleet to aid King Louis against rebels, although apparently without much effect.

After Æthelstan's death in 939, many of the king's successes would dissipate. Olaf returned to Northern England, not only recapturing York from Æthelstan's brother and successor Edmund (r. 939-46), but also making significant inroads into regions of the Danelaw which Edward the Elder had conquered and Æthelstan had (apparently inadequately) consolidated (the so-called Five Boroughs). Edmund was able to retake the Five Boroughs (Lincoln, Leicester, Nottingham, Stamford, and Derby) in 941, and Northumbria in 944, but he was forced to concede all of Cumbria to King Malcolm of the Scots in exchange for the king's military assistance—

²⁹ The location of the battlefield remains a matter of speculation (hence the italics).

* "Diplomatic" in this sense simply means "pertaining to royal charters/diplomas," and should not be confused with the normal sense of the term, i.e. "pertaining to diplomacy/foreign relations." I use both senses of the term in this study, but context should indicate my meaning at any given point.

preserving the “kingdom of the English” but relinquishing the “kingdom of all Britain.”³⁰ Eadred (946-55), the last of Edward’s sons to rule, spent much of his reign fighting against the Norse leaders Olaf Sihtricsson (Olaf Gothfrithsson’s nephew) and Erik Bloodaxe for Northumbria, finally gaining control of the north in 954. The “kingdom of all Britain” would make a brief return in the 973, when King Edgar (r. 959-75), Edmund’s son, was consecrated (for a second time) at Bath and ferried across the river by Welsh and Scottish sub-kings, but it never had the staying power of the “kingdom of English” in the history of the island until fairly recently.³¹

As a result of these later developments, and as a result of a longstanding historiographical fascination with the “Unification of England,” historians of Æthelstan have generally minimized the importance of the “kingdom of all Britain” in favor of the “kingdom of the English.”³² Even for Simon Keynes, the leading modern scholar on Æthelstan, the former was merely a “wishful extension” of the latter.³³ A few accounts have recognized the independent and systematic importance of the “kingdom of all Britain” in Æthelstan’s royal ideology, but these have rarely been wholly adequate on other counts. Simon Walker argues evocatively for the “significance” of the concept of British hegemony, but does not carefully distinguish

³⁰ For these events, see Keynes, “England, c. 900-1016,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume III c. 900-c. 1024*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 471-3.

³¹ For the Bath coronation, see *ASC*, s.a. 973 and Keynes, “England, c. 900-1016,” 481-2.

³² E.g. Stafford in *Unification and Conquest* is surprisingly silent on Æthelstan’s imperial ideology; likewise David Dumville, “Æthelstan, First King of England,” in his *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 149, 153-4, though he acknowledges the imperial pretensions of Æthelstan’s coins and charters, spends much more time, as his title suggests, on Æthelstan’s role in the transformation from Wessex to England; Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the twelfth century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) has some excellent observations, but mainly in the context of a study on law; Christopher Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (London: Batsford, 1963), 130-140, treats the concept in passing.

³³ Simon Keynes, “Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons,” in *Edward the Elder*, ed. Higham and Hill, 61; also see Keynes, “England, c. 900-1016,” 469: “His charters indicate that he was regarded...as *rex Anglorum*...and by extension as *rex totius Britanniae*.”

this claim from that of the *regnum Anglorum*, and relies too heavily on the concept of *bretwalda* to explain the title *rex totius Britanniae*.³⁴ Eric John underestimates the novelty of Æthelstan's ideology by his stress on the influence of an indigenous tradition of hegemonial kingship, leaving Æthelstan's attempts to legitimate his hegemony with outside sources unexplained.³⁵ Michael Wood, who makes the best argument for a Carolingian-style imperial flavor to Æthelstan's royal ideology, relies too heavily on William of Malmesbury, and as a result takes some of Æthelstan's ideological claims too seriously.³⁶ Generally speaking, historians do not carefully differentiate between Æthelstan's royal and imperial claims, and consistently underestimate the novelty of those claims.

While the *regnum Anglorum* was indeed a natural extension of Alfred's *regnum Angulsaxonum* and the logical conclusion of the concept of an *Angelcynn*, the idea of a "kingdom of Britain" (especially in the Carolingian form it took by the mid-930s) had no logical wellspring in Anglo-Saxon England. Of course, Æthelstan or his advisors did not invent the *regnum totius Britanniae* and its trappings from scratch; they borrowed much from the Continent, appropriating Carolingian symbols and titles to give their novel claims an aura of legitimacy. The primary goal of this thesis is to illustrate the prominence and novelty of the imperial aspect of Æthelstan's royal ideology, while at the same time examining both chronologically and topically how different aspects of that ideology gave legitimacy to novel claims. In retrospect, we

³⁴ Simon Walker, "A Context for 'Brunanburh'?" in *Warriors and Churchmen in the High Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Karl Leyser* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), 21-39.

³⁵ Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae, and other studies* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), 1-63.

³⁶ Michael Wood, "The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: An English Charlemagne?" in *Ideal and Reality in Anglo-Saxon Society*, eds. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 250-272; Michael Wood, *In Search of Modern England: Journeys into the English Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); for a popular audience in his documentary *In Search of the Dark Ages* (BBC, 1980).

can see that the Ecgberhtings of Wessex played a foundational role in the creation of the English nation, and that Æthelstan's "kingdom of the English" was a great milestone in this process. Yet this fact should not blind us from the more ambitious claims of this early medieval innovator, whose royal ideology, understood in its own context, tells us much about how and why early medieval kings used ideas to justify assertions of power and status.

Royal Ideology in the Early Middle Ages

Before we can say anything about Æthelstan's royal ideology, however, we must make some clarifications. This leads us to a second goal of this thesis, which is to show how royal ideology functioned in the early Middle Ages, and how one can reconstruct such an ideology even with scant records. First, the definitional question: what is an ideology?³⁷ For our purposes, there are two important aspects to consider: 1) an ideology is an organized system, not a loose assortment of beliefs and 2) it has an intended audience. For Æthelstan it is also important to show that the ideological

³⁷ Political scientists have spilt much ink attempting to define the term "ideology." A few good syntheses include John Gerring, "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis," *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (1997): 957-994; Willard A. Mullins, "On the Concept of Ideology in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 66 (1972): 498-510; and Malcolm B. Hamilton, "Elements of the Concept of Ideology," *Political Studies* 35 (1987): 18-38. For my purposes, a good place to start is F. X. Sutton's succinct definition: "any system of beliefs publicly expressed with the manifest purpose of influencing the sentiments and actions of others" (F.X. Sutton, S.E. Harris, Carl Kaysen, and James Tobin, *The American Business Creed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), 2). This definition highlights two basic aspects of ideology as I wish to define it: (1) it is an organized system (although the level of organization in Æthelstan's ideology *vis-à-vis* one of the modern day is naturally limited in comparison by differing literacy levels, technology, and communications; and, from our perspective, the comparison is further blurred by evidentiary constraints); and (2) it has an intended audience which it attempts to influence. Malcolm Hamilton fills in some remaining gaps with his definition: "a system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs and attitudes advocating a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements, and/or aimed at justifying a particular pattern of conduct, which its proponents seek to promote, realize, pursue, or maintain" (Hamilton, "Elements," 38). Note that most of Æthelstan's ideological claims were (in the first instance) *factual* rather than *normative*. The normative implication typically followed the factual with help from pre-existing normative systems (e.g. traditions of lordship, traditions of kingship, Christianity, etc.).

claims in sources such as charters, coins, poems, and law codes originated to some extent with the king. For instance, Æthelbald, king of Mercia (r. 716-757), was described as *rex Britanniae* in a famous charter of 736, but we cannot conclude that this title was an integral part of any royal ideology, since the question was drawn up by flattering beneficiaries rather than by a royal scribe, and since the occurrence is unique among his charters.³⁸ Æthelstan's royal diplomas, on the other hand, were highly standardized and almost certainly directed to some extent by the king. One important and debated question, somewhat outside of our scope, is whether there was an Anglo-Saxon "chancery" at this point in the early tenth century, i.e., a centralized royal secretariat for writing up charters. Mainly the debate has been between Pierre Chaplais, who argues that early tenth-century charters were written in monastic scriptoria, and Simon Keynes, who argues that they were written by a royal chancery or proto-chancery.³⁹ The consistent uniformity of Æthelstan's charters, and the fact that they were often written up by the same scribe in far-apart locations, would seem to give greater support to Keynes. For our purposes, it is enough to note,

³⁸ S 89, the "Ismere" diploma (736), EHD no. 67: *Ego Aethilbalt domino donante rex non solum Marcersium sed et omnium prouinciarum quae generale nomine Sutangli dicuntur...Ego Aedilbalt rex Britanniae* ("I Æthelbald, by gift of the lord king not only of the Mercians by of all countries which are generally called by the name South-Angle...I Æthelbald king of Britain"). Also cf. S 1410 (July 10, 744): *qui Britannicæ insulæ Monarchiam dispensat regalisque regni regimina gubernat* ("[Æthelbald] who rules the monarchy of the island of Britain and governs the steering of the royal realm").

³⁹ Pierre Chaplais, "The Anglo-Saxon Chancery: From the Diploma to the Writ," rpt. in *Prisca Munimenta: studies in archival & administrative history presented to A. E. J. Hollaender*, ed. F. Ranger (London: University of London Press, 1973), 43-62; Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 14-79; Pierre Chaplais, "The Royal Anglo-Saxon 'Chancery' of the Tenth Century Revisited," in *Studies in Medieval history presented to R.H.C. Davis*, ed. H. Mayr-Harding and R.I. Moore (London: Hambledon, 1985), 41-51; Simon Keynes, "Regenbald the Chancellor (*sic*)," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 185-22; Simon Keynes, "The West Saxon Charters of King Æthelwulf and his Sons," *EHR* 109 (1994): 1109-49; C. L. G. Insley, "Charters and Episcopal Scriptoria in the Anglo-Saxon South-West," *Early Medieval Europe* 7:2 (1998): 173-98; with excellent summaries in S. E. Kelly, ed., *The Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, vol. I, British Academy Series VII (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), lxxiii-lxxxiv and C. L. G. Insley, "Where Did All the Charters Go? Anglo-Saxon Charters and the New Politics of the Eleventh Century," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 24 (2001): 109-127, pp.109-112.

with Chaplais, that “nobody would seriously suggest that a diploma could have been produced without the knowledge or permission of the king whose grant it recorded.”⁴⁰ Regardless of how and where precisely royal diplomas were produced, by the early tenth century they closely reflected the ideas of the king and his court, though these ideas were filtered through the ponderous Latin of ecclesiastical learning.

The law codes—written in the vernacular, and from a first-person perspective (“Now I have decided...”)—would have reflected the king’s immediate direction even more closely.⁴¹ And Æthelstan’s famous decree in his Grately Code that “there shall be one coinage throughout the king’s realm, and no man shall mint money except in a town” shows that he also intended to maintain a tight control over the coinage—and presumably its iconography.⁴² It is unlikely that mints across England would have simultaneously styled him *rex totius Britanniae*, an unprecedented title, without centralized instructions. Finally, the few surviving poems and depictions from Æthelstan’s reign, often written into gift books which the king presented or received, are unlikely to have recorded any ideological ideas outside of a courtly norm. Consequently, we may trust most of the ideological sources of Æthelstan’s reign as dependable reflections of the king’s own thoughts about his power and status—though, again, mediated by the immediate, learned manufacturers. And we may conclude from the centralization and standardization of these sources, as well as the symbolic, linguistic, or iconographical parallels among sources from different *loci* of production, that the king wished to present a coherent picture of royal power.

⁴⁰ Chaplais, “‘Chancery’ Revisited,” 42. Whether they worked from a chancery or scriptoria—or a combination—Æthelstan’s scribes would certainly have been ecclesiastics.

⁴¹ *Nu hæbbe ic funden* V As. (Exeter), Preamble.1.

⁴² II As. (Grately), cap. 14.

But who constituted the audience? The charters of Æthelstan's later reign are notorious for the difficulty of their vocabulary and syntax, and surely must have presented a challenge to contemporary readers, not least of which, the king himself. Despite William of Malmesbury's claim that "no one more...literate ever administered the kingdom," one doubts that Æthelstan had the independent ability to trudge through the Latin of one of his charters' impossible preambles ("proems").⁴³ On the other hand, the king did have learned men in his retinue who would have been capable of translating: most obviously, the author of the charter himself. Well-educated ecclesiastics would have been able to follow the Latin, and possibly some of the secular nobles as well, given the surprising literacy of some tenth-century Anglo-Saxon nobles.⁴⁴ Standardization would have meant that even a reader who could not follow the proem could at least pick out the royal style and the signature, which were always in the same place. And even a reader with little Latin would have recognized the very difficulty of a charter as a statement of learning and loftiness. Laws, in contrast, were more accessible. All the major landowners in the realm certainly would have been familiar with the major codes, which were composed with their advice and in their vernacular; and it seems that even burghers in London were aware of the king's legal vision.⁴⁵ Coins had an even wider public still; anyone with the financial wherewithal to conduct currency transactions say around 930 (with at least a smattering of traders' Latin or perhaps the linguistic assistance of a local priest)

⁴³ *GR* ii.132 (trans. Mynors *et al.*): "De hoc rege non inuálida apud Anglos fama seritur, quo nemo legalius uel litteratius rempublicam amministrauerit." This claim may have been based on a prophetic poem written in Æthelstan's youth. Cf. Michael Lapidge, "Some Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan," reprinted in *Anglo-Latin Literature*, ed. Lapidge (London: Hambledon, 1993), 49-86; 60-71. It may also simply be William's attempt to explain the notorious difficulty of Æthelstan's charters.

⁴⁴ E.g. the chronicle of the late tenth-century ealdorman Æthelweard (*Chron.Æthel.*), a Latin translation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* written in somewhat inelegant if quite learned Latin prose.

⁴⁵ Cf. VI As.

would have been able to read that Æthelstan was *rex totius Britanniae*, and know what that meant, at least literally. Later in the reign, the king's coins offered an even more accessible symbol of his status: a depiction of Æthelstan's head and shoulders, adorned with a three-pronged crown.

In summary, Æthelstan had at his disposal a range of centralized media through which to present a coherent political ideology, i.e. a system regulating the representation of his power and status. Though mediated by scribes, poets, moneyers, and whoever else was the immediate manufacturer or composer of Æthelstan's written and pictorial productions, Æthelstan's own royal and imperial assertions were disseminated to the people who mattered most: the ecclesiastics and nobles to whom the charters were geared, and for whom they were written out as proof of land ownership and rights. Æthelstan's audience did not include illiterate peasants and slaves. But his ideology was not geared to such people in the first place, who did not matter politically compared to the bishops, abbots, ealdormen, reeves, and thegns.

Sources

The narrative sources for Æthelstan's reign are notoriously scanty. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a vernacular history of the British Isles begun during Alfred's reign and continued—through seven extant manuscripts—beyond the Conquest, is the most consistently reliable narrative for late Anglo-Saxon history.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, its coverage of Æthelstan's reign is slim, with only a few entries and one long poem (*s.a.* 937), describing the battle of *Brunanburh*. A few outside sources and later narrative

⁴⁶ Printed by Charles Plummer, ed., *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, with supplementary extracts from the others: a Revised Text*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892-9) [ASC]; trans. EHD, no. 1; for a brief introduction to the *Chronicle*, cf. EHD, 109-118, 135-6.

accounts are available to fill in the gaps. Contemporary Irish material from the Annals of Ulster include a note on the battle of *Brunanburh* and an obit for Æthelstan's death.⁴⁷ The tenth-century Reims chronicler Flodoard also gives some information about Æthelstan from a continental perspective, especially about his dealings with the Robertians and Carolingians of France.⁴⁸ Several German chroniclers made mention of Æthelstan's marriage alliance with the Ottonians.⁴⁹ Æthelweard, a late tenth-century ealdorman, translated the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and sent his work to his cousin, a nun, in Germany, and his account, written not so long after the fact, sheds some light on the significance of *Brunanburh*, among other things.⁵⁰

Another body of narrative accounts for Æthelstan's reign comes mainly after the Norman Conquest. Symeon of Durham, a monk of the community of St. Cuthbert, wrote two major histories and these, along the earlier *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, give some important information about Æthelstan's dealings in the north.⁵¹ William of Malmesbury, an Anglo-Norman historian of the twelfth century, wrote a great deal about Æthelstan in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, and some in his history of the bishops, the *Gesta Pontificalis* (including a contemporary letter from the prior of St.

⁴⁷ Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ed. and trans., *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983) [AU].

⁴⁸ Philippe Lauer, ed., *Les Annales de Flodoard* (Paris: Picard, 1905). Trans. Steven Fanning and Bernard S Bachrach, *The Annals of Flodoard of Reims, 919-966* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview, 2004).

⁴⁹ Most importantly the female author Hroswitha of Ganderheim: in Paul von Winterfeld, ed. *Hrotsvithae opera*, MGH SS rG (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902); but also Liutprand, "Antapodosis," in *Die Werke Liutprands von Cremona*, ed. Joseph Becker, MGH (Hannover: Buchhandlung, 1915).

⁵⁰ A. Campbell, ed., *The Chronicle of Æthelweard* (London: Nelson, 1962) [*Chron. Æthel.*].

⁵¹ Thomas Arnold, ed., *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, vol 2: *Historia Regum* (London: Longman, 1885) [Symeon HR] David Rollason, ed. and trans., *Symeon of Durham: Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, Ecclesie (Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000) [Symeon *Libellus de exordio*]; Ted Johnson South, ed. and trans., *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: A History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of his Patrimony* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002) [HSC].

Sampson at Dol).⁵² It was once thought that the *Gesta Regum* preserved a contemporary or near-contemporary poem about Æthelstan, but Michael Lapidge has revealed this poem to be a much later work.⁵³ Lapidge's work, along with the incriminating fact that Æthelstan was a noted patron of Malmesbury (both in life and death—for he was buried there) and some questions about William of Malmesbury's general veracity as a historian, have caused some scholars to doubt how much of William's account we can really trust.⁵⁴ David Dumville, in an almost gleeful repudiation of William's entire account in the *Gesta Anglorum*, and Michael Wood, in an equally emotional appeal to William's reliability (explaining the Latin poem, rather improbably, as a translation of a lost vernacular document), are the scholarly poles at either end of a continuum.⁵⁵ We should not cast William wholly aside, in any case, for his rich account is often corroborated by other documents.

Later works, including the *Liber Eliensis* (twelfth century), the Worcester Chronicle (twelfth century), Henry of Huntingdon (twelfth century), Roger of Wendover (thirteenth century), and a few saints' lives, occasionally add information to our knowledge of Æthelstan's reign, although such works are often derivative and

⁵² R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, eds. and trans., *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) [GR]; N.E.S.A. Hamilton, ed., *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis de Gestis Pontificum Anglorum* (Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint, 1964) [GP].

⁵³ Michael Lapidge, "Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Æthelstan," in *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900-1066*, ed. Lapidge (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 49-86. Originally printed in *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1981): 61-98.

⁵⁴ Robert Patterson has led the case against William's contemporary histories, after many years in which, following Stubbs, English historians were willing to treat William as a highly objective historian. Patterson has argued that he was a consistent partisan of Robert of Gloucester. See Robert B. Patterson, "William of Malmesbury's Robert of Gloucester: A Re-evaluation of the *Historia Novella*," *American Historical Review* 70 (1965): 983-997; Patterson, "Stephen's Shaftesbury Charter: Another Case against William of Malmesbury," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 487-492.

⁵⁵ David Dumville, *Wessex and England*, 142: "the dangerous pages of William of Malmesbury"; see also 142 n. 9, 146, 150, 163, and 168; Michael Wood, "Making of King Aethelstan's Empire," 250-272; and less convincingly in "The Lost Life of King Æthelstan," in Michael Wood, *In Search of Modern England: Journeys into the English Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 149-68.

filled with spurious information.⁵⁶ Numerous legends circulated in medieval England about Æthelstan, culminating in the Middle English romance *Athelston* (which may not actually refer to our king specifically but does seem to have emerged from the late Edwin drowning story), but these have no bearing on this study.⁵⁷

A final set of narrative sources for Æthelstan's reign are Scandinavian sagas (mainly thirteenth-century). *Egil's Saga*, a thirteenth-century Icelandic epic, tells the story of Egil Skallagrimsson, a viking and poet who allegedly served as a mercenary for Æthelstan against Olaf.⁵⁸ Slightly less legendary are a handful of Scandinavian sources pertaining to Æthelstan's fostering of Hákon the Good of Norway, the son of King Harald Fairhair. These include two thirteenth-century saga collections, an early Latin chronicle, and contemporary poetic material preserved in the sagas.⁵⁹

The most numerous and best sources for Æthelstan's reign are not narrative at all, but administrative. Charters (a term used broadly to refer to royal diplomas, grants of other sorts, wills, and similar documents) give by far the best contemporary literary evidence for Æthelstan's royal ideology. They must be dealt with caution. Few originals (that is, actual contemporary charters written on parchment during Æthelstan's reign) survive from the tenth century. The versions which are preserved

⁵⁶ E.O., Blake ed., *Liber Eliensis*, Camden Third Series 92 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1962); R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, eds., *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Diana Greenway, ed. and trans., *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum: the history of the English people* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Henry O. Coxe, ed., *Rogeri de Wendover Chronica; sive, Flores historiarum*, vol. 1 (London: English Historical Society, 1841). Roger of Wendover preserves some material from now-lost northern annals (*EHD*, p. 255); Michael Winterbottom, ed. *Three Lives of English Saints* (Toronto: Hunter Rose, 1972); James Raine, ed. *The Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops*, vol 1 (Wiesbaden: Kraus, 1965).

⁵⁷ A. M. Trowce, ed., *Athelston, a Middle English Romance* (Millwood: Kraus, 1987).

⁵⁸ Óskarsdóttir, Svanhildur, ed., *Egil's Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder (London: Penguin, 2004).

⁵⁹ Alison Finlay, trans., *Fagrskinna, a catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Erling Monsen and A. H. Smith, ed. and trans. *Heimskringla or the Lives of the Norse Kings by Snorre Sturlason*. New York: D Appleton and Company, 1932; Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, ed. *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fischer (Coopenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2003).

were kept in cartularies, books of charters which religious houses drew up to prove their legitimate claims to certain lands. Unfortunately, many cartularies include forgeries thanks to the greed and zeal of archivist monks. Not all forgeries are useless, though. Sometimes a forgery preserves an authentic witness lists or authentic dating clause (copied from an authentic charter to legitimate the charter). Malmesbury Abbey, for instance, produced an impressive set of forgeries based closely upon some of Æthelstan's most distinctive charters.⁶⁰ Consequently, we can divide charters into originals (i.e. contemporary copies), apparent originals (authentic charters preserved in cartularies or elsewhere), and forgeries (with various levels of authenticity). There are obvious drawbacks to this system; scholars with more sources at hand may sneer at the usefulness of forged charters. Still, even a blatant forgery can tell us about a diplomatic style being forged.

Another source for Æthelstan's reign are his law codes.⁶¹ Æthelstan's reign produced six that survive (although one is a set of bylaws drawn up by a peace-guild in southeast England).⁶² It is impossible to date these codes with certainty, but we know where they were issued. Æthelstan's laws tell us much about the ideological claims of his kingship, as well as giving examples of the problems he faced as a king, such as theft and over-powerful nobles.

An archeological source for Æthelstan's reign are his coins (silver pence), which reveal much about royal ideology in their legends and iconography.⁶³ Although

⁶⁰ S 434-6.

⁶¹ Printed in F. Liebermann, ed., *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols. (Halle: Niemeyer, 1903-1916) and, with translation, in F.L. Attenborough, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (New York: Russell, 1963) [As].

⁶² VI As.

⁶³ The best survey is C.E. Blunt, "The Coinage of Athelstan, 924-939," *British Numismatic Journal* 42 (1974): 35-159.

these coins cannot be dated exactly, it is possible to estimate their date by comparison to contemporary diplomatic and from the contents of coin hoards. Æthelstan initiated two numismatic innovations in his reign: the first pennies with the legend “king of all Britain,” and the first crowned portrait type in Anglo-Saxon coins.

Finally, a wide array of fragmentary evidence corroborates the administrative sources and fills in some of the narrative holes of Æthelstan’s reign. Alone, these poems, manumissions, confraternity records, regnal lists, depictions, relic lists, and dedicatory inscriptions do not tell us much, but placed side by side with charters, coins, and each other they are informative.⁶⁴

The records for Æthelstan’s reign appear to be scanty, but in a sense this apparent evidential dearth is an illusion. While the narrative sources are indeed lacking, the diplomatic, legal, and numismatic sources are numerous enough to give us a good idea of Æthelstan’s kingship. There is certainly something lost is the absence of a contemporary royal biographer or narrative historian, but there is also something gained. The student of King Æthelstan’s ideology is forced to examine the king’s ideological claims on their own terms. And within the scattered fragments, tarnished coins, inscrutable Latin, and spotty legal records of his reign, Æthelstan’s royal ideology emerges as a logical, ambitious, and sophisticated political system.

⁶⁴ The best survey of these fragments is Keynes, “King Athelstan's Books,” in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 143-201.

PART I
CONSTRUCTING A ROYAL IDEOLOGY

Æðelstanus rex Anglorum, per omnipatrantis
dexteram totius Bryttaniæ regni solio
sublimatus.

Æthelstan king of the English, raised by the
right hand of the All-Father to the throne of the
whole kingdom of Britain.¹

The royal style above, featured in charters from *c.* 931 to 935, summarizes the main assertions of Æthelstan's mature ideology. First, Æthelstan was "king of the English" (*rex Anglorum*), a claim which extended Alfred's "kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons" past the Humber River in order to bring the English of Northumbria into one kingdom with the English of Wessex and Mercia. Second, Æthelstan was "king of all Britain" (*rex totius Britanniae*), a title which claimed a Carolingian-style hegemony over all the non-English peoples of the island of Britain. This section examines the chronological development of an ideology that standardized and propagated these claims through charters, coins, and other royal productions. We shall see that Æthelstan's ideological claims were mutually distinct; the *regnum totius Britanniae* was not simply a "wishful extension" of the *regnum Anglorum*, but a parallel assertion of a different style of kingship altogether.² This section also examines how Æthelstan's royal ideology developed in response to resistance. Not surprisingly, Æthelstan's two ideological *regna* faced opposition. The Welsh resented subordination to the Anglo-Saxons. The king of the Scots rebelled twice. Even some of Æthelstan's own subjects questioned their king's legitimacy. But resistance was a

¹ S 416 (contemporary original) (November 12, 930).

² Simon Keynes, "Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons," 61.

catalyst for ideological growth, and with each victory, Æthelstan and his ideological spokesmen grew more confident in their assertions. In the wake of 927, when Æthelstan's victories in the north first set the stage for his main ideological claims, Æthelstan's focus was on the *regnum Anglorum*. By the end of his reign, however, Æthelstan and his spokesmen came to prioritize his hegemonic ambitions, supporting them with a royal ideology heavily influenced by Carolingian precedent.

Precedents and Inspirations

The Anglo-Saxons had their own concepts of kingship and hegemony, however, which supplied a bedrock from which Æthelstan's ideological advisors could build. The "Germanic" kingship typically associated with the Old English epic *Beowulf* was probably archaic even when the poem was written, but its lessons are a useful shorthand for the basic principles of traditional Anglo-Saxon kingship. An Anglo-Saxon king's success depended first and foremost on the support of his noble retainers, which he attained only through a reputation for strong kingship. This entailed vigilance and military prowess; for the menace of war and blood feud, inside and out of the kingdom, constantly threatened the stability of royal peace. Most importantly, the king had to be a gift-giver; for rings, weapons, and gold were the currency that bought the friendship and loyalty of "steadfast companions."³ The importance of these kingly traits is corroborated throughout Anglo-Saxon history. Bede described how King Oswine of Deira (642-651) attracted "noblemen from

³ *Beowulf*, ll. 23.

almost every kingdom” with his royal demeanor and reputation for generosity.⁴

Closer to Æthelstan’s time, King Alfred famously observed:

In the case of a king, the resources and tools with which to rule are...praying men, fighting men and working men. You know also that without these tools no king may make his ability known. Another aspect of his resources is that he must have the means of support for his tools [i.e. the three classes of men]...land to live on, gifts, weapons, food, ale, clothing, and whatever else is necessary...Without these things, he cannot maintain the tools, nor without the tools can he accomplish any of the things he was commanded to do.⁵

King Æthelstan also understood the importance of “Beowulfian” kingship, both ideologically and politically. He donated land and gifts liberally to his praying, fighting, and working men, while cultivating a far-flung reputation as a victorious warrior. A contemporary or near-contemporary description of Æthelstan as “ring-giver of men” shows that he was not above traditional Old English kingship.⁶ But *Beowulf* does not tell the whole story, either, and King Æthelstan had more sophisticated ways of charming his subjects than doling out bracelets.

For a more sophisticated theory of kingship, Æthelstan could turn to his grandfather, Alfred, a “ring-giver” blessed by a talent for ideology.⁷ In the late ninth century, King Alfred developed the concept of a political *Angelcynn* to justify his rulership over Wessex and Mercia as one “kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons,” paving the way for Æthelstan’s own “king of the English.” Alfred’s ideological legacy lived on through King Edward’s reign and into the first few years of King Æthelstan’s. We

⁴ *EH* iii.14.

⁵ Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 132 (Alfred’s translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, c. 17).

⁶ The quote is from the poem-entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* on the Battle of Brunanburh: *Batt. Brun.*, 93: “Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten, / beorna beahgifa” (King Æthelstan, lord of warriors, / ring-giver of men). For parallel use of “ring-giver” and its variants as a title for king in *Beowulf*, cf. ll. 35, 342, 1485: *beaga bryttan* (ring-giver); ll. 2635, 3005: *ðe us (ðas) beagas geaf* (he who gave us rings); l. 2652: *goldgyfa* (gold-giver); and ll. 1171, 1476, 1603, 2419, 2584 l. 1476: *goldwine* (gold-friend). For a vivid description of gift giving and its importance, cf. ll. 1191-1201. For the opposing evils of miserly kingship, cf. ll. 1709-24. Cf. also Brooke, *Saxon and Norman Kings*, 131.

⁷ For Alfred as ring giver see Bishop Wulfsgie’s preface to his OE translation of the *Dialogues* in Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 188.

know that Æthelstan was directly aware of the concept from an early manuscript in which he refers to “all the relics which I, by God’s mercy, have obtained among the *Angelcynn*.”⁸

Outside of his own dynasty, but still within an insular context, Æthelstan could tap into a rich history of indigenous concepts of hegemony, as Eric John has suggested.⁹ The most controversial of these indigenous concepts is the famous title preserved in the “A” *Chronicle* entry for 827 (*recte* 829): *bretwalda*, applied to eight kings who held overlordship over the other kings “south of the Humber.”¹⁰ This list was taken from Bede’s earlier list of seven kings who had held *imperium* in Southumbrian England, adding Ecgberht of Wessex (Æthelstan’s great-great-grandfather).¹¹ A considerable literature has attempted to put these passages in context, but the meaning of the *bretwaldaship* for Anglo-Saxon kingship remains unclear.¹² Whether or not the *bretwaldaship* represented a political reality of the sixth

⁸ BL MS Royal I.B.vii; printed in *SEHD*, no. 19; trans. *EHD*, no. 140; Whitelock translates *on Angelcyn* as “in England,” but this is not exactly right. For more information on this manuscript and a debunking of the theory that it was the gospel-book with which Æthelstan used for his consecration, see Keynes, “King Athelstan’s Books,” 185-89. The slave was freed when Æthelstan *æræst cyng wæs*, “first became king.” Whether this refers to his acclamation in 924 or his consecration in 925, it is certainly from his early reign.

⁹ Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae, and other studies* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), 1-63.

¹⁰ *EHD*, p. 171: “And that year King Ecgberht conquered the kingdom of the Mercians, and everything south of the Humber; and he was the eighth king who was ‘Bretwalda.’ The first who had so great authority (*þus micel rice*) was Ælle...” The list is as follows: Ælle (Sussex), Ceawlin (Wessex), Æthelberht (Kent), Rædwald (East Anglia), Edwin (Northumbria), Oswald (Northumbria), Oswiu (Northumbria), Ecgberht (Wessex).

¹¹ *EH*, ii.5: “qui tertius quidem in regibus gentis Anglorum cunctis australibus eorum prouinciis, quae Humbrae fluuiio et continguis ei terminis sequestrantur a borealibus, imperauit... Nam primus imperium huiusmodi Aelli...” (“he [Æthelberht of Kent] was the third English king to rule over all the southern kingdoms, which are divided from the north by the river Humber and the surrounding territory... The first king to hold the like sovereignty (*imperium*) was Ælle...”). Notably absent from Bede’s list are the Mercian kings Penda, Wulfhere, and Æthelbald.

¹² For an introduction to the massive literature on the topic, cf. Barbara A. E. Yorke, “The Vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Overlordship,” *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 2 (1981): 171-200; see also Patrick Wormald, “Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*” in *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society*, eds. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 99-129; for a typically skeptical account see Simon Keynes,

and seventh centuries (unlikely), however, it seems to have been at the very least a recurring concept in Ecgberhting written propaganda. Æthelstan included, it seems; for a variant form of this title (*brytænwalda*) appears in an Old English translation of a charter of Æthelstan, possibly as a translation for the title *rex totius Britanniae*.¹³ Nevertheless, it seems unlikely, as Eric John and Simon Walker suggest, that Æthelstan's *regnum totius Britanniae* owed its whole inspiration to this concept; and there is good reason to question whether *bretwalda* or *brytænwalda* really referred to island-wide kingship at all (in context it only seems to refer to Southumbrian hegemony).

If he wanted a clearer exemplar for emperorship, Æthelstan only had to look across the channel. The detailed accounts of Frankish affairs in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,¹⁴ the numerous marriage contacts between Anglo-Saxon and Continental powers,¹⁵ the coteries of foreigners in important positions,¹⁶ and the dignified guests from abroad, such as Louis d'Outremer,¹⁷ illustrate how strong were the bonds which

"Rædwald the Bretwalda," in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, eds. Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 103; Eric John is outspoken in his defense of the historical importance of the concept: Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae*, 1-63.

¹³ S 427; cf. Walker, "Context for 'Brunanburh,'" 26. This variant form appears in all other manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* besides "A" (where it is *Bretwalda*): *Brytenwalda* (B), *Brytenanwealda* (C), *Brytenwealda* (D, E), and *Brytenweald* (F), indicating that it, rather than *bretwalda*, was the standard form of this title (ASC, s.a. 837). It is worth noting, however, that the Latin and Old English sections of S 427 are not clearly translations of one another, and nor is the charter regarded as undeniably authentic.

¹⁴ Cf. ASC, s.a. 885 and, most famously, s.a. 887.

¹⁵ For a good summary of English marriage alliances see Philip Grierson, "The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Ser. 4, vol. 24 (1941): 71-112.

¹⁶ For the role of foreigners in Æthelstan's kingdom, cf. Michael Wood, "The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: An English Charlemagne?" in *Ideal and Reality in Anglo-Saxon Society*, eds. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 258-9, 261; and David N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 159-60.

¹⁷ On Louis IV's life and reign, see Philippe Lauer, *Le Règne de Louis IV d'Outre-Mer* (Paris: Bouillon, 1900).

linked Anglo-Saxon England to the Continent in the early tenth century.¹⁸ The memory of Carolingian emperorship—with its connotations of power, learning, piety, and splendor—would continue to inspire Western kings for a long time to come, and it would be a major source of inspiration for Æthelstan's royal ideology.

At the same time, Æthelstan and his contemporaries had an older and even more venerable guide for kingship: the Bible. The kings of the Old Testament—anointed, sacrosanct, and often supported or guided directly by God himself—were the highest aspiration for many medieval kings.¹⁹ We have already seen how King Alfred justified his temporal wealth as the “resources and tools” with which to accomplish God's “commands.” And Æthelstan likewise represented his kingship as the fulfillment of God's Will: nearly every royal style is accompanied by some mention of God's grace, favor, friendship, or support; a typical royal style from his hegemonial Group 4 charters (c. 938-939), for instance, runs: “*basileus* of the English and all adjoining peoples *through the favor of the heavenly will*.”²⁰ For men justified by religion, piety and its trappings were essential. Consequently, kings donated land, resources, and gifts to churches and monasteries, encouraged a reputation for devoutness, entered into confraternity with foreign religious houses, and, with a

¹⁸ Indeed, they had existed for some time: Cf. Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century: the Ford lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in the Hilary Term 1943* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946). Nor was Æthelstan the first king to incorporate Frankish concepts into his kingship: e.g. Offa anointing his son and Æthelwulf giving his wife the name of queen.

¹⁹ Cf. Judith McClure, “Bede's Old Testament Kings,” in *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 76-98.

²⁰ S 441, emphasis added: “Ego Æþelstanus...favente superno numine basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium.”

particular vigor in the case of King Æthelstan, collected, gave away, and even stole holy relics.²¹

By the middle of his reign, King Æthelstan had incorporated these strands of inspiration into the sophisticated, innovative claims of his mature ideology. When he claimed to rule as *rex Anglorum* and *rex totius Britanniae*, it was according to the normative rules laid out by his precedents. Of course, it took a while for this imperial ideology to develop. And one of the goals of this chapter is to put the development of that ideology into context. This is made difficult by the limitations of the sources: the inability to date coins with exactitude, the scant supply of authentic charters for Æthelstan's early years, and generally by the fragmentary and debatable nature of so much of the contemporary evidence. Nevertheless, some chronology is possible, and a careful comparison of political developments with self-representation shows how much Æthelstan's ideology depended upon his political situation. In his first years as king, for instance, Æthelstan's position was not wholly secure even in Wessex. As a result, his early ideology was directed less towards the other peoples of Britain than to his own subjects; its theme, less hegemony than legitimacy.

Legitimacy and Consolidation: Early years and consecration

Edward the Elder died on July 17, 924. According to the "A," "E," and "F" manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, "King Edward died and his son Æthelstan succeeded to the kingdom."²² But Æthelstan's succession was by no means as easy as the *Chronicle* makes it out to be. The first complication to this straightforward

²¹ On Æthelstan's reputation as a relic collector, see chapter two. See also Brooke, *Saxon and Norman Kings*, 131-140.

²² *ASC*, s.a. 934.

narrative comes from the *Mercian Register*, a Mercian account preserved in blocks in the “B,” “C,” and “D” manuscripts of the *Chronicle*: “In this year King Edward died at Farndon in Mercia and his son Ælfweard died very soon after (D: “after sixteen days”) at Oxford, and their bodies are buried at Winchester. And Æthelstan was chosen by the Mercians as king, and consecrated at Kingston.”²³ So here we have the interesting piece of information that the Mercians (rather than the West Saxons) chose Æthelstan as king, and that Æthelstan’s half-brother, Ælfweard, died soon after Edward. The second complication comes from the *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster at Winchester, which says that Ælfweard was “truly crowned with royal tokens” (*vero regalibus infulis redimitus*), i.e. that he had been made king and bestowed with his dynasty’s regalia.²⁴ A unique continuation of the West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List preserved in the *Textus Roffensis* (a twelfth-century collection mainly of legal documents compiled at Rochester) corroborates this remark with an entry for a short-lived King Ælfweard.²⁵ If these remarks were all we had, we might assume that Ælfweard’s sixteen-day reign was simply too short for the *Chronicle* to take notice, and that Æthelstan was consecrated shortly after he died. But a third complication remains. A charter dated September 4, 925, “on the day of his consecration,” reveals that Æthelstan’s actual consecration at Kingston did not occur until well over a year

²³ *EHD*, 199.

²⁴ *Lib. Vit.*, f 9v.1.

²⁵ Printed and edited in D. Dumville, “The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List: Manuscripts and Texts,” *Anglia* 104 (1986): 29. “Ða feng Ælfwerd Eadwardes sunu to 7 heold .iiii. wucan” (“Then Ælfweard Edward’s son succeeded to [the kingdom] and held it for 4 weeks”). This would of course conflict with the account in the D manuscript of the *Chronicle* which says that Ælfweard died just sixteen days after his father. (*ASC*, s.a. 924.) Similarly, the regnal dates in the Rochester list for Æthelstan are also incorrect.

after the Mercians chose him as king.²⁶ The West Saxon Genealogical List confirms the date with a reign length of “fourteen years, seven weeks, and three days,” the difference between September 4, 925 and October 27, 939 (Æthelstan’s death).²⁷ The fact that Æthelstan *had* been acknowledged as king before this date is supported by his charters’ dating clauses, where he calculates the regnal year from both 924 and 925.²⁸

What was the cause of this delay between acclamation as king and consecration? As Janet Nelson has pointed out, such a delay does not necessarily imply a difficult accession.²⁹ Nevertheless, contemporary evidence, later mythology, and analogy to a similar delay in 978-9 do suggest that the Æthelstan’s election as king of Wessex in 924 had been contested.³⁰ It seems that a West Saxon faction, perhaps centered at Winchester, preferred King Edward’s sons by his second wife (Ælfflæd) to Æthelstan. Winchester, whose New Minster had been founded by Edward in 901, was a traditional royal center for the West Saxon dynasty, and was

²⁶ S 394. “primo anno regni regis Adalstani, die consecrationis eius, pridie nonas Septembris” (in the first year of the reign of King Æthelstan, on the day of his consecration, the day before the Nones of September [i.e. September 4]).

²⁷ Keynes, “King Athelstan’s Books,” 187 n.208. For the List in its various forms see Dumville, “West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List.” For a translation, see *EHD*, no. 1.

²⁸ Cf. Keynes, “King Athelstan’s Books,” 187. Two charters written out on April 16, 928 (S 399-400) give a regnal year calculated from 925 (*anno...mei haut dubium regiminis tercio*, “in the third year of my rule”), while a charter of May 28, 934 gives one calculated from 924 (*anno...regni vero mihi commissi .X^o*, “truly in the 10th year of the reign entrusted to me”).

²⁹ Janet Nelson, “Inauguration Rituals,” in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood (Leeds: University of Leeds Printing Service, 1977), 54-56; also cf. George Garnett, “Coronation and Propaganda: Some Implications of the Norman Claim to the Throne of England in 1066,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 36 (1986): 91-116, p. 92. Thanks to Dr. John Maddicott for bringing this information to my attention.

³⁰ Cf. Sean Miller, ed. *Charters of the New Minster, Winchester*, British Academy Series IX (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxviii-xxix: “The only similar gap in Anglo-Saxon England was the coronation of Æthelred II in May 979 over a year after the death of Edward the Martyr in March 978. With Æthelred and Edward...we know from contemporary sources (though...not from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) that the country had been divided as to who should rule.”

moreover a particularly important site for royal patronage.³¹ Moreover, Bishop Frithestan of Winchester, a senior bishop of an important see, and apparently quite close to King Edward,³² does not attest any of Æthelstan's extant charters until 928, and thereafter maintains a spotty record in the witness lists until he is succeeded by Æthelstan's supporter Beornstan in 931.³³ Æthelstan is also left out of the *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster, and his name is changed to "Edward" in a charter of 931×934 (redated 921) in the New Minster cartulary, but the first might simply reflect Æthelstan's limited patronage of Winchester (though this itself may be a sign of bad blood, given the history of royal patronage) and the second might have been a simple mistake.³⁴ Finally, William of Malmesbury gives a riveting but unsubstantiated account of a West Saxon traitor named "Ælfred" who supposedly led a faction to blind and imprison Æthelstan, only to be intercepted and sent to Rome to swear his innocence.³⁵ We have little reason to believe this story is accurate, and perhaps some reason to doubt its authenticity,³⁶ but it may nevertheless preserve some truth about a

³¹ Many important members of the royal family were buried in the New Minster: King Alfred, Queen Ealhswith (Alfred's wife), Edward's brother Æthelweard, Edward himself, and Ælfweard.

³² A spurious charter of King Edward (S 382) describes the bishop as *meus dilectus Friðestanus* ("my dear Frithestan").

³³ Cf. Simon Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations in Anglo-Saxon Charters, c. 670-1066*, I: Tables (Cambridge: Dept. of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, 2002), Table XXXVII.

³⁴ Miller, *Charters of the New Minster*, xxx.

³⁵ *GR*, ii.131: "In the year of our Lord 924 Edward's son Æthelstan began to reign, and held the throne for sixteen years. His brother *Elwardus* [Ælfweard], who died a few days after his father, had been thought worthy of a burial-place with him in Winchester; so Æthelstan was elected there with the overwhelming support of the nobles, and crowned in a royal town called Kingston, despite the opposition of a certain Ælfred and his supporters." For the "end" of this seditious Alfred see ii.136-7, 139: At Rome, "Ælfred" was made to swear his innocence before the pope, but in so doing he died because of his guilt, and was reluctantly permitted to receive a Christian burial. For some potential corroboration to this story in Æthelstan's legal codes, see Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the twelfth century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 307.

³⁶ E.g. it is decidedly similar to the account he gives of Godwine dying upon swearing to King Edward the Confessor that he did not kill the *ætheling* Alfred (*GR*, ii.197).

struggle for power. The whole affair is shrouded in evidentiary darkness, but we might make some conjectures about its nature and causes.

The main issue was probably Æthelstan's legitimacy, for although he was Edward's oldest son, it seems that he was born of a noble concubine rather than a wife.³⁷ We can uncover some of what was going on behind the scenes by examining King Edward's charters of the early 900s. Æthelstan witnessed several of his father's early charters as *filius regis* (king's son),³⁸ and typically did so in a group with his half-brother Ælfweard and his uncle Æthelweard.³⁹ The rules of succession in the West Saxon kingdom remain confused; before Ecgberht (r. 802–839), the kingdom had passed from cousin to distantly-related cousin; afterwards, the succession went to brothers and sons, although it is difficult to see what determined precedence. The order in which these *æthelings* (princes) attested on charters often gives a clue as to their precedence in the list of potential heirs. Out of the seven charters of Edward's reign attested by Æthelstan, however, only two are substantially authentic, and both are early: S 365 and 366 (both dated 901). In S 365 Æthelstan attests fifth on the witness list: after his father, Archbishop Plegmund, Æthelweard (incorrectly as *filius regis*), and Ælfweard. In S 366 he attests behind the same group in the same order.⁴⁰

³⁷ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: the king's wife in the early Middle Ages* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 65, 70. Stafford has described this woman, Ecgwynn, as "the noble concubine of Edward's youth" (65).

³⁸ S 365, 366, 377, 378, 381, 382, and 383.

³⁹ Æthelweard is often incorrectly described as *filius regis* in Edward's charters instead of *frater regis* (he is called the son of King Edward in S 359–60, 362, 364–6, 368, 370, 372, 373, 374, 1286), but he was in fact the son of King Alfred and Edward's brother (cf. *As. Life*, c. 75: "Nati sunt ergo ei filii et filiae de supradicta coniuge sua [*scilicet*] Æthelflæd primogenita, post quam Eadwerd, deinde Æthelgeofu, postea Ælfhryth, deinde Æthelweard natus est, exceptis his, qui in infantia morte praeveniente praeoccupati sunt," cf. also S 342a, 375, 376–378, 383, 1443, 1507). He died sometime around 920. His two sons, Ælfwine and Æthelwine, died at the battle of *Brunanburh* in 937, according to William of Malmesbury (GR, 220–221 (ii.135.9))

⁴⁰ Here Æthelweard is erroneously copied as "Elfredus." PASE's identification of "Elfredus" as Eadred is impossible, as Eadred was not alive at the time. Given the context supplied by S 365 and the other

In the remaining five charters, the spurious S 377-378 (909) and 381-3 (899×923), which may nevertheless preserve remnants of authentic material, this group of three *æthelings* now attests *after* the bishops. Moreover, the order has changed: Æthelweard still leads the group, but now Æthelstan is listed ahead of his half-brother. A few possibilities could explain this shift: it simply could be that all of these charters are spurious, or, more imaginatively, that Ælfweard's elevated position in the two charters of 901 had been due to the contemporary importance of his mother, Ælfflæd, a prominent figure around 901.⁴¹ It is possible that, since Æthelstan's mother Ecgwynn was a woman of lower official position, Æthelstan was overlooked in favor of his infant brother, recently born in the purple of a consecrated queen. Afterwards, perhaps, the replacement of Ælfflæd by Queen Eadgifu, Edward's final wife and the mother of the future kings Edmund and Eadred, affected the young Ælfweard's status just enough so that the older Æthelstan could witness above him.⁴² Or perhaps Æthelstan himself, now growing older, clamored for a better position. Unfortunately, the charter evidence from 910 to 924, which would otherwise shed light upon the political situation before Edward's death, is practically nonexistent.⁴³

Maybe Edward simply failed to specify clearly which son he wanted to succeed him. Or maybe he even arranged for the kingdom to be divided: Wessex going to Ælfweard and Mercia to Æthelstan.⁴⁴ The jury is still out as to whether

charters listed above, it seems clear that this individual is Æthelweard. Perhaps the incorrect name is a result of a confusion with Æthelweard's father Alfred?

⁴¹ S 363, in which she attests third (as *conjux regis*, "wife of the king") on the witness-list after "Eadward rex" and "Ealhswið mater regis" (Ealhswith, King Alfred's wife and Edward's mother).

⁴² Cf. Pauline Stafford, "The King's Wife in Wessex," *Past and Present* 91 (1981), 13.

⁴³ Cf. Simon Keynes, "England, c. 900-1016," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 3, c.900-c.1024, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 461, 468.

⁴⁴ Suggested in Janet L. Nelson, "The Second English *Ordo*," reprinted in Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon, 1986), 366.

William of Malmesbury is to be trusted when he says that the young Æthelstan was raised by his aunt Æthelflæd and her husband Ealdorman Æthelred in Mercia, which would be evidence of the latter, and which would help to explain why Æthelstan was chosen king by the Mercians while his half-brother was chosen in Wessex.⁴⁵ Even if there had been a split between the kingdom's Mercian and West Saxon nobles, though, we are left wondering why, after Ælfweard's death, Æthelstan still had to wait more than a year for his consecration at Kingston. Several scholars have discounted the time lag as evidence of a struggle for power; for such delays were not uncommon among early medieval kings, King Edward being one case in point.⁴⁶ On the other hand, it was not unusual for kings to face difficulties with their accessions; and King Edward is a case in point yet again, with the rebellion he faced from his own cousin, Æthelwold. Possibly the West Saxon nobles and ecclesiastics who had supported Ælfweard—Bishop Frithestan among them?—had attempted to elect Ælflæd's second son, Edwin, in his brother's place. It is possible that Æthelstan, already proclaimed king by the Mercians, older than his half-brother, and in a position of strength, cut a deal with his West Saxon political opponents; possibly by acknowledging Edwin as his own heir.⁴⁷ Was force or the threat of force involved? Again, the political situation is obscure, although Æthelstan's restricted patronage for Winchester, and his preferment for Malmesbury despite Winchester's traditional position as a royal establishment, may point to acrimonious relations. In any case,

⁴⁵ GR, ii.133.2. For a skeptical account see David N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 146.

⁴⁶ Edward was consecrated Pentecost 900, though Alfred died October 26, 899.

⁴⁷ In S 1417, an evidently early charter, Edwin attests after Æthelstan as *clito*, an elevated term for *ætheling*, a prince "sharing with a reigning king descent from a common grandfather and eligible for succession to the throne" (PASE).

Æthelstan's position must have been considerably stronger by September 4, 925, when he was consecrated king at Kingston-upon-Thames in Surrey, an old royal estate "central to a kingdom which comprised Wessex, Mercia, East-Anglia, and Kent," in other words, the geographical navel of the "kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons."⁴⁸

Royal consecration was a process akin to ecclesiastical ordination, and as such its strongest statement was to the divine justification of a king being consecrated, and to the sacral nature of his royal office. By Æthelstan's time consecrations in Anglo-Saxon England were complicated, lengthy rituals, as is revealed by the surviving liturgical texts, *ordines*, which proscribe the sequence of events in the ceremony. According to Janet Nelson, Æthelstan would have used what is called the Second English *Ordo*, a liturgical text preserved only in manuscripts which postdate Æthelstan's reign by several years.⁴⁹ Essentially, the ceremony at Kingston would have been divided into four main phases: preliminary benedictions, anointment, investitures, and enthronement.⁵⁰ During the preliminaries, the preeminent bishops and the elected king would have exchanged ritual responses in church, *Te Deum* would have been sung as the king was led to the altar, and several benedictions would have been given for the king. During the anointment, Æthelstan's sacral nature as

⁴⁸ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, 114.

⁴⁹ Janet L. Nelson, "The Second English *Ordo*," in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon, 1986), 361-70. There are two versions of this *Ordo*, which Nelson designates A and B. Since the B version appears to be the later one, I will only focus on A. A's most famous MS source is the Sacramentary of Ratold (Bibliothèque Nationale lat.12052), which was drafted 973×986. The "Ratold" *Ordo*, supplemented by copies in seventeen other MSS, is printed in P. L. Ward, "An Early Version of the Anglo-Saxon Coronation Ceremony," *EHR* 57 (1942): 345-361. Also to be considered here is the First English *Ordo*, the Second *Ordo*'s predecessor, preserved in three main MSS, and printed in P. Schramm, *Kaiser, Könige und Päpste*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1968), 223-233.

⁵⁰ Nelson, "Second English *Ordo*," 362, Table I.

king would have been conferred with holy oil, a practice which owed its ultimate inspiration in the Old Testament anointing of Saul, but which had been imported to Anglo-Saxon England from Carolingian Francia at the end of the eighth century. During the investitures, the anointed king would have been invested with the royal regalia: ring, sword, crown, scepter, and rod (quite possibly the “royal tokens” with which Ælfweard was invested), each investiture accompanied by an explanatory statement and prayer. Then the king would take his throne, and would issue three precepts: first, that he would protect the church of God and the whole Christian populace with a true peace, second, that he would prohibit robberies and iniquities by all ranks of men, and, third, that he would promote justice (*aequitas*) and mercy (*miser cordia*) throughout his realm, in deference to the justice and mercy of God. Finally, he would be acclaimed by cries of “vivat rex!” (“long live the king!”).⁵¹

Of course we cannot know with certainty whether Æthelstan followed the precise steps laid out in this *ordo*, for our version of this text represents the accrual of textual tradition rather than one exact ceremony. But what is important is that, whatever its exact form, the consecration enabled Æthelstan’s authority in Wessex to take a quantum leap. The ostentatious support and benediction of the leading bishops, in the presence of the leading magnates of Wessex, lay and ecclesiastic—and the shouts of “vivat rex!”—must have been quite a relief after a year of uncertainty. Also important is the particularly Carolingian quality of the *ordo*. As Nelson has shown, it owed much to late ninth-century West Frankish *ordines*, in particular to one of Archbishop Hincmar of Reims.⁵² We should not assume that merely by using a

⁵¹ P. L. Ward, “Early Version of the Coronation Ceremony,” 350-61.

⁵² Nelson, “Second English *Ordo*,” Table II.

Carolingian-inspired king-making liturgy King Æthelstan was already making imperial claims, but we should be aware that Æthelstan and his best educated advisors were well-aware of Carolingian practices. Nor should we forget that Louis, the five-year-old son of King Charles the Simple and scion of the Carolingians in West Francia, was then living in exile in England with his mother, Æthelstan's sister Eadgifu—and both were likely at Kingston on September 4, 925.

We have a (dim) window into the exact events of the consecration thanks to the charter written “on the day of his consecration.”⁵³ In this diploma, Æthelstan restored some land on the island of Thanet to St. Augustine's, Canterbury. This is one of his earliest charters—perhaps his first—and it may avail us to examine the donation in full to get a taste of Æthelstan's diplomatic ideology when he took the throne:

In the year from the incarnation of the lord 935, in the 8th indiction, in the first year of the reign of King Æthelstan, on the day of his consecration, the day before the Nones of September [i.e. Sept. 4], Æthelstan, king of the Saxons and the Angles (*rex Saxonum et Anglorum*), for the salvation of his soul, gave land of fourteen sulungs (*aratrorum*) to St. Augustine, which land, on the island of Thanet, is known by the name Weburginland, which furthermore had been taken away unjustly from St. Augustine for many years. But, with God assenting, King Æthelstan restored that land again to St. Augustine with the consent of eight bishops and two ealdormen (*principes*) whose names are these: Archbishop Æthelhelm [Canterbury], Bishop Ælle [Lichfield], Bishop Sigehelm [Sherborne], Bishop Wulfhelm [Wells], Bishop Wilfrith [Worcester], Bishop Beornheah [Selsey], Bishop Eadwulf [Crediton], Ealdorman Ordgar, Ealdorman Ælfwald, Odda king's thegn, and Cened abbot, Ælfheah priest, and another Ælfheah priest and monk.⁵⁴

This straightforward charter has none of the florid language of Æthelstan's later diplomas. But it does make some noteworthy, if not unexpected, ideological claims.⁵⁵

⁵³ S 394.

⁵⁴ S 394. Æthelstan's name is spelled “Adalstan” throughout.

⁵⁵ It also reveals the coterie of foreigners surrounding King Æthelstan in the early part of the king's reign. Whoever drafted S 394 spelt the king's name “Adalstan,” which Michael Lapidge has taken to be evidence of the scribe's German origins (“Some Latin Poems,” 62-65). Several of the members of

First of all, St. Augustine's, Canterbury (named after the saint sent by Pope Gregory I to convert the English) was one of the most important ecclesiastical institutions in Britain. Canterbury was the see of the archbishop, whose institutional status in the island was as well established as that of the king of the West Saxons. Æthelstan is portrayed as a divinely inspired restorer of lost lands to this august ecclesiastical body. A note of continuity is sounded by the royal style, *rex Saxonum et Anglorum*, taken straight from the charters of Edward and Alfred.⁵⁶ Likewise, as we shall see below, Æthelstan's early coinage also maintained continuity from his father's mints. But the continuation of the ideological title "king of the Anglo-Saxons" was more than a static continuation of tradition; it was an active assertion that such a polity continued to exist, despite the uncertainties of 924-5. Keynes has written extensively on Alfred's invention of a polity called the "Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons."⁵⁷ During the late 880s and early 890s, as King Alfred extended his sway over English-speaking Mercia, he styled himself "King of the Anglo-Saxons" (or a variant) in his charters, positing a unified *gens Angulsaxonum* under his rule.⁵⁸ Asser, who was intimately familiar with Alfred's court and its language, invariably describes him as

the *familia* of the New Minster who attest S 1417, another early charter, have Continental names: Walthere, Gundlaf, Hildewine, and possibly Petrus (though he could also be Celtic). From an ideological standpoint, it is important to note that even after the literary reforms of King Alfred, the Anglo-Saxons still relied upon foreigners for training in learning and literacy. By surrounding himself with an "intellectual *comitatus*" of learned foreigners, Æthelstan girded his reputation as an heir of King Alfred, who was also famous for a similar cadre of foreign intellectuals (Wood, "Making of King Aethelstan's Empire," 258).

⁵⁶ Cf. Simon Keynes, "The West Saxon Charters of Æthelwulf and his Sons," *EHR* 434 (1994), 1109-1149, pp. 1147-49, and esp. 1148 n.4.

⁵⁷ Simon Keynes, "King Alfred and the Mercians," in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century*, ed. Mark A.S. Blackburn and David N. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 1-46.

⁵⁸ West Saxon kings had used the title *Occidentalium Saxonum rex* ("king of the West Saxons") or sometimes *Saxonum rex* ("king of the Saxons"). Cf. S 277, 283, 292, 307, 329, 333, etc.

“king of the Anglo-Saxons” in his biography.⁵⁹ Edward the Elder continued this royal style in his own charters.⁶⁰ When Æthelstan finally had himself consecrated, it was natural that he should do so as *rex Anglorum et Saxonum*, if he wished to continue the Alfredian assertion that Mercia and Wessex were a united kingdom. Æthelstan only uses this style (*Angulsaxonum rex*) in his early charters, before he moved on to the mature ideology of the 930s. S 396 and 397, two authentic diplomas drawn up on the same occasion in 926, both employ the title *Angulsaxonum rex*; as does, with one variation, S 1417 (924×933, but probably c. 927). Part of the reason for this scarcity may be the limited survival of his early charters, but it also points to the fact that, once Æthelstan felt his position was secure, he abandoned the earlier claim for something much less modest.

This conservative consolidation must have been successful, in any case, for Æthelstan felt secure enough four and a half months after his coronation to forge the first of the international alliances so characteristic of his later reign. On January 30, 926 Æthelstan and Sihtric, the Norse king of York (described in the *Chronicle* as “King of the Northumbrians”), met at Tamworth in Mercia, where they arranged for Sihtric to marry Æthelstan’s sister.⁶¹ According to Roger of Wendover (whose late and often faulty account may nevertheless preserve a shred of truth), Sihtric abandoned his paganism to marry the West-Saxon princess, and may have given up more as well: possibly relinquishing minting rights in the north.⁶² Around the same

⁵⁹ Asser, *passim* (e.g. c. 1 “Ælfred Angulsaxonum rex”); cf. Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 227–8.

⁶⁰ E.g. S 359, 366, 362–4, 373, 375, 380, etc.

⁶¹ ASC “D,” s.a. 925 (*recte* 926).

⁶² Henry O. Coxe, ed., *Rogeri de Wendover Chronica; sive, Flores historiarum*, vol. 1 (London: English Historical Society, 1841), 385 (s.a. 925). Nevertheless, Sihtric allegedly relapsed soon after to paganism: “Qui [Sihtric], ob amorem virginis paganismum relinquens, fidem Christi suscepit, sed non multo post beatam virginem repudians ac Christianitatem abiciens, idolorum culturam restauravit, et

time, Æthelstan sent his sister Eadhild to marry Hugh the Great, the Capetian *dux Francorum*. As a prelude to the marriage, Hugh had given the king gifts “on a truly munificent scale,” according to William of Malmesbury, including jewels, horses, “a precious crown of solid gold,” and some choice relics: the sword of Constantine the Great (with a nail from the cross), the lance of Charlemagne (said to be the lance which pierced Christ’s side), the banner of the Theban legion, a piece of the true cross.⁶³ With such impressive successes, Æthelstan must have felt more comfortable by the end of 926 than ever before: secure at home, with friendly (and evidently impressed) allies across the seas, and allied by marriage to the Norse kingdom of York. How much he had already planned for the extraordinary developments to come, and whether he had already begun to think of himself as king of more than just “the Anglo-Saxons,” remains unknown. But by the end of the next year King Æthelstan was in a position to make hegemonic claims over the rulers of the island, quite regardless of tradition.

927 and Aftermath: the “King of the English”

The year 927 was the great turning point of Æthelstan’s reign. Early in the year, the death of King Sihtric of York triggered a set of events which would place Æthelstan, by July 12, in control of lands which no West Saxon king had even laid

post modicum temporis apostatus vitam miserabiliter terminavit” (“He, abandoning his paganism for love of the virgin, took up the faith of Christ, but not long after, repudiating the blessed virgin and casting aside Christianity, restored the worship of idols, and after a short time the apostate miserably ended his life”). Sihtric may have had to relinquish more than his paganism at the Tamworth meeting. The numismatic evidence suggests that he relinquished his right to mint his own coins in the north. See Michael Dolley, *Viking Coins of the Danelaw and of Dublin* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1965).

⁶³ *GR*, ii.135.3-6. See Part II: Relics.

claim to before. The “D” manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offers a good initial description of the events of 927, with a portent to match:

In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky, and Sihtric died, and King Æthelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians (*feng to Norðhymbra rice*); and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island: first Hywel, king of the West Welsh, and Constantine, king of the Scots, and Owain, king of the people of Gwent, and Ealdred, son of Eadwulf from Bamburgh. And they established peace with pledge and oaths in the place which is called Eamont (*æt Eamotum*), on 12 July, and renounced all idolatry and afterwards departed in peace.⁶⁴

The “E” and “F” chronicles add, “King Æthelstan drove out (*fordraf*) King Guthfrith,” an event which seems to have occurred before the meeting at Eamont, near Penrith in the Peak District.⁶⁵ William of Malmesbury helps to put the event in context: according to William, Sihtric’s death allowed Æthelstan to “add Northumbria to his own share, for it was his by ancient right no less than by modern connection.”⁶⁶ Æthelstan may have met initial opposition from a certain Ealdwulf (*Aldulfus*), possibly a member of the Bamburgh dynasty, who is only mentioned by William of Malmesbury.⁶⁷ The fact that Æthelstan might have had to cross swords with an “English” leader before he was able to assert kingship over the *gens Anglorum* in Northumbria is an indication of how unprecedented and, probably, unexpected Æthelstan’s expedition to the north had been. The marriage alliance with the deceased Sihtric would have been flimsy grounds for a takeover of Northumbria when Sihtric’s son Olaf *and* brother Guthfrith, as well as the local Bamburgh dynasty, had far more legitimate claims to the region.

⁶⁴ ASC “D,” *s.a.* 926 (*recte* 927). Trans., *EHD*, 200.

⁶⁵ ASC “E,” “F,” *s.a.* 927. Trans. *EHD*, 200.

⁶⁶ GR ii.134.5. This was something of a stretch, since the West Saxons had never held any dominion over York, which had belonged to the kingdom of the Northumbrians before the Viking invasions.

⁶⁷ GR ii.131.4.

Legitimate or not, Æthelstan was determined to conquer Northumbria. As William of Malmesbury wrote, “Sihtric’s son Anlaf (Olaf) fled to Ireland and his brother Guthfrith to Scotland, where they were promptly followed by envoys to the king, who went to Constantine king of Scots and Owain (Eogan) king of the Cumbrians to demand return of the fugitive with the alternative of war. The barbarians had no spirit to utter a word of protest; they preferred to gather at a place called Dacre and put themselves and their kingdoms in the hands of the English king.”⁶⁸ Here, if Alfred Smyth’s gloss of what appears to be a confusion of two meetings in the *Chronicle* is correct, Æthelstan accepted the submission of the Northern rulers: Constantine of the Scots, Owain of Strathclyde (rather than Gwent), and Eadwulf of Bamburgh, while the Welsh kings submitted on a separate occasion at Hereford.⁶⁹

Smyth argues that Olaf, Sihtric’s son, who eventually did become king of York in 941, was too young to succeed his father in 927; instead, the viable Norse claimant to York had been Guthfrith, king of Dublin, Sihtric’s brother, who left Dublin with his fleet soon after Sihtric died.⁷⁰ According to Smyth, relying on the *Ulster Annals* and Symeon of Durham, Guthfrith landed in Cumbria, where Æthelstan put him to flight, but then made a dash for York, which he was unable to take, before being driven back to Ireland at long last.⁷¹ Æthelstan, taking York once and for all, destroyed the Norse defenses of the city, and returned to Wessex as master of all of

⁶⁸ GR ii.134.5. William’s Dacre meeting is clearly the same as the *Chronicle*’s Eamont meeting. Dacre is located near Penrith, along a tributary of the Eamont River.

⁶⁹ Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: the history and archaeology of two related Viking kingdoms* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 1987), 12.

⁷⁰ Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, 10-11. Cf. *AU*, s.a. 927: “Sihtric grandson of Ivarr, king of the New Foreigners and Old Foreigners died at a young age. The fleet of Anagasan retired and Guthfrith retired from Dublin.”

⁷¹ Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, 13-14.

England and overlord of all the rulers of Britain. William of Malmesbury's statement that Æthelstan "compelled Idwal, king of all the Welsh, and Constantine, king of the Scots, to abdicate...[but] yielding to pity, he restored them to their former status, to reign under his lordship, declaring it more glorious to make kings than to be one" seems like an exaggeration. Nevertheless, it is clear that Æthelstan's victory in the north implied unprecedented power over previously autonomous kings.⁷² While it was probably nothing so drastic as an abdication, the suddenness of the submission, and the ease with which King Æthelstan defeated Guthfrith and destroyed the Norse fortress at York, must have been nearly as impressive. Around the same time, according to William of Malmesbury, Æthelstan "compelled" (*coegit*) the leaders of the Welsh to meet at Hereford, on the border of Wales, where they allegedly submitted to his overlordship and agreed to pay a hefty tribute.⁷³ William indicates that they did so "after a spell of reluctance" (*aliquandiu calcitrantes*), perhaps a reference to actual fighting. According to William, Æthelstan forced the leaders of the Welsh to pay a tribute unimagined before his time: "an annual tribute of twenty pounds of gold and three hundred pounds of silver, and to hand over by the count 25,000 oxen, besides as many as he might wish of hounds...and birds of prey."⁷⁴ It is uncertain whether this meeting took place before or after the northern expedition, but the mention of a "Hywel, king of the West Welsh" (*Huwal West Wala cyning*) in the "D" *Chronicle*'s description of the Eamont meeting may indicate that King Hywel, and perhaps others, having submitted at Hereford before the northern expedition, now

⁷² *GR*, ii.134 (pp. 212-13).

⁷³ *GR*, ii.132.5: "apud Herefordensem urbem coegit occurrere."

⁷⁴ *GR*, ii.132.6.

accompanied Æthelstan to the north (as they would again in 934). In any case, by the end of 927 Æthelstan was undisputedly the island's most powerful king.

Unfortunately, exactly how and when Æthelstan transformed these successes into a cohesive imperial ideology remains uncertain. Unfortunately, the limitations of the primary sources force us to adopt a somewhat teleological approach. On the one hand, we have the diplomatic and military triumphs of 927, which place Æthelstan in a clear hegemonic position over his neighbors in Britain. On the other hand, we have the charters and coins of the 930s which give definitive evidence of a consistent, well-thought-out ideology of imperial kingship. What we are missing is the middle. Thus, we must conduct our search backwards, searching for the *regnum Anglorum* and *regnum totius Britanniae* of the 930s in the scant and spurious sources of 927-931, assuming all along that 927 must have been what precipitated the change.

Perhaps the earliest of the 927-31 sources period is a poem, *Carta dirige gressus* ("Letter, direct your steps"), which seems to have been written just in the wake of the events of 927, about the northern expedition. The poem, based on an early ninth-century poem addressed to Charlemagne, is preserved in two manuscripts, Cotton Nero A. ii, 10v-11v ("C") and Durham A. II. 17, pt 1, 31v ("D"). It is typical of so many of the surviving sources for Æthelstan's reign in that it is fragmentary, corrupt, and can only be explained by conjecture with the help of other contemporary sources. Nevertheless, Michael Lapidge has made a painstaking reconstruction of this poem from the two highly corrupt manuscripts.⁷⁵ A translation follows in full:

⁷⁵ Michael Lapidge, "Some Poems," 49-86. An earlier although less complete emendation, was carried out in W. H. Stevenson, "A Latin Poem Addressed to King Athelstan," *English Historical Review* 26 (1911): 482-487, who first identified the Carolingian source of the poem. (To say a MS is corrupt is

Letter, direct your steps
 Sailing across the seas
 And an expanse of land
 To the king's palace⁷⁷
 Direct first of all your best wishes
 To the realm:⁷⁹ the prince,⁸⁰
 The distinguished ealdormen⁸¹ as well,
 The arm-bearing thegns⁸³
 Whom he now rules with this
 Saxonland now made whole⁸⁴:
 King Æthelstan lives
 Glorious through his deeds!

He, with Sihtric having died,
 In such circumstances arms for battle
 The army of the Saxons⁷⁶
 Throughout all Britain.⁷⁸
 Constantine, king of the Scots,
 Hastens to Britain:
 By supporting the king of the Saxons⁸²
 [He is] loyal in his service.
 King Æthelstan said [these things]
 Through the announcements of Peter
 May they be well, live long,
 Through the Savior's grace!⁸⁵

With great skill, Lapidge rescues a useful contemporary poem from a very corrupt set of texts. He glosses the poem as an announcement from Æthelstan to his court, conveyed through the offices (and poetry) of a certain Peter (line 22: *per Petri preconia*). Lapidge identifies this *Petrus* as a subscriber to a Winchester charter (S 1417) in which the New Minster *familia* grants land to the thegn Alfred—incidentally the same charter which describes Edwin as *cliton* (sic). In his view, “the letter recording the events *æt Eamotum* was directed to Æthelstan's household – queen, prince, ealdormenn and thegns – who were presumably resident in the south and who would have welcomed the news of the successful outcome of the king's northern expedition. It is not fanciful to suppose (as Lapidge does) that the *regis palacium* of line 4 refers to “the royal *burh* at Winchester, the principle residence of the West

simply to say that it was miscopied from its source; e.g. the D manuscript of the poem has *Quarta dirie gressus* instead of *Carta dirige gressus*).

⁷⁶ *Saxonum exercitum*; Lapidge: “The army of the English.”

⁷⁷ *ad regis palacium*; Lapidge: “to the king's burh.”

⁷⁸ *per totum Bryttanium*

⁷⁹ *regimen*; from MSS *reginem/regem*. Lapidge emends the meaningless *reginem/regem* as *reginam* (“queen”), which seems unlikely given the absence of any evidence of a “wife” in the sources about Æthelstan, let alone a consecrated “queen.” For my reasons behind *regimen*, a term for “rule” or “realm” used both in Æthelstan's charters and the Second *Ordo*, see Appendix 1.

⁸⁰ *ad...clitonem*

⁸¹ *claros...comites*

⁸² *Saxonum regem saluando*; Lapidge “By supporting the king of the English.”

⁸³ *armigeros milites*

⁸⁴ *ista / perfecta Saxonia*; Lapidge: “this / England now made whole.”

⁸⁵ Taken from Lapidge's translation with some changes, “Some Poems as Evidence,” 86.

Saxon kings.”⁸⁶ Lapidge’s emendation and interpretation have received widespread acceptance among historians. If *Carta Dirige Gressus* is indeed a panegyric dispatch in the wake of the events of 927, then it is surely one of the most important sources for the early development of Æthelstan’s imperial ideology.

The central ideological claim of the poem is that “this Saxonland” has been “made whole” under the rule of King Æthelstan. The Latin here is *Saxonia*, which literally refers to the “Saxons,” but which is probably better understood as Lapidge interprets it: “this *England* now made whole.”⁸⁷ We must remember that in 927 there was no concrete concept of “England” as a geographical entity, and certainly no agreed-upon name for such an entity. While hindsight as well as the “Angle” element in Alfred’s *Angelcynn* and Bede and Gregory’s *gens Anglorum* might lead us to believe that such a name would naturally be *Anglia* (the term which was in fact used for “England” later in the Middle Ages), this was not a foregone conclusion at the very moment when England’s historical boundaries were first established. The term “Saxons,” while it was indeed used among Anglo-Saxons to refer to the West-Saxons exclusively, was also used as a general description of Anglo-Saxons by writers from outside the Anglo-Saxon world.⁸⁸ Given that the *Petrus* who composed *Carta Dirige Gressus* was evidently a foreigner himself (possibly a Frank or a German), and given that in 927 there could not have been a standard vocabulary for a polity which had just been created, it would not have been unusual if *Petrus* had used “Saxons” as the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁷ My emphasis. Ibid., 86. Keynes, “England, c. 900-1016,” 469, follows Lapidge in translating *ista perfecta Saxonia* as “this England now made whole.”

⁸⁸ E.g. Æthelstan’s obit in the Irish *AU*, s.a. 939, where he is called *ri Saxan* (“king of the Saxons”). See also the Welsh *Armes Prydein Vawr*, which refers to all the “foreigners” (i.e. Anglo-Saxons in this context) as *Saesson* (“Saxons”), even when it distinguishes between the “men of *Iwys*” (Gewise, an old name for Wessex) and the “incendiaries of Mercia” (Welsh *Lloegyr*) (*Arm.Pryd.*, *passim*, but esp. at pp. 9-10).

main element of the name for a new geographical/political entity. Therefore, we should not read *Saxonia* and the other references to “Saxons” in the poem as a specific nod to the West-Saxons as opposed to the Mercians or the Northumbrians. Instead, we should probably see *ista perfecta Saxonia* as an ideological missing link between the “kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons” which Æthelstan inherited and the “kingdom of the English” which he created. As it happened, the ideological vocabulary of Æthelstan’s diplomatic never picked up on the concept of *Saxonia*, and ultimately it described Æthelstan’s kingship in terms of *Angli* rather than *Saxones*. But the sense of completion implied in the adjective *perfecta*, “completed,” surely refers to the conviction that the *Angelcynn* were meant to be ruled as one entity. And this, after all, is the first of the two main pillars of Æthelstan’s mature ideology: the transition from the kingdom “of the Anglo-Saxons” to that “of the English.”⁸⁹

The *regnum Anglorum*, which eventually materialized from these ideological rumblings, does not seem so impressive at first glance, but its implications are actually quite profound. As Simon Keynes has suggested, the “kingdom of the English” (comprising Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria) was the successor to Alfred’s “kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons” (comprising Wessex and Mercia).⁹⁰ In one sense, Æthelstan’s claim to direct kingship over Northumbria was unprecedented; the Norse of Dublin, with two generations of direct rule in York, had a much better hereditary claim to the region than the house of Wessex, regardless of the marriage

⁸⁹ Keynes, “King Alfred and the Mercians,” 36.

⁹⁰ Simon Keynes, “King Alfred and the Mercians,” in *Kings, Currency, and Alliances*, ed. Mark A.S. Blackburn and David N. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 38-9.

alliance with Sihtric.⁹¹ But in another sense, the claim had a long history, for by incorporating Northumbria into his direct rule Æthelstan not only fulfilled his grandfather's dream of a politically unified *Angelcynn*, he also achieved the *political* culmination of a religious concept of the *gens Anglorum*, articulated by Bede in the eighth century, and thought up by Pope Gregory in the sixth.⁹²

Carta Dirige Gressus gives unique evidence that the transition from *regnum Angulsaxonum* to *regnum Anglorum* was precipitated by a real political occurrence: Æthelstan's conquest of Northumbria after Sihtric's death early in 927. But the poem also gives us an incipient version of the second pillar of Æthelstan's ideology: the assertion of "Saxon" hegemony over Britain. The poem makes clear that in the wake of 927 Æthelstan already thought of himself as the lord of the most powerful king in the north. Constantine II is clearly described as a subordinate, hastening to "Britain" (Eamont, perhaps) to aid his superior. The poet takes for granted that Constantine owes Æthelstan "service" (*servitium*); he is described as a *fidelis*, implying that he is bound to Æthelstan by ties of lordship and an oath of fidelity. The Carolingian prototype for the poem shows that Æthelstan was already imbuing his overlordship with Carolingian overtones, though the poem also reveals how closely Æthelstan's ideological claims were linked to his military capacities. His ability to mobilize "the army of the Saxons / throughout all Britain" seems to have been the main motivation for Constantine's "loyal service."

⁹¹ Ecgberht's brief hegemony hardly counts, and certainly did not constitute direct rule. Cf. *ASC*, *s.a.* 829; *EHD*, 171: "And Ecgberht led an army to Dore, against the Northumbrians, and they offered him submission and peace there, and on that they separated." In the next year, however, "Wiglaf again obtained the kingdom of the Mercians," and it is unlikely that the Northumbrian submission of 829, whatever its (probably nominal) nature, survived the reemergence of an autonomous buffer state.

⁹² Cf. Wormald, "Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*," *passim*.

With *Carta Dirige Gressus* setting the stage for the early development of Æthelstan's two main ideological claims, we move on to the development of those claims in the charters. The charter mentioned above, S 1417, attested perhaps by the same *Petrus* who composed the poem, might give some information about the king's ideology just *before* the northern expedition of 927. Here, Æthelstan appears as *Angelsaxonum Denorumque gloriosissimus rex* ("the most glorious king of the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes), perhaps in his first diplomatic claim to overlordship over another "people" outside of the *Angelcynn*. A few features of the charter suggest that it was the diplomatic contemporary of *Carta Dirige Gressus*: the presence of a *Petrus* (an unusual name in Anglo-Saxon England) in the witness list of the charter, the appearance of the term *clito* in both poem and charter, and the hegemonic expansion to the old royal style (*Denorumque*). This charter would then seem to be a missing link between the florid magnificence and bold claims of the later charters (and *Carta Dirige Gressus* itself) and the moderated tones and old-fashioned titles of the early charters. A date either shortly before the northern expedition of 927, while the king was developing his plans for Northumbria, or shortly afterwards, before the new titles had become common usage, seems appropriate.

So when did *rex Anglorum* and *rex totius Britanniae* become common usage on coins and charters (which is to say, throughout the material manifestation of Æthelstan's public and semipublic self-representation)? Unfortunately, the only charter explicitly dated 927, despite its exciting use of the title *monarchus totius Britanniae* ("monarch of all Britain), is undoubtedly spurious, and the (undated) coins

can only be dated by comparison to the charters.⁹³ Luckily, two authentic charters, drawn up simultaneously at Exeter on April 16, 928 (Easter), offer a rich glimpse into the ideological state of affairs only nine months after the meeting at Eamont.⁹⁴ Importantly, while there is no appearance of the title *rex totius Britanniae* in these charters, they do mark the first appearance of *rex Anglorum* in Æthelstan's diplomatic lexicon. They are also the first of a series of charters composed and drafted by the same individual, a royal scribe typically designated "Æthelstan A" (after Richard Drögereit) who authored all of the king's authentic charters from 928 to 934/5.⁹⁵ There are only two contemporary originals by this scribe, S 416 (931) and S 425 (934), but a number of reliable copies remain in the archives, recognizable by their flamboyant language (replete with tough syntax, internal rhyme, and grecisms), their extremely comprehensive dating clauses (with year, indiction, epact, concurrent, and lunar year), their long witness lists, and, especially after 931, their standardized royal styles and signatures.

The two "Æthelstan A" charters drawn up on Easter Day, 928 paint a vivid picture of a king and his court at one of the most important times of the medieval year: "Truly, this charter [was written] at Eastertime, in the royal stronghold (*in arce regia*) called Exeter, where king Æthelstan and his subkings (*subreguli*), bishops, ealdormen (*duces*), judges (*iudices*), nobles (*proceres*), and dignitaries (*dignitates*)

⁹³ S 398. The relatively short witness-list would be more appropriate for a charter towards the end of Æthelstan's reign, except that Bishop Oda is erroneously appointed to Sherborne rather than Ramsbury (cf. three other spurious charters where he is similarly misidentified as bishop of Sherborne: S 477, 1209, 1210). Moreover, the title *monarchus* does not appear in any other of Æthelstan's charters.

⁹⁴ S 399-400.

⁹⁵ Richard Drögereit, "Gab es eine angelsächsische Königskanzlei?" *Archiv für Urkundenforschung* 13 (1935): 335-436, pp. 345-348, 361-369. Cf. Simon Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 16-17. It should be noted that although the series is named after the *scribe*, it is quite possible that the scribe and the author were different individuals.

feasted with great joy.”⁹⁶ High holidays always brought the realm’s most important people into the king’s close proximity, providing an unmatched opportunity for politicking, conducting state affairs, and disseminating ideology.⁹⁷ This particular Easter, the king’s impressive guest list included three Welsh kings—Hywel Dda, king of Deheubarth, Idwal Foel, king of Greater Gwynedd, and a certain “Wurgeat” (perhaps Gwriad, king of Gwent) (each styled *subregulus* in S 400⁹⁸)—and the archbishop of York, Hrothweard.⁹⁹ The appearance of the Welsh kings, and their attestations as *subreguli*, gives some idea of the staying power of the submissions of 927, while the attestation of Hrothweard shows that Æthelstan’s claims of direct kingship over Northumbria were more than a one-time boast. Incidentally, this was also the first time that Bishop Frithestan of Winchester is known to have attested one of Æthelstan’s charters; so it seems that whatever hard feelings there may have been between the king and the bishop initially had been smoothed over.¹⁰⁰ In such circumstances, Æthelstan is quite fittingly described as *donifluo Dei gubernamine rex Anglorum* (“king of the English by the bountiful direction of God”) in the royal style and simply *rex Anglorum* in the signature. It seems that the idea of a *perfecta Saxonia* had caught on in court, and that this complete “kingdom of the English” had now replaced the “kingdom as the Anglo-Saxons” in the diplomatic lexicon. But as yet there was still no sign of *rex totius Britanniae*.

⁹⁶ S 399-400: “Hæc...scedula tempore paschali in arce regia quæ calatur Execeaster rege Adelstano suos subregulos, episcopos, duces, iudices, proceres, dignitates gaudio cum magno Pascendo...depicta est.”

⁹⁷ Some other examples of holiday gatherings from Æthelstan’s collected charters include: S 418-19 (Christmas, 932), S 391 (Easter, 933/944), and S 425 (Pentecost, 934).

⁹⁸ Only S 400 contains a comprehensive witness list. S 399 only lists the king and the two archbishops.

⁹⁹ S 400: “Ego Hroþwardus Eboracensis æcclesiæ archiepiscopus consensi 7 subscripsi.”

¹⁰⁰ He appears tenth on the witness list of S 400. S 399 abridges the witness list, but we can assume that Frithestan probably attested in the same position in the original.

Mature Ideology: King of All Britain

The second pillar of Æthelstan's mature ideology was not long in the waiting, however. Although we must reject the promising but spurious *regnum totius Albionis Deo auctore dispensans* ("managing the kingdom of all Albion by the authority of God") of a charter of 929,¹⁰¹ we have the first authentic diplomatic reference to Æthelstan's *regnum totius Britanniae* in the royal style of an "Æthelstan A" charter of April 3, 930. Here, the title "Athelstanus rex Anglorum" is augmented by the phrase *per...omnipatrantis dextram totius Britannie regni solio sublimatus* ("raised to the throne of the kingdom of all Britain by the right-hand of the All-Father"), while in the signature Æthelstan is described as "king endowed with the absolute rule (*monarchia*) of special privilege."¹⁰² These two titles, which appear again next in a charter of April 26, 930, are, with variations (e.g. *ierarchia* for *monarchia*), the standard until the discontinuation of the "Æthelstan A" series in 935.¹⁰³ In their mature form, the "Æthelstan A" charters comprised two distinct groups, designated Group 1 ("Flebilis fortiter detestanda," 931-933) and Group 2 ("Fortuna fallentis saeculi," 934-5), whose proems differed, but whose royals styles and signatures remained constant.¹⁰⁴ Both groups begin with dense, flamboyant proems, musing on the imperfections of this

¹⁰¹ S 401. There are several anachronisms as well as a questionable pile-up of bishops at the end of the witness-list. Likewise, the use of *Albion* as a synonym for *Britannia* is rare until 935 (after which the term is often used in the dispositive clause of authentic "Group 3" charters, e.g. S 411, 432, 437).

¹⁰² S 403: royal style, "ego Æthelstanus rex anglorum...per eiusdem omni patrantis dexteram . totius bryttannie regni solio sublimatus"; signature, "Ego Æthelstanus singularis priuilegii monarchia preditus rex."

¹⁰³ S 405.

¹⁰⁴ Keynes, *Diplomas*, 44. Group 1: S 412-13, 416-19, 422 (see also S 379, 421, 423, and maybe 1604). Proem occurs thereafter in S 692, 777, 781, 822, 928, 1006. (Keynes, *Diplomas*, 44 n. 77). Group 2: S 407 and 425-6. Three spurious texts (S 434-6) from the Malmesbury archives are close mimics of the authentic charters of this group (Keynes, *Diplomas*, 44 n.78).

“fallible world”¹⁰⁵ in almost unreadable Latin; and, like all “Æthelstan A” charters, they are verbose and highly standardized. Part of this standardization, of course, was the diplomatic emergence and crystallization of the conceptual claim that Æthelstan was *rex totius Britanniae*.

This claim was groundbreaking. It not only claimed hegemony over all the neighboring kings; it also posited the existence of a practically unprecedented territorial polity. In the Middle Ages, as we have seen, kings were described by the *gens* they ruled, and emperors by multiple *gentes*. But geographical names based on the names of Roman dioceses and provinces continued to be recognized in the Middle Ages, including *Britannia*. The geographical concept of an *orbis Britanniae*, or “sphere of Britain,” existed long before Æthelstan, and it had even been used on occasion to describe a political rather than simply geographical entity, though never consistently.¹⁰⁶ Æthelstan’s island-wide hegemony, however, was the first to stick, the first to reap real dividends, and the first to make a perceptible impact on neighbors. Most important, it was the first to be disseminated consistently: by a scribe

¹⁰⁵ Group 1: “totillantis saeculi”; Group 2: “fallentis saeculi.”

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae*, 1-63, but esp. 5-13, who argues for a long history to the concept of a political *orbis Britanniae*. John finds several contestable references to a “king of Britain” or political “sphere of Britain” in early sources: e.g. Adomnan’s (d. 704) description of King Oswald of Northumbria (r. 634-642) as *totius Brittanniae imperator* (A.O. and M.O. Anderson, eds., *Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 200) (John, pp. 6, 9-10), Æthelbald of Mercia’s (r. 715-757) royal style (*rex Britanniae*) in a famous charter of 736 (S 89, trans *EHD*, no. 67; also cf. a charter of 744, S 1410: “*Britannicæ insulæ Monarchiam dispensat regalisque regni regimina gubernat*”) (John, pp. 6, 10), St. Boniface’s (d. 755) description of the same Æthelbald as *imperator vel rex* (John, pp. 10). While I grant that the idea of a geographical and potentially political *orbis Britanniae* is certainly accounted for in the early sources, it is doubtful that Oswald or Æthelbald really conceived of themselves as kings over *all* the peoples in the island. Nor is there any proof that these imperial styles originated with the kings (indeed, the opposite seems to be true). The most important difference, then, between the scattered early references and Æthelstan’s tight ideology is *consistency* and *clarity of intent*; Æthelstan appears as *rex totius Britanniae* throughout his coins and charters, sources which were highly centralized compared to saints’ lives and Æthelbald’s beneficiary-drafted charters.

working in close proximity to the king to produce centralized, standardized charters, and, at the same time, by royal moneyers.

For at the same time as “Æthelstan A” brought the “kingdom of all Britain” into the language of King Æthelstan’s charters, the title was also incorporated into his coins. Our ability to use the numismatic evidence with regard to chronology is limited by a few factors: first, it is impossible to date the coins with any exactitude; second, different coins were produced in different regions.¹⁰⁷ Generally speaking, however, Æthelstan seems to have modeled his first coins (i.e. those of c. 924-7) on those of his father. Æthelstan’s diademed bust type is thus a combination of two coin types used by King Edward: on the obverse, from Edward’s own diademed bust, there was a king in a Roman-style diadem, typically circumscribed with the legend ÆDELSTAN REX; on the reverse, from the obverse of another one of Edward’s coins, there was a cross with a circular legend for the moneyer.¹⁰⁸ This is a rare coin for Æthelstan, however, and probably only minted in the south for a short time. More prevalent was Æthelstan’s continuation of Edward’s two-line type, a coin which typically featured a circumscribed cross with the same unadorned legend, ÆDELSTAN REX (“King Æthelstan”), on the obverse, and two lines of text dedicated to the moneyer on the reverse (hence “two-line”).¹⁰⁹ The main ideological suggestion intended by these choices for coin types must have been continuity (and thereby legitimacy). From the looks of it, Æthelstan initially played it safe with his coins, as he did with diplomatic titles—slowly but surely consolidating his position by following in the steps of his father.

¹⁰⁷ Blunt, C.E. “The Coinage of Athelstan, 924-939” *British Numismatic Journal* 42 (1974), 44.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 47. See Figure 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. See Figure 2.

The cross type coinage, a combination of the obverse of the two-line type and the reverse from the diademed bust type of Æthelstan's early coinage, was the first coinage type to use a form of *rex totius Britanniae* in its obverse legend, and we can probably date it to shortly before the title became standard in "Æthelstan A" charters.¹¹⁰ The cross type uses a sparse design, without the pomp of the earlier diademed bust or the later crowned bust (which depicted Æthelstan crowned), but for anyone with an inkling of Latin, it was a shining piece of propaganda with a very large audience. It is interesting that when King Æthelstan chose to abandon the simple "rex" of his early coins for a more extravagant title, he elected to use *rex totius Britanniae* rather than *rex Anglorum*. While the *regnum Anglorum* was probably more important to Æthelstan in the long run and certainly more important in the run-up to the 930s, as the decade went on Æthelstan became more focused on defending his hegemonic claims and less involved in his claims to direct kingship over the Angles of Northumbria. The presence of this innovative title on contemporary coins belies the reflexive assumption that *regnum totius Britanniae* was simply a "wishful extension" of the *regnum Anglorum*.¹¹¹ Likewise, the nearly uniform use of the title in the signatures of Group 3 and 4 charters, which (thanks to the coins not least of all) would have been recognizable even by secular individuals without the education to follow the rest, indicate that Æthelstan wanted to emphasize this title almost like a "sound-byte" to as wide an audience as possible.

Thanks to a contemporary Welsh poem, we have evidence that the significance of the *regnum totius Britanniae* was digested far beyond the king's

¹¹⁰ Blunt, "Coinage," 47. See Figure 5.

¹¹¹ Keynes, "Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons," 61.

immediate circle of literary advisors. The poem in question, *Armes Prydein Vawr* (“the Great Prophecy of Britain”), presents a very different ideological vision of “Britain” than Æthelstan’s coins and charters. Writing in the language of a messianic prophecy, the poet predicts that the *Cymry* (i.e., the Welsh) will rise up as one against “the foreigners” (*allmyn*; i.e., the Anglo-Saxons) and push them back to the sea. The Welsh poet envisions a day

when the men of Wessex (*Iwys*) will come together in council,
in a single party, of one mind with the Mercian incendiaries,
hoping to bring shame upon our splendid hosts...
The tribute and the daily payments will be avenged—
and the frequent expeditions and the wicked hosts.
The *Cymry* will prevail through battle,
well-equipped, unanimous, one in word and faith.¹¹²

This bold prophecy is informative on many levels. First, by calling for a united Welsh people, “one in word and faith,” we see how Æthelstan’s rhetoric may have slipped into Welsh thought. And whether he liked it or not, the Welsh poet was willing to regard the men of Wessex and Mercia as a single party, and indeed he usually refers to both indistinguishably as *Saesson* (with the same sense as *Saxones* in *Carta Dirige Gressus*). At the same time, the poet’s ideological vision of a Saxon-free Britain ruled by the “unanimous” *Cymry* is unintentional praise for the success of Æthelstan’s ideology to impress its claims upon an audience. Welsh recognition of English overlordship is even more explicit in this poem, however, for the *Armes* consistently refers to Æthelstan as the *mechteyrn*, or “great king.”¹¹³ This Welsh word had clear hegemonic overtones; in another source from the same collection, a Welsh poet uses

¹¹² *Arm.Pryd.*, ll. 108-10, 123-26. The term for Wessex is *Iwys*, a Welsh version of the old *Gewisse*; the term which Ifor Williams glosses as Mercians is “Lloegyr,” for which he gives his justification at pp. 50-51.

¹¹³ *Arm.Pryd.*, ll. 18, 100 on the meaning of the word see p. 26.

it as a description of God.¹¹⁴ Simon Keynes, looking at the poet's scorn and his promise to avenge "the tribute and daily payments," has written, "So much, in the hearts of the Welsh, for Æthelstan's 'kingdom of Britain.'"¹¹⁵ But the lesson of *Armes Prydein Vawr* may well be just the opposite. Many of the Welsh, especially kings like Hywel and Idwal, undoubtedly detested King Æthelstan and his *regnum totius Britanniae*.¹¹⁶ But the imperial ideology which supported that *regnum* still cut to the depths of their hearts: the humiliation of attesting as *subkings*, the heavy tributes, the inconvenient itineration. Everything pointed to a state of affairs which even Æthelstan's worst enemy was forced to concede: he was the *mechteyrn* of Britain.

An English Charlemagne?

The next major development in Æthelstan's ideology occurred shortly after the king's successful campaign in Scotland. The circumstances behind this campaign remain uncertain. According to Symeon of Durham, in 934, King Constantine II broke the oath which he swore to Æthelstan in 927, and Æthelstan retaliated by attacking with an army and a fleet (which raided as far as Caithness). King Constantine, duly cowed, was forced to hand over his son as a hostage.¹¹⁷ Also, as we know from Æthelstan's charters, Constantine accompanied his overlord back south, where he witnessed a land grant at Buckingham (some four hundred miles from Scone) not as a king but as a *subregulus*.¹¹⁸ Soon thereafter, the Scottish king was at

¹¹⁴ J. Gwenogvryn Evans, *The Book of Taliesin* (Llanbedrog, 1910), 41.4; 54.14.

¹¹⁵ Keynes, "England, c. 900-1016," 469.

¹¹⁶ Cf. D.P. Kirby, "Hywel Dda: Anglophil?" *Welsh Historical Review* 8 (1976): 1-13.

¹¹⁷ Symeon *HR*, s.a. 934.

¹¹⁸ The term is actually more denigrating than "subking," since *regulus* itself is often used as "subking," Cf. Offa's dealings with the kings of the Hwicce, who gradually went from *reges* to *reguli*

Cirencester, where he attested another charter as *subregulus* in the company of four other *subreguli*: Eogan of Strathclyde, Hywel, Idwal, and Morgan ab Owain of Glywysing and Gwent. In this charter, of which only the last material survives, Æthelstan is described, as in the Nottingham charter of June 7, 934, as *singularis privilegii ierarchia praeditus rex*, “king endowed with the hierarchy of special privilege.”¹¹⁹ This time, the stock phrase of the “Æthelstan A” subscriptions was illuminated by the renewed submission of the two kings of the north along with the continued submission of the leading Welsh kings. When “Æthelstan A” died or retired soon after, Æthelstan’s diplomatic language shifted to represent the new political situation.

Around 935, Æthelstan’s charters experienced a stylistic shift which mirrored a contemporary Carolingification of the coins (the advent of the crowned bust type). Proems became shorter and the language a bit less flowery, but the royal titles were, if anything, more grandiose. The final charters of Æthelstan’s reign are divided into two overlapping groups: Group 3 (935-939) and Group 4 (938-939).¹²⁰ The royal styles of Group 3 charters typically follow the pattern (with some variations in the second of the two titles): *nodante [recte: donante] Dei gratia basileus Anglorum et equæ tocius Bryttanniæ orbis curagulus* (“through the gift of the grace of god *basileus* of the English and also *curagulus* of the whole sphere of Britain”)¹²¹ while

to *subreguli* or *duces* in S 55-60. Cf. especially S 113, where Offa grants four hides to “my *subregulus* Ealdred...*dux* of the Hwiccans.”

¹¹⁹ S 1792, printed as no. 11 in S. E. Kelly, ed., *Charters of St. Paul’s, London*, British Academy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 158-160.

¹²⁰ Keynes, *Diplomas*, 44. Group 3: S 411, 429-31, 437-8, 445-6 (n.80); Group 4: S 351 (forgery based on a real diploma), 441-2, 447, 449. (n.81). The last two of these charters are the product of “Æthelstan C,” a scribe posited by Drögereit who continues to produce charters in Edmund’s reign (e.g. S 464, 512).

¹²¹ S 430.

those of Group 4 charters (938-939) use *desiderio regni celestis exardens favente superno numine basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium* (“kindled by the love of the heavenly kingdom, by the favor of the divine will, industrious *basileus* of the English and of all surrounding *gentes* round about”).¹²² There are all sorts of titular variations, with such exotic titles as *curagulus* and *gubernator* in addition to the already prevalent *basileus*, and the poetic *Albion* for *Britannia*. The signature for both groups, however, is almost uniformly a straightforward *rex totius Britanniae* (“king of all Britain”), reflecting the new assuredness of the king in his imperial status. In these late charters, whether they emphasize kingship over a geographical *orbis*, as with Group 3, or a hegemony over all the *gentes* surrounding the *regnum Anglorum*, as with Group 4, Æthelstan’s diplomatic language made an unmistakable claim to a Carolingian-style hegemony, above and beyond his direct rule over the *gens Anglorum*.

These styles were not confined to the charters alone, for Æthelstan is also styled *Anglorum basyleos et curagulus totius Bryttannie* in the inscription of a gospel book originally written in the late ninth or early tenth century, evidently acquired from Æthelstan’s brother-in-law Otto (later Emperor Otto I), sometime after 929, and finally donated to Christ Church, Canterbury near the end of Æthelstan’s reign.¹²³ The language of the charters was the language of the Latin-educated court; and thus royal titles and concepts made their way into other venues. In the same gospel-book, we

¹²² S 441.

¹²³ BL, Cotton Tiberius A. ii, the connection with Otto is from the entry of *Odda rex* and *Mihthild mater regis* on 24r of the manuscript. Cf. Lapidge, “Some poems,” 81-85, Keynes, “King Athelstan’s Books,” 147-153, esp. 149-150. For the late date Cf. Lapidge, “Some poems,” 85. The handwriting of one of the prose dedication is that of a scribe who wrote five royal charters from 944 to 949, certainly indicating a later date of composition. Cf. also P. Chaplais, “The Anglo-Saxon Chancery,” 46-7.

find a late poem, *Rex pius Æðelstanus*, written in a Continental hand, and evidently inscribed at the time of the donation to Christ Church. The introduction has a Continental tone in its opening lines: “Holy king Æthelstan, renowned through the wide world, / whose esteem flourishes and whose honor endures everywhere, / whom God set as king over the English, sustained by the foundation / of the throne, and as leader of [His] earthly forces, / plainly so that this king himself, mighty in war, might be able / to conquer other fierce kings, treading down their proud necks.”¹²⁴ The imagery blends the idea of a holy king with an emperor: in the close connection of divine justification and imperial rule there are undeniable connections to continental forms of ideology. This flavor is augmented by the contemporary royal styles. The late phrase *divina favente gratia rex* (“king by the favor of divine grace”) (939), the first such usage in English kingship, is borrowed straight from ninth- and tenth-century Carolingian royal and imperial styles.¹²⁵

Thus, Æthelstan’s diplomatic ideology shifted in the later years of his reign towards a more Carolingian-style imperial or hegemonic rule. Even the phrase *basileus*, with its Byzantine imperial implications, suggests an intensification of the hegemonic aspect of Æthelstan’s kingship in his own self-representation. Too many historians have read into the abandonment of the long proems and sanctions of “Æthelstan A” by the Group 3 and 4 charters a self-chastening, perhaps after the hardship of Æthelstan’s war, ignoring the intensification of imperial tropes and iconography in the coins and charters. But the battle of *Brunanburh* in 937, for all its

¹²⁴ Lapidge, “Some Poems,” 83-84.

¹²⁵ E.g. Louis the German, cf. E. Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire: Kingship and Conflict under Louis the German, 817-876* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 188. S 440: “divina favente clementia rex Anglorum et æquæ totius Britanniae orbis curagulus preelectus”; S 445: “diuina fauente gracia tocius Britannie primatum regalis regiminis obtinens.”

carnage and drama, did not precipitate any evident ideological change in either medium. The imperial ideology, in its expanded, Carolingian form, remained the staple of Æthelstan's court ideology until his death.

PART II

ASPECTS OF A ROYAL IDEOLOGY

Some aspects of Æthelstan's royal ideology do not fit neatly into a chronological account, either because their sources cannot be dated with accuracy or because their influence on Æthelstan's royal and imperial assertions is not easily separated from the assertions themselves. This chapter will examine some of those aspects—emblems of rulership, laws, learning, and religion—in order to present a richer understanding of the developing ideology. These activities often overlapped; emblems of rulership were displayed when laws were made, religion was connected with learning, and so forth. Early medieval ideology is sometime difficult to spot in the regular activities of medieval kingship; features of rulership that we take for granted as a normal part of running of a kingdom (e.g. crowns, laws, religion) had important roles in forming and broadcasting royal ideology.

Crowns and Crown-Wearing

Kings have always tried to distinguish themselves from their subjects and competitors by means of what German scholarship calls *Herrschaftszeichen*, “emblems of rule”: clothing, headgear, weapons, scepters, and other physical objects of differentiation used to represent their status, power, responsibilities, or sacrality.¹ Early Anglo-Saxon kingship was not devoid of emblems of rule—the mounds of Sutton Hoo testify to the presence of indigenous regalia from as far back as the early seventh century (e.g. the famous “scepter,” long ship, and numerous objects of

¹ See Percy E. Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Hierseemann, 1954-56).

faraway wealth).² But the introduction of Christianity, the memory of the Carolingian empire, and most of all the West-Saxons' ambition for territorial and ideological expansion called for imported *Herrschaftszeichen*. In Æthelstan's kingdom, one object above all served to reify Æthelstan's novel ideological abstractions on the physical plane: the crown.

Wearing a crown in early medieval Europe was no simple matter. The crown was one of the loftiest symbols of rule. Because of the exalted and potentially sacral nature of such a symbol, crowns were worn only on special occasions, starting with the consecration, in which the king was invested with all the emblems of his rule. Many kings also wore their crowns on holidays. A famous passage in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the festal crown-wearing of William the Conqueror, who became king of England in 1066:

[King William] was also very distinguished (*swyðe wurðful*): three times each year he wore his royal crown (*cynehelm*), as often as he was in England. At Easter he wore it in Winchester, at Pentecost in Westminster, at Christmas in Gloucester, and then there were with him all the prominent men over all England, archbishops and suffragan bishops, abbots and earls, thegns and knights.³

The Conqueror had a particular knack for propaganda. In 1069, after he had crushed the resistance in Northumbria, King William conducted this same ceremonial crown-wearing in the ruins of the Minster of York.⁴ But he was not the first king to wear his crown in front of "the prominent men" of his kingdom in order to display his unique

² For Sutton Hoo and its treasures see Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998) and for more detail R. Bruce-Mitford, *et al.*, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (London: British Museum Publications, 1975).

³ Translation from Harry A. Rositzke, trans. *The Peterborough Chronicle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 120. *ASC*, s.a. 1087 (*recte*: 1086, although the remarks are general and meant to apply to King William throughout his reign).

⁴ David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 77.

power and status. The exact origins of festal crown wearing remain contested, but it seems that the practice emerged in Francia in the mid-eighth century.⁵ It was practiced by the Carolingians, who crowned their sons in their lifetimes;⁶ thereafter, the torch passed to the Ottonians, who adopted the practice with particular vigor (perhaps to make up for their parvenu status in a post-Carolingian world).⁷ But what about the Anglo-Saxons?

As we have seen, Æthelstan was crowned during the investiture phase of his consecration. But coronation was not an ancient practice in Wessex. In fact, before the tenth century Anglo-Saxon kings may not have worn crowns at all. Janet Nelson has examined the evidence for this absence, working from the scholarship of Josef Kirschner.⁸ Evidently, before c. 900 Anglo-Saxon kings, following ancient Germanic tradition, wore a sort of war-helmet rather than the pronged band of contemporary Francia. This helmet (OE *helm*) was the “prime royal headgear” until Edward the Elder’s time. Consequently, until the beginning of the tenth century, the Latin word *corona*, referring to a Carolingian type of “crown” (i.e. a metal circlet), was commonly translated into Old English with the word *beag*, “ring, bracelet, collar,” carrying a connotation of a work of jewelry, rather than a symbol of particularly

⁵ Michael Hare, “Kings, Crowns, and Festivals: The Origins of Gloucester as a Royal Ceremonial Centre,” *Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 115 (1997): 41-78, p. 41.

⁶ E.g. Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH SrG 25, 6th edn. (Hannover, 1911), c. 23: “In festivitibus veste auro texta et calciamentis gemmatis et fibula aurea sagum adstringente, diademate quoque ex auro et gemmis ornatus incedebat” (“On festival days, [Charlemagne] advanced wearing golden cloth and bejewelled shoes, fastening his cloak with a golden brooch, and likewise wearing on his head a diadem of gold adorned with jewels.”).

⁷ Hare, “Kings, Crowns, and Festivals,” 42.

⁸ Nelson, “Earliest *Ordo*,” 356-8. Her conclusions are drawn from linguistic data organized and discussed in Josef Kirschner, *Die Bezeichnungen für Kranz und Krone im Altenglischen*, Inaugural Dissertation, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität zu München (Munich: Salzer, 1975).

kingly significance.⁹ This changed around the year 900, when the word *helm*, or, more specifically, *cynehelm* (“king’s helmet”), began to appear as the standard translation for *corona*. For Nelson, this linguistic shift reflects a “search for a more precise terminology” that was caused by the introduction of a Continental-style *corona* into the body of Anglo-Saxon *Herrschaftszeichen*, probably at some time during the ninth century.¹⁰ The shift is mirrored in the royal *ordines*. According to Nelson, in the First Royal *Ordo*, which dates to the mid-ninth century, the headgear placed upon the king’s head during the “coronation” is a *galea*, “helmet.”¹¹ In the Second Royal *Ordo*, which Æthelstan followed for his own consecration, *corona* is the standard.¹² So we can be confident that Æthelstan wore a crown at Kingston on September 4, 925, and that he was one of the first Anglo-Saxon kings (if not the first) to do so.¹³ It is also possible that he wore his crown on festivals.

Michael Hare has suggested that festal crown-wearing may have begun in England during the early tenth century, around the same time coronation with a crown became a part of royal consecration.¹⁴ The sources are hardly conclusive, but the iconographical evidence, especially the crowned bust coins, along with an increased interest in dating festivals in the “Æthelstan A” charters, are convincing. It certainly

⁹ Nelson, “Earliest *Ordo*,” 357. Of course, the *beag* was an important social emblem, and ownership of expensive rings, bracelets, and collars was a sign of high status and often closeness to a king; hence the common Old English title *beaga bryttan*, “ring giver,” as a title for kings. It also bears note that a “ring” (*annulus*) was one of the regalia in the Second Royal English *Ordo*.

¹⁰ Nelson, “Earliest *Ordo*,” 347.

¹¹ Bibliothèque Nationale MS 579 lat.10675 (“Egbert Pontifical”): “Hic omnes pontifices sumunt *galeum* [*sic, recte: galeam*] et ponant super caput ipsius” (“Here all the bishops take up the helmet and let them place it upon the head [of the king]”). Quoted in Nelson, “Earliest Surviving Royal *Ordo*,” 356 n.77. The erroneous declension of *galea* probably represents the lack of familiarity with early Anglo-Saxon practices when this *ordo* was recopied in the late tenth century.

¹² Ward, “Early Version of the Coronation Ceremony,” 355: “Coronet te deus corona glorie” (“God crown you with the crown of glory”); 359: “Tunc debet inponi corona in capite” (“Then let the crown be placed upon [the king’s] head”).

¹³ Wormald suggests that Æthelstan was the first; *Making of English Law*, 448.

¹⁴ Hare, “Kings, Crowns, and Festivals,” 44-45.

seems unlikely that Æthelstan, depicted wearing a crown so consistently on coins and in manuscripts, never wore his crown after 925.

The first appearance of a crowned portrait of a king in Anglo-Saxon coinage was Æthelstan's crowned bust coins, which he seems to have issued towards the latter half of his reign.¹⁵ These were produced mainly in Greater Wessex, East Anglia, and Northumbria, while the coeval rosette type predominated in Mercia.¹⁶ On the obverse was the king's crowned bust in profile. The portrait was too large to accommodate the full title *rex totius Britanniae* on the circumscribed legend, so the title was shortened to ÆDELSTAN REX. Perhaps the king felt that his supremacy was well enough understood in Wessex and the Northeast, where the new coin proliferated. *Rex totius Britanniae* continued to appear on charters and most of the rosette type coins. Moreover, the portrait probably spoke for itself. Ecclesiastics and literate nobles versed in the book trade would have been familiar with a Continental iconography of kingship; and the new headgear presented a striking image even if they were not. On the reverse of the crowned portrait type, a circular legend gave moneyer and mint around a small cross in the inner circle. On a few York and Winchester coins, the obverse bust was shrunk to fit completely within the inner circle, and the style of the cross type and some rosette type coins, ÆDELSTAN REX TO BRIT, or a variant, is

¹⁵ Blunt, "Coinage," 47-8. See Figure 6. Blunt guesses that these coins appeared c. 933. While the crowned bust type is the first Anglo-Saxon coin to depict a king crowned, the earlier diademed bust type (of which there are a few examples for Æthelstan) depicted a king wearing a Roman-style diadem (See Figure 2); this was, however, simply an aping of Roman coins and did not represent contemporary Anglo-Saxon headgear.

¹⁶ There are crowned bust coins for Canterbury, Hertford, Langport, Lewes, London, Maldon, Norwich, Oxford, Rochester, an unidentified *Smie[rl]*, Wallingford, Wareham, Winchester, and York. The Mercian rosette type coins often used the title *rex totius Britanniae*, like the cross type (See Figure 3). Cf. Blunt, "Coinage," 126-7.

preserved in the circumscription.¹⁷ The crown itself is a circlet with three prongs, each capped by a sphere.

This sort of crown closely resembles a remarkable contemporary depiction of Æthelstan in a manuscript of Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS. 183) which the king may have donated to the saint's community at Chester-le-Street sometime in the 930s.¹⁸ This picture has prototypes in Frankish illustrations and closely resembles ninth-century depictions of Charles the Bald.¹⁹ In this regard, it is important to note that several of the moneyers who minted Æthelstan's crowned bust coins bore Continental names.²⁰ Another possible model (or inspiration) for all these crowned portraits was the bejeweled Carolingian golden crown which Æthelstan received from Duke Hugh in 926.²¹ According to William, in 926 Hugh had sent to Æthelstan "a precious crown of solid gold, and yet more precious from its gems, of which the brilliance shot such flashing darts of light at the beholders that the more anyone strove to strain his eyes, the more he was dazzled and obliged to give up."²² William's description of this stunning crown reminds us that the king's headgear was not just a piece of his wardrobe; it was a striking symbol of

¹⁷ Blunt, "Coinage," 48. See Figure 4.

¹⁸ CCCC 183, See Figure 1 (frontispiece). For a description of CCCC 183 which accepts the thesis that the manuscript was donated to the community of St. Cuthbert, see Keynes, "King Athelstan's Books," 182-185. For a compelling challenge to this interpretation, see David Rollason, "St Cuthbert and Wessex: The Evidence of CCCC MS 183," in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1989), 413-424.

¹⁹ Cotton Otho B ix, Cf. Wood, "Making of King Aethelstan's Empire," 268.

²⁰ E.g. Grimwald (London), Amelric (Winchester), Hungar (Rochester), and Abonel (Hertford, Maldon).

²¹ *GR*, ii.135.5

²² *GR*, ii.135.5. William uses the word *diadema* for "crown."

his power and wealth. It was even a symbol of sacrality, as we learn from William of Malmesbury.²³

The frontispiece of CCCC 183 is the only extant contemporary depiction of the king, but another contemporary depiction, from a gospel book donated to Chester-le-Street (but lost in the Cottonian fire of 1731), can be reconstructed from a description made in the seventeenth-century. According to this description, the king was depicted crowned, carrying a scepter, and genuflecting before the enthroned St. Cuthbert, with the inscription “Anglorum piissimus rex” (“the most pious king of the English”).²⁴ As Michael Wood has pointed out, this depiction, like that of CCCC 183, reflects Carolingian inspiration; in particular it resembles yet another depiction of Charles the Bald.²⁵ This pious magnificence of these descriptions seems to go well with the iconographic shift initiated by the crowned bust coins, which preferred the trappings of imperial kingship (a prominent bust with a Carolingian crown) over the flowery legends of the earlier cross type.

If Æthelstan conducted public crown-wearings in addition to these iconographical crown-wearings, we would expect the occasion to be a festival. We might think back to the festivities on Easter, 928 in Exeter, for instance, when “the king feasted in great joy with his sub-kings, bishops, ealdormen, judges, nobles, and dignitaries.”²⁶ Assuming that Æthelstan did wear his crown on festal occasions,

²³ GR, ii..135.6.

²⁴ Cotton Otho B ix, Cf. Wood, “Making of King Aethelstan’s Empire,” 268-9. The inscription should also remind us of the poem *Rex pus Æðelstan* written towards the end of the king’s reign. Cf. Lapidge “Some poems,” 83-4.

²⁵ A picture of Charles the Bald in the Munich Schatzkammer, where the Frankish king wears a three-pronged crown, calf-length cloak clasped at the shoulder, and similar leggings and shoes. Wood, “King Aethelstan’s Empire,” 267.

²⁶ S 399-400.

however, what was the significance? An answer to this question is supplied by the prayer which accompanies the investment in the Second *Ordo*:

Accipe coronam glorie honorem iocunditatis ut splendida fulgeas et aeterna exultatione coroneris per dominum.

Take the “crown of glory” (Isaiah 28:5), the reward of joyfulness, that you may shine forth and be crowned with eternal exultation through the lord.²⁷

This passage, like any from a liturgical source, must be taken with extreme care. Its words, first of all, were not invented in Æthelstan’s court; they are taken in fact from a much earlier *ordo* composed by the ninth-century Frankish archbishop of Rheims Hincmar.²⁸ Nor was Hincmar necessarily making an overt reference to Isaiah, since liturgical language is always non-specifically pervaded by biblical phrases.

Nevertheless, the borrowing tells us much by what it represents to Æthelstan: Carolingian tradition. Hincmar was an early spokesman for Charles the Bald, a Frankish king whose symbolism, as we have seen, pervaded Æthelstan’s own iconographical representation. For the Carolingians, the crown was a symbol of glory; explicit mention is made of the bright shine cast by the metal (and here we should remember the dazzling brilliance of Hugh’s gift crown). We can imagine the crowd at Exeter in 928, among them the Welsh kings, the Archbishop of York, and possibly even the young scion of the Carolingians, awed by a powerful king and overlord, wearing the symbol of his glory, a shining Carolingian crown.

Æthelstan’s crown iconography is representative of how aspects of Carolingian kingship were incorporated into his royal ideology. As long as he had the actions to back up his ideological moves, the mere act of borrowing Carolingian

²⁷ Ward, “Coronation Ceremony,” 359.

²⁸ Nelson, “The Second English *Ordo*,” 362.

trappings could endow a king with an aura of sacrality and authority. Such an aura would have been a significant boon to a king of great material power but contented legitimacy like Æthelstan. And Æthelstan's legitimizing use of Carolingian symbolism extended beyond his contested accession. Carolingian ritual also represented Carolingian practice; and by appropriating the *Herrschaftszeichen* of Charlemagne and Charles the Bald, Æthelstan legitimated his imperial expansion by reference to their own empires. Æthelstan's ideological spokesmen—moneyers, scribes, even beneficiaries—internalized these appropriations into the web of activities which contributed to Æthelstan's royal ideology, broadcasting them back outward to audiences both wide (for the coins) and select (for the depictions).

But perhaps an even more important *locus* of dissemination for the ideology represented by Carolingian *Herrschaftszeichen* was the royal assembly—where the king took council, conducted alliances, granted land, and made laws. The largest and most important of these assemblies occurred during festivals, when the king was also the most likely to wear his crown. On the Continent, at least, festive crown-wearings “were heavily liturgical occasions, when the king was solemnly revested in church with regalia and robes.”²⁹ They were reenactments of the consecration—perhaps even using the same liturgy—before the prominent men of the kingdom. Consequently, they were a visceral reminder to powerful ecclesiastics and nobles of the king's status and power. Likewise, as Wormald incisively adds, they were a visceral reminder to the king of his own duty “to be just, severe and merciful”: a duty characterized, first and foremost, by lawmaking.³⁰

²⁹ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 448.

³⁰ Ibid.

Æthelstan's Laws

At first glance, Æthelstan's royal ideology as it appears in his law codes does not fit as neatly into an imperial or hegemonic ideology as his diplomatic titles, coins, depictions, and crown iconography. Although there are numerous parallels with the charters, the laws, which unfortunately must remain undated, seem much more concerned with local, English kingship. But, as we shall see, appearances can be deceiving. Tentatively, the law codes as a body may be dated to the same period as the "Æthelstan A" charters.³¹ Their main "ideological foundation" was the principle that the king's role as lawmaker was part of his sacral role as the anointed protector of the public peace.³² This, as we have seen, was established in the consecration *ordo*, in which the king offers "three precepts" to his people: "first, that the Church of God and all Christian people should have true peace for all time; then that thievery and all injustice be forbidden to all ranks of men, and, third, that he offer justice and mercy in all judgments."³³ Anyone who infringed upon the king's ability to uphold these precepts was guilty of disobedience (*oferhyrnyesse*) and subject to punishment both temporal (a 120 shilling fine) and, in theory, divine. The resulting web of obligations between God, the king, and king's officials, is summed up in a passage from Æthelstan's early ordinance on tithes:

Now you [reeves] here, says the king, what I grant to God, and what you must perform on pain of forfeiting the fine for insubordination to me. And

³¹ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 307. One wonders about the *judices* at the Easter celebrations at Exeter, 928 (S 399-400).

³² *Ibid.*, 302-3.

³³ Ward, "Early Version," 357: "Haec tria praecepta populo christiano sibi subdito praecipere. in primis ut ecclesia dei & omnis populus christianus ueram pacem seruens in omni tempore. Aliud est ut rapacitates & omnes iniquitates omnibus gradibus interdicat. Tertium est ut in omnibus iudiciis aequitatem & misericordiam praecipiat"; cf. Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 447.

you shall see to it also that you grant me that which is my own, and which you may legally acquire for me...And you must guard against the anger of God and insubordination to me, both yourselves and those who it is your duty to admonish.³⁴

The king enjoyed a special relationship with God, but this relationship also entailed its share of duties and responsibilities. Æthelstan recognized moral limitations placed on his kingly power. “I do not wish that you should anywhere acquire anything for me wrongfully,” he told his reeves.³⁵ And while the three “precepts” of his consecration *ordo* were not as binding as the “threefold promise” of later *ordines*, his legal ideology foreshadowed themes of royal responsibility which became prominent during the church reforms of the later tenth century.³⁶ In this way, Æthelstan’s laws can seem less audacious and more traditional than the other written productions of his kingship, especially his charters. For instance, his title in the laws is never anything more than “king” (*cyning*).

On the other hand, Æthelstan’s legal codes make some tall orders. The demand for uniformity in coinage (II As 14) and the attempted restrictions in trading (II As 12) assume wide-ranging powers over the everyday lives of subjects, although these were by no means novel claims in Anglo-Saxon legal tradition.³⁷ Patrick Wormald has also shown how many of Æthelstan’s laws drew upon Frankish and even Byzantine precedents for content and phrasing.³⁸ For instance, a passage in the Grately Code on cutting off the hand of fraudulent moneyers owes its ultimate inspiration to a Byzantine law, while Æthelstan’s interest in ordeals, unique among

³⁴ I As 5.

³⁵ I As 5.

³⁶ Cf. Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, 144.

³⁷ Cf. I Edward 1 (printed in Attenborough, p. 114-5).

³⁸ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 306-7.

Anglo-Saxon kings, was inspired by comparison to Carolingian capitularies.³⁹ Such august inspirations point to Æthelstan's imperial self-image even within the most traditional production of his kingship.

Moreover, in the early Middle Ages lawmaking itself was seen as an imperial activity. Charlemagne renovated Frankish law immediately "after accepting the imperial title"; a story known in Anglo-Saxon England.⁴⁰ And given that the volume of Æthelstan's lawmaking far exceeded all previous Anglo-Saxon kings, it is possible he was making an ideological claim about his imperial stature simply by legislating. This is not so far-fetched if we keep the venue in mind. The royal assembly where the laws were made saw all the notables of the realm gathered together. Everything from the placement of nobles at table to the order of attestation in charters emphasized the hierarchy which reinforced Æthelstan's ideological claims. And, as Patrick Wormald points out, "the number of law-codes issued by councils on days when kings might wear their crown may be statistically significant."⁴¹ Here we should think back to the *judices* (judges) who feasted with Æthelstan at Exeter on Easter, 928.⁴² This title may simply be a literary flourish, but we do know from Æthelstan's Exeter Code that he legislated in the same city on a different holiday, Christmas.⁴³ So even if there is no direct reference to imperial status in Æthelstan's law codes, it was possible for lawmaking to have imperial significance. It is easy to see how wearing a crown, a *Herrschaftszeichen* with strong Carolingian overtones, enriched a process which had

³⁹ Ibid, 106. For the moneyer's hand see II As 14:1; For ordeals see II As 6:1 and the "Decree Concerning Hot Iron and Water" (printed in Attenborough, pp. 179-173).

⁴⁰ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, c. 29: "Post susceptum imperiale nomen." We know from Asser's preface, which is partially based upon Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*, that Anglo-Saxons were acquainted with his version of Charlemagne's career. Cf. Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 54, 254 n.139.

⁴¹ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 446.

⁴² S 399-400.

⁴³ As V, Preamble.1: *to middanwintre*.

a Carolingian flavor of its own. Whether or not Æthelstan wore a crown on festivals, the royal assembly where laws were made was always a venue which, as Patrick Wormald puts it, “most emphasized his majesty.”⁴⁴ Even if Æthelstan was merely a “king” in his law codes, those codes were nevertheless constructed and discussed in the same setting where his *Herrschaftszeichen* were most likely to be on display, and the bold claims of his imperial ideology were demonstrated by the presence of *subreguli* and clarified by the royal styles and signatures of his charters.

Learning and Literature

Royal styles and signatures provide the most obvious (and to contemporaries with limited Latin, probably the most readable) instantiations of Æthelstan’s self-representation in the charters, but there was more to charters, ideologically, than the titles used in these short sections.⁴⁵ High language, particularly in the proem (in theory a preface explaining the pious motivation for a grant) in practice showcased the vast learning of King Æthelstan’s court.⁴⁶ From “Æthelstan A” to the last productions of Æthelstan’s “chancery,” we may detect a loving indulgence in exotic language, and sometimes even in the very idea of the written word. “Truly, this charter was depicted by the turning of fingers” is one circumlocution “Æthelstan A”

⁴⁴ Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 448.

⁴⁵ Cf. Insley, “Where Did All the Charters Go,” 112.

⁴⁶ The pious sentiments hearken to the origins of Anglo-Saxon charters (ultimately to the late Roman private deed) as ecclesiastical documents recording grants made by a secular king to a monastery or church. Originally, what would later expand into the proem was often a short statement such as *pro remedio animæ meæ* (“for the relief of my soul,” e.g. S 8, A.D. 679) or *consulens anime meae in posterum* (“looking after my soul for the future,” e.g. S 20, April 8, 699), justifying the king’s grant as an act of piety. Over time, as these phrases expanded in length, kings began to grant bookland (i.e. permanent grants recorded in writing) to laymen as well as ecclesiastic; but oddly enough they continued to justify their doing so in pious language.

used in 928.⁴⁷ In another charter, musing upon the lasting power of the written word, he wrote, “may the agreements of heroes be inscribed by the letters of charters, lest they be lost to oblivion.”⁴⁸

To some extent these passages and others like them are simply tropes, which cannot be described, like the titles *rex Anglorum* and *rex totius Britanniae*, as unique contributions to English ideological history. Moreover, they are not inspiring as literature; William of Malmesbury would complain that a contemporary poet who wrote of Æthelstan in his own time “rambled beyond reason, in the style which Cicero, king of Roman eloquence, calls...bombastic.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, the proems of Æthelstan’s charters do show how far English learning had expanded since Alfred complained that it “had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English.”⁵⁰ If the grandiloquence of “Æthelstan A” reminds us of a high school student with his finger in the thesaurus (and, as we shall see, the comparison is not so far off), we would do well to compare our scribe’s pompous but undeniably learned wordplay to the sorry productions of the late ninth century. In a charter of 873, for instance, described by one scholar as “a miracle of incompetence,” not only is the Latin a mess, but the

⁴⁷ S 399-400: “Haec siquidem scedula...flexu articularum depicta est”

⁴⁸ S 407 (June 7, 934): “Heroicorum constipulationes ne oblivioni tradantur cartulariis apicibus inserende videntur.” Something is lost, both in the earnest grandiloquence and the awkwardness of the Latin, by a fluent English translation. Literally, this is more like, “The agreeifications of heroic men, lest they be handed over to oblivion, seem to ought to be grafted by chartularious letters.”

⁴⁹ *GR* ii.132: “in laudibus principis uagatur, eo dicendi genere quod suffultum rex facundiae Romanae Tullius...appellat” Ironically, given that so much of the incomprehensibility of the hermeneutic style which William is here criticizing involved passing on the scribal errors of glossaries, the word which William uses for “bombastic,” *suffultum*, is actually an early corruption for the original *sufflatum*.

⁵⁰ Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 125. From the Prose Preface to Alfred’s translation of Pope Gregory I’s *Regula Pastoralis*.

scribe (evidently the main scribe for the Canterbury office) accidentally copies the witness list of a diploma from of the dead King Æthelwulf (d. 858), not once but twice.⁵¹

If “Æthelstan A,” by contrast, seems unnecessarily wordy or artificial to the modern reader, this was merely a sign of his good education in the high style of his age, the so-called “hermeneutic style.”⁵² In the words of Michael Lapidge, the “most striking feature” of this tenth-century style was “the ostentatious parade of unusual, often very arcane and apparently learned vocabulary.”⁵³ A phrase from a proem appearing in two charters of April, 930—*largiflua tonantis iduma*, “the generously-bestowing hand of the Thunderer”—gives a characteristic example, borrowed from the important study of D.A. Bullough.⁵⁴ As Bullough explains, *Largiflua* is a borrowing from patristic texts, a good source for Latin religious vocabulary. *Tonans*

⁵¹ S 344. For “miracle of incompetence” and a general discussion of the low quality of charters in the late ninth century, see S.E. Kelly, *Charters of St. Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury and Minster-in-Thanet*, British Academy Series IV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xciv-xcv. For the possibility that the scribe “could barely see what he had written” see Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 294-5 n.4. Also cf. N. Brooks, “England in the Ninth Century: the Crucible of Defeat,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 29 (1979): 1-20, pp. 15-16 and M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-899* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 452-3. One example of the shoddy Latin in S 344 is the donative clause: “ego Eðfred rex...+ ego Eðered archiepiscopus et omne domus mea familie meeae [sic] de eclesia Christi omnes concedimus Liaban fili Birgwines istam agellam qoð [sic] nos nominamus Gilding...” (“I King Alfred...and I Æthelred archbishop and all my house of my *familia* from the church of Christ, we all hand over to Liaba, Birgwine’s son, that little field which we call Gilding...”). The unusual syntax, the wrong gender (neuter rather than feminine) on an adjective modifying *domus*, the solecism “from the church” (rather than the genitive), and the strange relative pronoun give a sense of the charter’s stylistic quality. Despite this scribe’s inadequacy, Canterbury seems to have relied upon him heavily; as he also drafted S 316, 328, 332, and 1195-7.

⁵² For this style and its development, see M. Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature,” in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900-1066* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 105-150. Also cf. Lapidge, “Schools, Learning and Literature in Tenth-Century England,” in *Ibid.*, 1-48; and especially D.A. Bullough, “The Educational Tradition in England from Alfred to Aelfric: Teaching *utriusque linguae*,” *La scuola nell’Occidente latino dell’alto Medioevo* 2 (1972): 453-494.

⁵³ Lapidge, “Hermeneutic Style,” 105. Lapidge has since elaborated upon the “impulse” behind such borrowings from foreign language and pretentious authors, suggesting that the “hermeneutic” vocabulary was intended, however misguided, to be poetic rather than merely baffling. See Lapidge, “Poeticism in Pre-Conquest Anglo-Latin Prose,” in *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, ed. Tobias Reinhardt, Michael Lapidge, and J.N. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 336.

⁵⁴ Bullough, “Educational Tradition,” 470-1. The charters are S 403 (April 3, 930) and S 405 (April 29, 930). In S 403 the spelling is *yduma*.

is an unusual circumlocution for God probably taken from the eighth-century English writer Aldhelm of Malmesbury. *Iduma*, the third word in our excerpt, is a borrowing from Hebrew—although Greek-derived words were more common.⁵⁵ It is worth pausing to note the aforementioned Aldhelm. St. Aldhelm (d. 709), abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherborne, was a contemporary of Bede, famous for his artful but artificial analogies and ornate vocabulary. After his death, he became popular stylist on the Continent; thus, when his style made its way into the King Æthelstan's diplomatic, it was through Continental channels. Bullough has shown how "Æthelstan A" drew heavily upon Aldhelm's prose and poem *de virginitate* for the vocabulary of his proems.⁵⁶ Moreover, William of Malmesbury tells us that Æthelstan was a great devotee of Aldhelm (they were distant relatives after all), endowing his abbey with relics, gifts, and land.⁵⁷ William's story is corroborated by Æthelstan's decision to bury his two cousins at Malmesbury in 937, and ultimately by his decision to be buried there himself.

The most striking element of the hermeneutic style was the heavy borrowing from Greek. These Greek loanwords and neologisms were taken from the works of Aldhelm, the *Bella Parisiaca Urbis* of Abbo of St. Germain, and the *hermeneutica*, Greek-Latin glossaries which became popular during the vogue for Greek of the Carolingian Renaissance.⁵⁸ A fitting example from a contemporary charter of Æthelstan's later reign (when "Æthelstan A" was no longer the scribe) is a

⁵⁵ Bullough, "Educational Tradition," 471. *Iduma* or *yduma* is from Hebrew *yad* (יָד), "hand."

⁵⁶ Ibid., 469. E.g. compare "Quae Tonantis proles summo culmine popolorum" (S 399-400) with "Ni medicus mundi, proles generata Tonantis" and "summo virtutum vertice" (Aldhelm's *Carmen* l.420, 100); and compare "saluberrima deferens medicamina" (S 399-400) with "saluberrimum Christi devulgans adventum" (Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* p. 253).

⁵⁷ *GP*, v.246-7.

⁵⁸ Lapidge, "Hermeneutic Style," 105-115.

subscription of Archbishop Wulfhelm: “Ego Wulfhelm Dorobonensis æcclesiæ archiepiscopus ejusdem regis donationem cum tropheo agie et crucis consignavi” (“I Wulfhelm archbishop of the church of Canterbury attest the donation of this same king with the sign of the holy cross”).⁵⁹ The normal Latin for the adjective “holy” is *sanctus*, which appears in Æthelstan’s own subscription in the same charter: *cum sigillo sancte crucis* (“with the sign of the holy cross”); the adjective *agius* (“holy”) used for Wulfhelm is from the Greek ἅγιος, “holy.”⁶⁰ Borrowings like *agius* and *tropheum* seem individually insignificant, mainly important for the literacy they represent, but some loanwords are more resonant. The title *basileus*, which appears throughout the royal styles of Æthelstan’s Group 3 and 4 charters, is of course a Byzantine imperial title, taken for the Greek word for “king.” The word itself probably made its way into Æthelstan’s diplomatic either through Abbo of St. Germain or a glossary, but Byzantine origins cannot be discounted.⁶¹ Byzantine connections to Britain, however tenuous and distant, were long established through trade and gift-giving. Given the context of the word in charters, it is likely that Æthelstan’s scribes intentionally tapped into the imperial flavor of the Greek word.

All this might seem to go over the head of a king of the “dark ages,” unless we had some evidence that Æthelstan, like many of his Carolingian exemplars, possessed a fascination with the Greek language. Charlemagne was said to have known some Greek, as was his son Louis the Pious.⁶² And there is evidence that Æthelstan was

⁵⁹ S 447 (939).

⁶⁰ Lapidge, “Hermeneutic Style,” 127. *Tropheum* is also from Greek (though brought into Latin earlier than *agius*).

⁶¹ For the transmission of *basileus* see Lapidge, “Hermeneutic Style,” 124, 127, 136, 138.

⁶² Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, c. 25: “Latinam ita didicit, ut aequè illa ac patria lingua orare sit solitus, Grecam vero melius intellegere quam pronuntiare poterat.” (“He was so learned in Latin that he was accustomed to pray in that language as much as in his own; Greek on the other hand he could better

similarly educated, and possibly in emulation of the Carolingians. An illuminated Psalter, BL Cotton Galba A. xviii, written somewhere in France in the late ninth century, is remarkable for Greek liturgical material inserted into the end of the book.⁶³ This material, a partial litany of Greek saints was long thought to have been copied from a late eighth-century Worcester manuscript recording Greek liturgical practices perhaps brought to England in the late seventh century. In the sixteenth century, the book collector Thomas Dackomb inserted the inscription *psaltirium Regis Ethelstani Emptum per dompnum Thomam* (“King Æthelstan’s Psalter bought by the funds of Thomas”) onto one of the first pages of the manuscript. It is uncertain how he came to this information, and it is quite possible that he was being led astray to increase the “*dompnum*” he had to fork over, but the implications of the inscription if true (and drawn out in imaginative detail by Michael Wood) are fascinating.⁶⁴

If Æthelstan requested this Greek litany and the transcription which accompanied it, we would have strong evidence for a personal interest in the Greek language, which would illuminate the prevalence of grecisms in Æthelstan’s charters. Perhaps just as Alfred saw Latin as the logical next step for precocious students who had already mastered Old English, Æthelstan, with the examples of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious before him, considered Greek the next step after Latin.⁶⁵ After all, William of Malmesbury wrote that “concerning this king the believable rumor was

understand than pronounce”); Thegan, “Gesta Hludowici Imperatoris,” in *Thegan Die Taten Kaiser Ludwigs, Astronomus Das Leben Kaiser Ludwigs*, ed. Ernst Tremp, MGH SrG 64 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1995), c. 19: “Lingua graeca et latina valde eruditus, sed graecam melius intellegere poterat quam loqui; latinam vero sicut naturalem aequaliter loqui poterat.” (“He was very learned in Greek and Latin, but Greek he could understand better than speak; Latin truly he could speak as well as he could his own native language.”)

⁶³ Lapidge, “Israel the Grammarian in Anglo-Saxon England,” in Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900-1066*, 102.

⁶⁴ Michael Wood, “The Story of a Book,” in Wood, *In Search of Modern England*, 169-185.

⁶⁵ For Alfred, see “Preface to *Pastoral Care*” in Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 126.

sowed among the English that no one more law-abiding or more literate ever administered the kingdom.”⁶⁶ And perhaps like his grandfather, Æthelstan also felt that learning was linked to piety, and that insufficient learning would be punished by the wrath of God.⁶⁷ Nor did Alfredian piety preclude aping the Carolingians, or even the Byzantines; in the early Middle Ages, empire and religion went hand in hand.

Religion I: Prayers, Charity, and Gospel-Books

King Æthelstan was keen to incorporate religion into his royal ideology, both out of piety and because of the longstanding associations linking Christianity to Carolingian-style imperial kingship. We have already seen several examples: the consecration, which symbolically imbued the king with Christian sacrality; the *Herrschaftszeichen*, which were given explicit religious overtones in the Second English *Ordo*; lawmaking, where Æthelstan fulfilled a duty of justice and mercy to a *populus christianus*; learning, which King Alfred had explicitly linked to piety in the preface to his translation of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*.⁶⁸ Religion touched nearly every aspect of early medieval kingship. Yet there were even more explicit roles for Christian ritual and piety in King Æthelstan’s royal ideology.

One example was charity. Æthelstan, like many medieval kings, saw it as his Christian duty to see that the poor of his people were fed and clothed. One way to accomplish this was to make charity a condition of a land grant. On Christmas Eve,

⁶⁶ *GR* ii.132 (trans. Mynors *et al.*): “De hoc rege non inualida apud Anglos fama seritur, quo nemo legalius uel litteratius rempublicam amministrauerit.”

⁶⁷ Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 124-5. Alfred’s ideas on this topic were widely disseminated, since he sent his translation of the *Pastoral Cure* to every bishopric in the kingdom (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 126).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 124-5.

932, Æthelstan granted twelve hides to his thegn Alfred, on the rather challenging condition that he and his successors supply a hundred twenty paupers with food and drink every day.⁶⁹ More reasonably, in a land grant of 933 to another thegn, Wulfgar, he asked for an annual feeding of ten paupers on All Saints' Day (November 1).⁷⁰ But Æthelstan was not interested in *ad hoc* charity alone; he also decreed regular charity in his laws. Thus, we find among his prodigious legal output an ordinance ordering his reeves to feed and clothe any "poor Englishman (*earm Engliscmon*)."⁷¹ The formulation is significant; for while this decree is a fairly straightforward one, it is also an interesting reference to the concept of an "Englishman," that is, a member of the *Angelcynn* or *gens Anglorum*. And in this context Æthelstan takes responsibility for the downtrodden of the *gens* he rules directly. Here we have some evidence for what separated Æthelstan's royal from his imperial kingship. The obligation to feed and clothe the poor of his realm only seems to have applied in the *regnum Anglorum*; the burden was presumably upon the sub-kings in the rest of *Britannia*.

Another example of a typical religious activity which contributed, however indirectly, to Æthelstan's overall ideology was liturgical prayer. Throughout his reign, King Æthelstan solicited and demanded prayers from the *familiae* of important religious houses. Medieval monasteries and convents kept lists of lay patrons in confraternity books, for whom monks and nuns prayed and sang. Medieval kings pursued confraternal relationships within and without their kingdoms, and this was

⁶⁹ S 418.

⁷⁰ S 379 (this spurious charter is clearly based on an authentic charter of Æthelstan, though using King Edward's name throughout).

⁷¹ I As preamble: "Ic Æþelstane cyning....for mina sinna forgyfenesse, þæt ic wille, þæt ge fedað ealle wæga án earm Engliscmon, gif ge him habbaþ, oþþe oþerne gefindaþ" (trans. Attenborough: "I, King Æthelstan...for the forgiveness of my sins, make known...that it is my wish that you shall always provide a destitute Englishman with food, if you have such a one [in your district], or if you find one [elsewhere]").

not merely from a desire to publicize their name. In the Middle Ages, prayer was the most important channel of communication to the divine. As a result, it was of great importance to the security of the kingdom.

As with the institutionalization of charity, Æthelstan had several ways to get ecclesiastics to pray for him. One was to offer them land. A charter of April 3, 930, granting four hides to Bishop Beornheah of Selsey, concludes with a memorandum in Old English reminding the bishop to sing psalms of praise for the king in exchange for the land.⁷² Between December 24, 932 and January 26, 933, Æthelstan went a step further and issued a series of conditional grants, which required ecclesiastical beneficiaries to pray for the king as a formal condition of their land grant in the donative clause of the charter.⁷³ For instance, in a charter drawn up on the same occasion as the grant to the thegn Alfred, Æthelstan granted eleven and a half hides to the *familia* of the convent at Shaftesbury “upon the underlying condition that, every year up to the day of great separation and judgment [Judgment Day], [the *familia*] and its successors should chant fifty psalms daily after prime, for the digressions of my soul, and they should celebrate a mass at the third hour after noon, so that I might prevail to acquire divine mercy withal.”⁷⁴ Thirty-three days later, now at the royal estate and hunting spot of Chippenham, Æthelstan granted 10 hides (and possibly more) to the *familia* of the Sherborne Minster, on the condition that all the members

⁷² S 403: “Disses londes boc swe etefast on þa ge rad here sealm sang swe ealning ge least þere biscop þam cyninge ge het” (“The charter for this land was handed over on the condition that the bishop promise the king always to carry out the singing of a laudatory psalm”). Thanks to Professor Dekel for help with this translation.

⁷³ S 419, 422, 423 (a forgery based on S 422). Cf. Kelly, S.E., ed. *Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, British Academy Series V (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33.

⁷⁴ S 419: “ea interiacente condicione, ut omni die usque magne discrecionis iudicii anno illa successoresque eius cotidie post primam quinquaginta decantent psalmos, anime pro excessibus mee, horaque mediante tercia missam percelebrent, ut diuinam consequi plenissime ualeam misericordiam.”

of the *familia* sing through the psalms once a year on All Saints' Day (November 1) also for the sake of his salvation.⁷⁵ These piecemeal efforts were accompanied by a far more impressive assurance that the houses of the kingdom would pray for the king: putting it into law.

In the Exeter Code, Æthelstan attended to the salvation of his soul by decreeing that "in every monastery, all the servants of God shall sing every Friday fifty psalms for the king, and for all who are minded to carry out his wishes. And [they shall sing psalms] for these others according to their merits."⁷⁶ Part of the explanation for legislating this was surely piety. Medieval laymen, kings included, were painfully aware of the differences between the norms of Christianity and their actual lives. Æthelstan was genuinely concerned over the "digressions" of his soul, and how they might affect both his temporal affairs and his life after death. Later myth, for instance, claimed that he was partially to blame for his part in Ætheling Edwin's death, and that submitted to a "seven-year penance" to make amends.⁷⁷ We should not read too much into such stories, since they fit a popular medieval trope (the recalcitrant king); but we should simply recognize that it was possible in the Middle Ages for *Realpolitik* and real piety to coincide.

Another expression of piety was the donation of gifts to churches. Gifts of treasure or books allowed the king to ensure the singing of psalms, win the favor of churchmen, and promote his other ideological claims. The dedicatory inscription of a

⁷⁵ S 422.

⁷⁶ V As 3 (trans. Attenborough): "7 man singe ælc Frigdæge æt ælcum mynstre ealle þa Godes þeowan an fiftig sealmas for þone cyng 7 for ealle þe willað ðæt he wile 7 for þa oþre, swa hy geearnian."

⁷⁷ GR, ii.139.5; William of Malmesbury himself doubts the veracity of the story: cf. *ibid.*, ii.140.

gospel-book (BL Tiberius A ii) that Æthelstan donated to Christ Church, Canterbury toward the end of his reign gives a wonderful example:

Æthelstan, *basileus* of the English and *curagulus* of All Britain, with a devout mind gave this book of gospels to the primatial see of Canterbury, to the church dedicated to Christ. And may the archbishop and the community of this church, now and forever, always regard my donation with diligent feelings, and in particular may they take pains to safeguard it...lest anyone hereafter, misled by dark deception, should try to steal the book from this place. May it remain here in safe custody, and may it in perpetuity provide an example of glory for those looking at it. For I beseech you in prayer that you will not cease to be mindful of me in your mellifluous orations (*mellifluis oraminibus*), as I trust will take place with harmonious voice.⁷⁸

Here, as in the charters, we hear the king's voice, though mediated through the pen of a learned scribe. In this case, Pierre Chaplais has identified the handwriting as that of a scribe who wrote several charters in the late 940s for Edmund and Eadred.⁷⁹ This individual is clearly familiar with the king's royal titles, including the lofty *basileus* and *curagulus* of the Group 3 and 4 charters at the end of Æthelstan's reign. By asking the monks to pray for him while also bringing up the titles which most concisely represent his royal ideology, Æthelstan was not only asking them to pray for his salvation and success; he was also legitimating the claims behind his titles through their prayers.

The gift book itself was a *Herrschaftszeichen*, meant to give "an example of glory" to anyone who saw it. Here we should think back to the Second Royal *Ordo*, which described the king's crown also in terms of "glory," whose gleam was a reminder to king's subjects of his power and status.⁸⁰ With this in mind, we should

⁷⁸ BL Tiberius A ii, 15v. Printed CS, 711; trans. Keynes, "King Athelstan's Books," 149 n.33. My translation is based off Keynes's, with some changes.

⁷⁹ Pierre Chaplais, "The Anglo-Saxon Chancery," 36-7; Cf. Keynes, "King Athelstan's Books," 150. The scribe drafted S 497, 510, 528, 535, and 552 (Keynes, *Ibid*, 150 n. 34).

⁸⁰ Ward, "Early Version of the Coronation Ceremony," 355.

consider the poetic description written about the book by a member of the *familia* after Æthelstan gave it to Christ Church:

Whosoever you are who look into this book abounding in [divine]
love, shining with light, read its excellent divine doctrines –
[this book] which the king, filled with the holy spirit,
adorned with golden headings and places set with jewels
and which, in his manner, he gladly dedicated to Christ Church
and joyously made it accessible to sacred learning.
He also embellished it by having its covers adorned with patterned jewels,
[so that it would be] resplendent as if with various flowers.
Whosoever thirsts, desiring to drink from streams [of learning], let him come:
let him, bearing sweet honey, discover [these] waters.⁸¹

This deluxe gospel-book was adorned with gold and jewels, broadcasting Æthelstan's piety and magnificence to whoever saw it. The hermeneutic poem within flaunted the learning he fostered among his people. The dedicatory inscription (written by a member of the king's own secretariat) announced his kingship over the English people and the whole of Britain. Here as in so many activities of Æthelstan's kingship, multiple ideological claims coincided to reinforce one another.

Thinking back to the two conditional grants of Christmas Eve, 932 (the first to the thegn Alfred in exchange for feeding the poor and the second to the Shaftesbury nuns in exchange for prayers), we should remember that various ideological aims coincided here as well.⁸² As with any charter or law produced at a festival assembly, these conditional charters were decided upon in the presence of the prominent ecclesiastics of the kingdom. On this particular Christmas, both archbishops, ten

⁸¹ Translation from Lapidge, "Some Latin Poems," 83-84. The Latin, written in a Continental hand, is classically hermeneutic: "quisquis amore fluens rutilans hoc luce uolumen / perspicis, eximia dogmata sacra lege – / quod rex aureoles sacro spiramine fusus / ornavit titulis gemmigerisque locis, / quodque libens Christi ecclesiae de more dicauit / atque agiae sophiae nobilitauit ouans / hoc quoque scematicis ornerier ora lapillis / auxit ubique micans floribus ut uariis. / quisque sitit ueniat cupiens haurire fluenta: / dulcia mella gerens inueniat lattices."

⁸² S 418-19.

bishops, and six abbots joined the rest of the king's court at Amesbury.⁸³ Æthelstan's ostentatious piety reminded these powerful ecclesiastics, men with a great stake in the royal patronage of religion, that the king was on their side.

The effectiveness of such reminders is demonstrated by Æthelstan's interactions with the Northumbrian community of St. Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street. Æthelstan was particularly zealous in his patronage of Chester-le-Street. The house, although it had suffered in the past century from Viking attack, was still one of the most influential populations in the north.⁸⁴ To win over the community, Æthelstan visited Chester-le-Street, showered the community with gifts, and promoted St. Cuthbert's cult in southern England.⁸⁵ King Æthelstan certainly had pious reasons for venerating St. Cuthbert.⁸⁶ But he also courted St. Cuthbert's church for ideological reasons. To an extent unrivaled by almost any other saint, St. Cuthbert was the patron saint of the *Angelcynn* north of the Humber.⁸⁷ Cuthbert's bishop, Wigred of Chester-le-Street, was often present at Æthelstan's assemblies.⁸⁸ It is reasonable to suppose that Æthelstan reached out to this bishop's sensibilities: when Wigred attended an assembly at Colchester, Essex on March 23, 931, for instance, three days after the feast day of St. Cuthbert, it is likely that the bishop and his entourage would have celebrated their saint with the king and his court.

⁸³ S 418.

⁸⁴ David Rollason, *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 150.

⁸⁵ Cf. *HSC*, c. 26; For diplomatic evidence of Æthelstan's visits to Chester-le-Street in 934, see Keynes, "King Athelstan's Books," 172-3.

⁸⁶ David Rollason, "St Cuthbert and Wessex: the Evidence of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 183," in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult, and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. G. Bonner, D. Rollason, and C. Stancliffe (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1989), 413-424; 414.

⁸⁷ Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 149-51.

⁸⁸ He attests S 401, 407, 412, 413, 416, 417, 418a, and 425.

The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, the tenth- or eleventh-century history produced by the community of St. Cuthbert, contains a charter recording several “royal gifts” (*regia munera*) that Æthelstan donated to the community “while [he] was leading a great army from the south to the northern region, taking it to Scotland” (presumably in 934).⁸⁹ These gifts are extensive and impressive, and the description in this charter has given many historians the impression that CCCC 183 and Otho B.IX were among them. They included a gospel-book, two chausables, one alb, one stole and maniple, one belt, three altar-coverings, one silver chalice, two patens (one finished with gold), two tablets crafted of silver and gold, two silver candelebra finished with gold, one missal, two gospel-books ornamented in gold and silver, one life of St. Cuthbert written in verse and prose, seven palls, three curtains, three tapestries, two silver cups with covers, four large bells, three horned crafted of gold and silver, two banners, one lance, two golden armlets, along with a large grant of land: the estate of Bishop Wearmouth with its dependencies. Æthelstan dramatically filled the gift-cups with coins, donating a great deal of money in addition to that in the cups, and topped everything off by instructing his brother Edmund to bury him at St. Cuthbert’s if anything happened to him during the expedition.⁹⁰

Æthelstan’s patronage had resonance in the community. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, Cuthbert’s community, which had moved to Durham, gave Æthelstan

⁸⁹ *HSC*, c. 26-27; Cf. Symeon *Libellus de exordio*, ii.18: “In the tenth year of [Wigred’s] pontificate, King Æthelstan, while he was on his way to Scotland, came to the tomb of St. Cuthbert with the army of the whole of Britain (*cum totius Brittannie exercitu*) to seek the patronage of the saint. He requested Cuthbert’s intercession, and he gave him for the adornment of his church many different kinds of gifts worthy of a king, which are still preserved today in this church of Durham and serve as a monument to the king’s pious devotion to the church of the holy father Cuthbert and to his undying memory. The cartulary contains an inventory of them and how great they were.” The “cartulary” here is apparently the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*.

⁹⁰ *HSC*, c. 27.

(and his dynasty) the same partisan reverence that William of Malmesbury gave Æthelstan for the king's support of his own abbey. The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* famously describes how St. Cuthbert supplied a beleaguered King Alfred with fish, promising to "be your shield and your friend and the defender of your sons," predicting victory against the Danes, and telling Alfred to "be joyful and strong without fear, since God has delivered your enemies into your hands, and likewise all this land, and established hereditary rule for you and your sons and the sons of your sons. Be faithful to me and to my people, for all Albion (*tota Albion*) has been given to you and your sons. Be just, for you are chosen King of All Britain (*rex totius Britanniae*)."⁹¹ Few statements speak better to the successful promotion of Æthelstan's ideology in the north than this, from the pen of a monk of the community of Cuthbert himself, anachronistically promising Æthelstan's grandfather the legacy which Æthelstan carved out for himself. Even though the document is relatively late, we can still be certain that the coins minted at York, Æthelstan's (often military) visits to the north, and Bishop Wigred's appearances at Æthelstan's court cemented the imperial tenets of Æthelstan's royal ideology in the northern awareness. What better evidence that the language of Æthelstan's diplomatic chancery had an audience which was influenced by that language than this? Just as Æthelstan and other West Saxon kings co-opted the greatest northern saints to win over the north, so did the community of the saint in later days co-opt the southern kings' successes as the result of the special protection of St. Cuthbert. And Æthelstan's myth of imperial legitimacy

⁹¹ Ibid., c. 16. South's translation. The last sentence is omitted in MS L of the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, which is, however, the last of the three surviving copies (see *HSC*, p. 20-21). Cf. Symeon, *Libellus de exordio*, ii.17, in which St. Cuthbert makes King Edward the same promise: "Totius...Britannie regnum filiis tuis me impetrante concedetur disponendum" ("by my intercession the kingdom of all Britain will be conceded to your sons and placed at their disposal").

were bolstered, disseminated, and sweetened by his victories in the field, by the dedicatory inscriptions and portraits in his gift-books, by the language of his charters, court, and assembly, and most of all by generous gifts of “*Herrschaftszeichen* in an abundance to make Dr. Schramm’s mouth water.”⁹² From the results, it is apparent that not only was Æthelstan actively promoting his ideological claims in the important monastic communities of the north, he was successful at it.

Of course Æthelstan’s religious activities were not all aimed to buffer his ideological claims. There is every reason to believe that Æthelstan was genuinely religious. Moreover, piety and largess were independently important kingly activities in their own right, and not necessarily subordinate to the propagation of royal ideology. But charity, the solicitation of prayer, and ecclesiastical gift-giving were all occasions for ideological dissemination as well. It was not that Æthelstan put his “kingdom of all Britain” before all else, but that he rarely missed an opportunity to reinforce his bolder claims by association with more typical activities of his kingship.

Religion II: Relics

Another form of piety that played a major role in promoting and defining Æthelstan’s royal ideology was the collection, worship, and donation of relics. King Æthelstan was known as a famous relic collector, prompting one modern scholar to call him “the Pierpont Morgan of his age.”⁹³ In his own time, a Breton prior, Radbod of St. Samson’s at Dol, sent Æthelstan the relics of three local saints, St. Senator, St.

⁹² H.S. Offler, “Review of *Herrschaftszeichen: gestiftet, verschenkt, verkauft, verpfändet* by P.E. Schramm,” in *EHR* 74 (1959): 715, commenting wryly on Schramm’s failure to recognize the substantial English *Herrschaftszeichen* in the *Historia Sancti Cuthberti*.

⁹³ Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings*, 132.

Paternus, and St. Scabillion, “which we know to be dearer to your heart than all earthly substance.”⁹⁴ Likewise, an Old English list from Exeter describes how Æthelstan sent men far and wide to purchase holy relics—“the most valuable treasures of all”—with the king’s own riches.⁹⁵ One Englishman even tried to steal the bones of St. Bertulf in Flanders, knowing he would find a buyer in King Æthelstan.⁹⁶ English ecclesiastical houses exulted over the relics Æthelstan left them: a relic list from Westminster Abbey records a true cross, a veil of Mary, and relics from numerous apostles and saints; one from Glastonbury lists some thirty relics of Our Lord; and the Exeter relic list quoted above improbably proclaims that Æthelstan gave Exeter a third of his relics.⁹⁷ William of Malmesbury also devotes much space in his twelfth-century *Gesta Pontificalis* to the relics which Æthelstan gave to Malmesbury, including the Breton relics from Radbod of Dol.⁹⁸

In the Middle Ages, relics were an important part of life, to an extent which is often difficult for modern readers to understand. In the words of David Rollason, relics were “points of contact with the supernatural...objects which would physically rise with the saints in the Last Days, and...the *foci* of miraculous and thaumaturgic power.”⁹⁹ As a monk historian condemning the attempted theft of St. Bertulf’s arm put it, they were “more precious than all treasure” (*omni thesauro preciosius*).¹⁰⁰ Relics were objects of great social practicality as well, for they validated oaths,

⁹⁴ *GP*, v.249; trans. *EHD*, no. 226.

⁹⁵ M. Förster, ed., *Zur Geschichte des Reliquienkultus in Altengland* (Munich: Beckschen, 1943), 63-5; Trans. by Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 159.

⁹⁶ “Monumenta Blandiniensia minora,” in O. Holder-Egger, ed., *MGH SS* 15, ii, 635, c. 24.

⁹⁷ Cf. Robinson, *Times of St Dunstan*, 75-9; Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 160.

⁹⁸ *GP*, v.246-249.

⁹⁹ D.W. Rollason, “Relic-cults as an instrument of royal policy, c. 900-c. 1000,” *ASE* 15 (1986): 91-103; 96.

¹⁰⁰ “Monumenta Blandiniensia minora,” c. 24.

protected the just, and gave inviolability to day-to-day activities of government. Consequently, medieval kings regularly incorporated relics into their kingship. When King Æthelstan freed a slave and his children at the beginning of his reign, for instance, he invoked “all the relics which I, by God’s mercy, have obtained among the *Angelcynn*” to protect the manumission from violation.¹⁰¹

From an ideological perspective, giving relics to ecclesiastical houses was an easy and effective way to publicize royal and imperial claims. Churches and monasteries recorded gifts of relics in formal lists, which were often read aloud as homilies before the congregation.¹⁰² On appropriate feast days, during legal disputes, and possibly during royal visits and administrative gatherings, these relics were publicly venerated, invoked, and displayed. Given their importance in the daily life of early medieval people, relics were one of Æthelstan’s most effective ideological media. And relics did not simply advertise Æthelstan’s piety. William of Malmesbury describes an inscription on one reliquary which Æthelstan built to store the relics of St. Paternus (which he later gave to the abbey): “King Æthelstan, emperor of all Britain and of all surrounding peoples, ordered this work to be made in honor of St. Paternus.”¹⁰³ The imperial title used here is clearly reminiscent of Group 4 royal styles, an impressive example of how one of the most ubiquitous and time-honored elements of Anglo-Saxon society (relics) could advertise and legitimize the imperial

¹⁰¹ *SEHD*, no. 19: “ealles ðæs haligdomes ðe ic on Angelcyn begeat mid Godes miltse”; trans. *EHD*, no. 140. For other examples of Anglo-Saxon kings using relics as a part of day-to-day administration, see Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 162-3 and “Relic-cults,” *passim*.

¹⁰² Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 160.

¹⁰³ *GP*, v.248: “Hoc opus rex Ethelstanus, totius Britanniae multarumque gentium in circuitu positarum imperator, in honorem sancti Paterni fieri iussit.”

claims of an esoteric diplomatic title.¹⁰⁴ We cannot know for certain how frequently Æthelstan used inscriptions of this sort to leave a permanent reminder of his imperial claims with the houses he patronized; but given the vast number of relics he gave away it is likely he did so on other occasions.

Æthelstan's enthusiasm for relics was also broadly suggestive of imperial Carolingian practice. Charlemagne himself had been a great collector of relics, and so had most of his successors.¹⁰⁵ By fostering a reputation in relic collecting, Æthelstan drew another analogy between the Carolingians and himself to legitimize his imperial actions. But with relics the analogy could be even more explicit. William of Malmesbury preserves an extraordinary list of Carolingian relics which Hugh the Great gave to Æthelstan upon Hugh's marriage to Æthelstan's sister Eadhild in 926.

The list is worth quoting at length:

the sword of Constantine the Great, with the ancient owner's name in gold letters, while on the scabbard over stout plates of gold you could see fixed an iron nail, one of four which the Jewish rabble had got ready for the tormenting of our Lord's body; Charlemagne's lance which, if the invincible emperor brandished it as he led the army against the Saracens, "brought him the victory and never failed"¹⁰⁶ (it was said to be that same lance which, when driven by the centurion's hand into our Lord's side, opened Paradise to hapless mortals by the precious wound it made); the banner of Maurice, blessed martyr and general of the Theban legions, with which that same king [i.e. Charlemagne] in his Spanish war was wont to break and put to flight the enemy squadrons however fierce and closely packed...a small piece of the holy and wonderful Cross enclosed in crystal, which the eye can penetrate, solid rock though it is, and discern the wood, its color and size.¹⁰⁷

As David Rollason exclaims, "it would be hard to imagine objects of greater value for giving tangible form to the ambitions and pretensions of the English

¹⁰⁴ S 441, emphasis added: "Æpelstanus...favente superno numine basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu persistentium" ("basileus of the English and all adjoining peoples")

¹⁰⁵ Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 160; L.H. Loomis, "The Holy Relics of Charlemagne and King Athelstan: The Lances of Longinus and St Mauricius," *Speculum* 25 (1950): 437-456.

¹⁰⁶ A quote from Virgil, *Aen.* x.859-60.

¹⁰⁷ *GR*, ii.135.4-6 (trans. Mynors *et al.*).

kings.”¹⁰⁸ In these relics, the highest symbols of religion and empire were literally conjoined. The sword of the first Christian emperor (who was born, incidentally, in York) was given divine justification through a relic from the Passion. Charlemagne’s lance, the symbol of the military prowess by which he won his empire, was, in the minds of the recipient, the same which pierced Christ’s side. The banner of Maurice, a military martyr, gave divine authority to Æthelstan’s conquests of pagan York.¹⁰⁹ The fragment of the Cross set in crystal was probably the same relic that the Byzantine emperor Basil I gave to the Carolingian king of East Francia, Louis the German, in 872.¹¹⁰ It united the gleam of imperial wealth with the most potent relic imaginable: a piece of the Cross. In these relics and their trappings, Æthelstan’s ideological ambitions were doubly justified: first, by the previous ownership of the Carolingians and, second, by the sanctity of the relics themselves. As Michael Wood puts it, Hugh’s gifts constituted a *translatio imperii* (a “transference of empire”): “some of Charlemagne’s own divine favor and *virtus* now passed to Æthelstan.”¹¹¹ And it was not long before King Æthelstan put that *virtus* to use. For shortly after Æthelstan received the relics from Hugh, he embarked upon the 927 expedition which was the start of both his “kingdom of the English” and his “kingdom of all Britain.” It is tempting to wonder how much these Carolingian treasures inspired Æthelstan, and how much they simply imparted precedence and authority to what he was already planning.

¹⁰⁸ Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, 161.

¹⁰⁹ It is clear that Æthelstan associated Christian kingship with his wars of conquest, for instance when he compelled the Northern kings to “[renounce] all idolatry” at the submission of 927 (*ASC*, s.a. 927).

¹¹⁰ Cf. Eric J. Goldberg, “‘More Devoted to the Equipment of Battle Than the Splendor of Banquest’: Frontier Kingship, Military Ritual, and Early Knighthood at the Court of Louis the German,” *Viator* 30 (1999): 41-48; 72-3, 73 n.126. Thanks to Professor Goldberg for bringing this to my attention.

¹¹¹ Wood, “Making of King Aethelstan’s Empire,” 267. Cf. Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 445: “It is barely conceivable that Æthelstan was unaware of the symbolism of his receipt of Charlemagne’s cherished relics.”

CONCLUSION: IDEOLOGY IN ACTION

Æthelstan was a powerful king. His riches, estates, soldiers, and ships allowed him to become the hegemon of Britain and one of the greatest rulers in contemporary Europe. But Æthelstan's success also had to do with the royal ideology he fashioned to broadcast and expand upon his material power. This thesis has examined that royal ideology in detail. From the start of his reign Æthelstan standardized his self-representation across many media (charters, coins, depictions, dedicatory inscriptions) in order to formulate and systematize his royal and imperial claims. At the same time, he legitimized and publicized those claims by wrapping them up with traditional activities of his kingship that produced those media (lawmaking, assemblies, worship, gift-giving) and, increasingly toward the end of his reign, with precedents from Carolingian emperors (through emblems of rulership, learning, royal titles, relics).

In his early reign, Æthelstan simply claimed legitimacy as the continuer of Alfred and Edward's "kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons," supporting that claim by continuing the diplomatic and numismatic traditions of his predecessors. But after the consecration on September 4, 925 and the ensuing marriage alliances with Sictric and Hugh of Neustria, Æthelstan was confident enough in his "Anglo-Saxon" legitimacy to expand upon his Alfredian claims. In 927 he conquered Northumbria and received the submission of the kings of the north; around the same time his claims as "king of the English" and "king of all Britain" emerged embryonically in the poem *Carta*

Dirige Gressus, and soon after they made their way into the charters of “Æthelstan A,” and, by the 930s, his coins as well.

After his victories against King Constantine II of the Scotland in 934, Æthelstan devoted much of his ideological energy to his claim to rule all of Britain, adopting many Carolingian trappings into his kingship in knowing analogy to their own multi-people empire. The victory against Olaf and Constantine in 937 was a reaffirmation of both claims, and the bloody battle left no discernable dent on Æthelstan’s ideological productions and pretensions. When he died, an Irish monk could write without exaggeration that “Æthelstan, king of the Saxons, pillar of the dignity of the western world, died an untroubled death.”¹

This thesis has shown how Æthelstan’s two mature claims differed in expression, origin, and priority. It has attempted to examine the royal ideology that moderated those claims while avoiding a preoccupation with the “Unification of England” question which views the *regnum totius Britanniae* as an “extension” of the *regnum Anglorum*.² Æthelstan’s “kingdom of the English” resonates with us because the “England” we know today descended from the Northumbrian boundaries and unification of the *Angelcynn* he achieved in 927. Recognizing and discussing the descent of England from 927 is in itself a worthy historical endeavor, but a preoccupation with that descent has generally caused historians to overlook the “kingdom of all Britain.” For all real purposes, this has meant they have overlooked

¹ *AU*, s.a. 939: “Adalastán ri Saxan, cleithi n-ordain iartair domain, segura morte moritur.” Note that “Saxons,” in keeping with typical Celtic usage, means “English” rather than “West-Saxons” in particular.

² Keynes, “Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons,” 61; Keynes, “England, c. 900-1016,” 469.

Æthelstan's royal ideology. As this study has shown, that royal ideology was far more devoted to legitimizing and broadcasting the imperial claims than the claims which would lead to the England of today.

More importantly, this study has attempted to show that a sophisticated, complex royal ideology was not only possible in tenth-century England, but natural. Today we are likely to gloss over a medieval ideology like Æthelstan's as more exaggeration than sophistication. After all, Æthelstan's imperial claims barely outlived his death. His control in the north was tenuous—held together by a mix of coercion, bribery, and showmanship—and after his death, that control collapsed. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that “the Northumbrians were false to their pledges, and chose Olaf [Guthfrithsson] from Ireland as their king” only one entry below the poem describing Æthelstan's great victory over the same Olaf at *Brunanburh*.³ Even in Wessex and Mercia, Æthelstan constantly relied on the help of his reeves, thegns, bishops, and ealdormen to govern a realm which seems small and easily governed compared to a modern state. If Æthelstan's control of the *regnum Anglorum* was so contingent, what are we to make of his ideology but the braggadocio of a dreamer?

But the short lifespan of Æthelstan's royal and imperial claims was not the failure of his royal ideology; it was simply the reality of early medieval kingship. Before the emergence of permanent courts, administrative bureaucracies, and a non-personal theory of the state in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Western kingdoms were held together by the personality of the king and the cooperation of

³ *ASC* (D), s.a. 941 (*recte*: 940). Even Archbishop Wulfstan of York allied with the Norse, forcing King Edmund to besiege the archbishop and Olaf's successor, Olaf Sictricsson, at Leicester in 943 (*ASC* D, s.a. 943).

prominent men.⁴ In a way, kingship was royal ideology, for the *de facto* control of localities was almost always in the hands of other men than the king. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it was possible to convince even hostile observers that one's ideology represented the true state of affairs. This might involve force or the threat of force, or work through the dissemination of imperial claims in coins and charters. The Welsh may not have liked their subordination, but the *Armes Prydein Vawr* makes it clear that they recognized it.⁵ Their non-involvement in Constantine and Olaf's 937 alliance speaks volumes for Æthelstan's ability to keep his sub-kings in check.

Writing about the "Tenth-Century Condition," the historian Karl Leyser has pointed out that "the hierarchies of the tenth century...coped with the world as it was by an intensified faith in the world as it ought to be."⁶ The "ought-world," as he rightly points out, was real to the men and women of the Middle Ages, especially towards the top of the social hierarchy. It had points of contact with quotidian existence in coronations, festivals, monastic visits, and relic-worship, ceremonies which "made visible and therefore understandable...abstract ideas about the higher ends of human governance."⁷ Æthelstan's ought-world was his royal and imperial kingship: a Christian, Carolingian-style empire of all the *gentes* of Britain, ruled over by the king of the *gens Anglorum*.

⁴ Cf. T. Reuter, "Assembly Politics in Western Europe from the Eighth Century to the Twelfth," in Reuter, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J. L. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 209.

⁵ See below, pp. 58-60.

⁶ K.J. Leyser, "The Tenth-Century Condition," in Leyser, *Medieval Germany and its Neighbours, 900-1250* (London: Hambledon, 1982), 4-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

On a material level, this claim hardly represented the reality. Æthelstan never ruled the whole *regnum Anglorum* as directly as he pretended in his charters.⁸ And while his material overlordship over the Welsh kings is well attested in witness-lists and *Armes Prydein Vawr*, there are reasons to doubt that Æthelstan ever demanded or could demand as much from the kings in Strathclyde and Scotland. For these reasons we might doubt that Æthelstan ever really ruled a “kingdom of all Britain.” But for Æthelstan’s contemporaries, this ought-world had enough points of contact with the material world that it became real. Nobles, ecclesiastics, and even independent kings experienced that world firsthand. Represented in the iconography of coins and manuscript art, reified in *Herrschaftszeichen*, symbolically recreated at royal assemblies, coercively displayed in military expeditions, and associated with God’s Will by its connection to relics and Christianity, there were many occasions when the ought-world of Æthelstan’s royal ideology, in Leyser’s words, “filled out their horizons.”⁹ For a tenth-century audience, to whom this ideology was directed, Æthelstan really was the King of All Britain, and that, in context, was a great accomplishment.

⁸ See the Map on p. vii, showing his itinerary, which rarely included locations north of the Humber.

⁹ Leyser, “Tenth Century Condition,” 5.

APPENDIX: THE “QUEEN” IN *CARTA DIRIGE GRESSUS*

Rege primum salutem	Direct your greetings first
ad reginam, clitonem,	to the queen, the prince,
claros quoque comites,	the illustrious ealdormen as well,
armigeros milites.	the arm-bearing soldiers.

- *Carta Dirige Gressus*, ll. 5-8,
emended and translated by Michael Lapidge

One difficulty with Lapidge’s (and Stevenson’s) edition of *Carta Dirige Gressus* is the “queen” (*regina*) he posits for line 6.¹ Basing his emendations on a supposed rhyme scheme aabb or abcb in rhythmic iambic meter, and pulling an *ad* (“to”) out of the Durham manuscript’s meaningless “*aditunem*,” Lapidge ventures “ad reginam, clitonem” (“to the queen, the *clito*”). This was Stevenson’s emendation of the MSS *reginem/regem* as well: “...saluta / reginam” (“greet the queen”); though Stevenson missed the *clito*.² *Clitonem* is surely correct, given the concurrence of both *clito* and *Petrus* in the poem and S 1417. But the “queen” is less certain. Other than *Carta Dirige Gressus*, there is no evidence in any source that Æthelstan was married, let alone had a consecrated queen.

In Æthelstan’s kingdom *c.* 927, two women named Eadgifu are candidates for the position of *regina* in this poem. The first, Æthelstan’s stepmother and Edward’s third and final queen, later attested the charters of her son King Edmund as *mater*

¹ Michael Lapidge, “Some Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan,” reprinted in *Anglo-Latin Literature*, ed. Lapidge (London: Hambledon, 1993), 77: “Stanza” 2, line 2. From MS “*reginem et clitanam*” (C) and “*regem non aditunem*” (D).

² W. H. Stevenson, “A Latin Poem Addressed to King Athelstan,” *English Historical Review* 26 (1911), 486.

regis (“mother of the king”) and even *regina* (in one spurious charter).³ She issued, received, and attested numerous donations during the reigns of her two sons Edmund and Eadred, attesting even into the reign of her grandson Edgar. But she was diplomatically inactive in Æthelstan’s reign. This is not surprising given her position with respect to Æthelstan’s mother Ecgwynna and thus to his legitimacy. Moreover, around 927 when the poem was written, Ælfflæd’s son Edwin was apparently the designated heir, not Eadgifu’s young son Edmund (or Eadred). Thus, it is unlikely that *Carta Dirige Gressus* would ask to greet Eadgifu at all, let alone as “queen” at the top of a list of important men.

The second candidate is Æthelstan’s sister Eadgifu, widow of Charles the Simple and mother of Louis d’Outremer, who had been consecrated as Charles’s *regina* before Æthelstan became king. But she is not a likely choice either, for although Eadgifu had been in England since 923, she does not attest either Edward or Æthelstan’s charters; nor is there any reason that her foreign queenship would have raised her above the *clito*, the ealdormen, and the thegns of *ista perfecta Saxonia*.

Did Æthelstan have a wife, perhaps an English noblewoman whom he married before his accession? There is not much evidence (other than perhaps this poem) that he did, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. There is a mention of an “Æðida filia regis Æðelstani” (“Edith, daughter of King Æthelstan”) in the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, although this may simply be a mistake.⁴ Æthelstan’s lack of male children, in any case, is corroborated by his brothers’ use of the title *clito* or prince while

³ *Mater regis*: S 464, 465, 467, and 475; *regina*: S 477.

⁴ E.O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis* (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1962), 292 (iii.50).

attesting his charters.⁵ Even an infant son would not have been omitted from the witness lists (Ælfweard, for instance, was an infant when he attested Edward's charters in 901).⁶ If Æthelstan did have a wife, that does not mean she was a queen, a status achieved by formal consecration for which Æthelstan's reign offers no record.

So what is the MSS *reginem/regem* if not a "queen"? An emendation to *ad regem* ("to the king"), giving perhaps "ad regem et clitonem" ("to the king and the *clito*"), would be strange given lines such as "whom he now rules," "King Æthelstan lives," and "King Æthelstan said [these things]"; for why would the king claim to rule himself or need to inform himself of his own actions through a letter?

The puzzle might be solved by resort to the Latin neuter noun *regimen*. The word, which in this case would mean "realm," "rule," or "government," appears in a handful of textual materials from Æthelstan's reign. It appears twice in the Second Royal *Ordo*: first in the opening invocation over the king and second in the consecration.⁷ It appears sporadically in Æthelstan's charters as well. It is used to describe a regnal year in the dating clauses of the two charters written on Easter, 928.⁸ It also appears in S 445, a charter of 939, in the royal style *Æðelstanus rex, diuina fauente gracia tocius Britannie primatum regalis regiminis obtinens* ("King Æthelstan, holding the supremacy of the royal *regimen* of all Britain with the favor of divine grace"). Moreover, the sacral flavor of the word (evident in the *ordo*) coheres

⁵ Eadwine attests as *cliton* in the aforementioned S 1417, Edmund attests as *indolis clito* in S 455, 386, 387, 388, and 389.

⁶ S 365-6.

⁷ Ward, "Early Version of the Anglo-Saxon Coronation Ceremony," 351: "Te inuocamus domine...ut summi regiminis solium gratiae supernae largitate gaudens suscipiat" ("We invoke you lord...that [the king] might receive the throne of the highest rule [*regimen*] by the abundance of heavenly grace"); 352: "idem potenter regaliterque tuae uirtutis regimen amministret" ("let [the king] administer the realm [*regimen*] of your virtue effectively and royally").

⁸ S 399, 400: "anno...mei haut dubium regiminis tercio" (without doubt in the third year of my *regimen*).

with Æthelstan's ideological vocabulary, especially considering the prevalence of another term for a type of sacral rule, *ierarchia*, in the royal subscriptions of Group 1 and 2 charters.⁹

If we replace Lapidge's troublesome *reginam* with *regimen*, even if the meter is slightly disrupted, we replace a nonexistent queen with a plausible term from Æthelstan's contemporary king-making liturgy and royal diplomatic, and preserve Lapidge's useful explanation for the conception, use, and context of the poem:

Rege primum salutem	Direct your greetings first
ad regimen: clitonem,	to the realm: the prince,
claros quoque comites,	the illustrious ealdormen as well,
armigeros milites.	the arm-bearing soldiers.

⁹ E.g. S 425: "Æðelstanus singularis privilegii ierarchia preditus rex" ("Æthelstan, king by the holy rule [*ierarchia*] of special privilege"). The term *ierarchia* in this title is usually interchangeable with *monarchia* (e.g. S 416).

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