

Alfred the Great (849-899)

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Alfred the Great was king of England for nearly 30 years in the early Middle Ages, from 871 to 899 when he died. He is famous for having fought the Danes that tried to invade England and for promoting learning and literacy all over the country.



Alfred was born in 849 and had four older brothers. He liked poetry as a child and he said that he never wanted to become king. But he did, after his brother, King Ethelred I, died in 871. Alfred was then only 22 years old. And he had not been king for very long before there was more trouble with the Danish Vikings. They tried to occupy as much as they could, also Wessex, the land of king Alfred (in the South-Western part of today's England).

This was nothing new. His brother had also tried to defeat the Danes, but they grew only stronger and stronger and finally, in January 878, they managed to drive Alfred off the throne in Wessex. He had nothing to do but to escape. In the escape he fled through deep woods and ended up on the island Athelney which lay in the middle of a marsh-area. Here he managed to assemble an army and in the spring of the same year he managed to defeat the Danes in the famous battle of Edington. The king of the Danes, King Guthrum, even accepted to baptise with Alfred as his god-father!

Alfred was a wise administrator. He took steps to ensure the protection of the weak from oppression by ignorant or corrupt judges. He also gave laws that protected the weak and dependent people.

But Alfred is perhaps most famous for his attitude towards learning. Like most others in his time he thought that Viking raids were a divine punishment for the sins of the people. But the people could do something about it, they could educate themselves! If they failed to develop themselves through learning and education, they would also fail to live in accordance

with God's will. And to not live in accordance with God's will is the same as sin.

So Alfred tried to do something about this. He invited scholars to his court both from Britain and from the European continent. He translated Latin texts into English and commanded all who were wealthy enough to learn to read English. The books he translated were mostly Christian books on how to lead a good, Christian life and thereby gaining in wisdom and virtue.

Alfred suffered from a painful illness throughout his whole life. But he never let this hinder his ambitions. He won military battles when no one thought he was going to win and he also became a wise and compassionate king for his people. Alfred the Great was never forgotten.



The so-called Alfred Jewel found on the island Athelney where he lived for some weeks in the year 878 preparing to strike back against the Danes.

Questions

1. Who was king before Alfred?

2. In which area of England was Alfred king?

3. When did Alfred escape and where did he escape to?

4. What were Alfred's main goals as a politician?

5. What was the common explanation of the Viking raids at the time?

6. What did Alfred do to make England a less sinful land?

Answers

- 1. Who was king before Alfred?**
Ethelred II, his older brother.
- 2. In which area of England was Alfred king?**
He was king of Wessex in South-Western England.
- 3. When did Alfred escape and where did he escape to?**
He had to escape from the Danes in 878. Then he first fled through thick woods to end up on the island Athelney situated on the marshes in Somerset.
- 4. What were Alfred's main goals as a politician?**
He tried to protect the weak and dependent people from the strong and mighty.
- 5. What was the common explanation of the Viking raids at the time?**
As England was a Christian country at the time most people thought that the Viking invasion was a punishment to the people from God because that had been sinful.
- 6. What did Alfred do to make England a less "sinful" land?**
He believed strongly in learning and education – which makes Alfred somewhat of an exception among rulers in the Middle Ages. So he invited scholars to the court, translated Latin texts into English and commanded all people that could afford it and have the time to it to learn to read and write.