

Æthelstan: The First King of England

Review Number:

1151

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 October, 2011

Author:

Sarah Foot

ISBN:

9780300125351

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Reviewer:

Rory Naismith

Æthelstan might not, to the uninitiated, seem a very likely candidate for a volume in the prestigious Yale English Monarchs series. He lacks the name-recognition associated with a Conqueror or a Confessor, and is not the subject of any compelling anecdotes about beaches or cakes which have wormed their way into the popular consciousness. To say Æthelstan is forgotten might be to go too far, but he is certainly not well remembered outside a select audience of Anglo-Saxon *illuminati*.

Professor Foot swims against this current. Even undertaking a biography of Æthelstan is a strong statement of the importance she would assign to him and his reign (which spanned the years 924–39), and her central point in this book is encapsulated by the subtitle: 'First King of England'. The achievement which lies immediately behind this acclamation is Æthelstan's conquest, in 927, of the Viking kingdom of York. This victory was just one act in the process by which warrior-kings of the West Saxon dynasty of Ecgberht (802–39) created a kingdom which broadly approximated modern England in extent. Alfred the Great (871–99) and his son Edward the Elder (899–924), along with the latter's sister Æthelflæd (d. 918) and her husband Æthelred (d. 911), rulers of the Mercians, set the scene for Æthelstan's *coup de grace* by seizing from Viking rulers all territory up to the Humber in the years down to 924. The kingdom they created was not, it should be stressed, 'reconquered' from the Vikings: it was a new and distinct entity which had no predecessor as a political unit. Neither was there any overwhelming desire to stop once York was taken early in Æthelstan's reign. A meeting of all the kings of Britain followed shortly after in 927, at Eamont Bridge in Cumbria, where all – according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and associated sources – swore an oath of peace, under the overlordship of Æthelstan. Charters and coins of Æthelstan from around that time began to style him not 'king of the Saxons', or even 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' as had been customary for his predecessors. Instead, he was *rex totius Britanniae*, 'king of all Britain'. This was no empty claim:

Æthelstan's court – as revealed by an unusually detailed series of charters – regularly played host to Welsh princes and other visitors from all corners of Britain.

There is good reason, then, to respect Æthelstan's place in English history and recognise that his reign provided some of the proudest moments of the West Saxon dynasty. Æthelstan was widely celebrated in contemporary Latin and vernacular verse, and his name became one of the most favoured of his dynasty. His fame spread well beyond the English Channel and the North Sea, and Æthelstan enjoyed a position of great power and respect throughout Western Europe. Young princes in need of whipping into shape, or whose kin had fallen victim to war or intrigue back home, were packed off to stay with him; among those who enjoyed Æthelstan's hospitality were the Norwegian Hákon (king 934–61); Alan, heir to the duchy of Brittany (936–52); and the future Louis IV, king of the West Franks (936–54). Æthelstan's cosmopolitan court also attracted older and wiser foreigners, among them the famous scholar Israel the Grammarian. He spent at least some of his time creating the numerological board game 'Die of the evangelist', which was enough of a hit to draw the interest of a visiting Irish bishop.

Anglo-Saxon kings of the 10th century are not generally known for their prominence on the European stage, which makes Æthelstan all the more impressive. That he accomplished so much despite a somewhat rocky road to the throne is truly outstanding. The death of Edward the Elder in July 924 precipitated a short crisis in his fragile kingdom. Kingship was as a rule restricted to a small body of throne-worthy kinsmen of the outgoing king, but the selection of a candidate from among those kinsmen by the magnates was still a crucial part of the king-making process. The decisions of aristocracies in different parts of Edward's kingdom threatened to tear it asunder, and demonstrated persistent local loyalties. In 924 Æthelstan apparently won recognition in Mercia as king – probably in part because he had been raised there – while in Wessex his younger half-brother Ælfweard was elected by the local *witan*. The resultant division proved brief, as Ælfweard died in a matter of weeks, but Æthelstan faced ongoing difficulties in Wessex: his coronation was deferred until 925 and took place in Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, outside the West Saxon heartland; a conspiracy against him was fomented at Winchester; and another grown half-brother, Edwin, met his death in a mysterious boating 'accident' in 933. A large part of Æthelstan's difficulties in gaining full acceptance lay in the dubious circumstances of his birth: even if not illegitimate, as Foot argues, his mother was significantly less prestigious than the king's next two wives, on whom Edward sired nine more children.

Æthelstan thus had to overcome considerable hurdles to gain acceptance throughout his kingdom, let alone become one of the most successful English kings of the 10th century. But although his reputation was secured as an icon of warlike kingship, reconstructing his life rather than his career is a unique challenge. The writing of any medieval biography is of course vulnerable to the dictates of scarce and tendentious sources. Kings present special problems. On the one hand they loom large – sometimes overbearingly so – as the embodiment of earthly might, as wielders of sacral authority and as the focal point of their kingdoms' political lives. On the other, a king's capacity to define (rather than be defined by) powerful, age-old institutions was limited, and texts or other sources granting a genuine window onto the personality or inner thoughts of early medieval monarchs are few.

Foot recognises these obstacles in the opening chapter of her book, and acknowledges the high degree of 'self-conscious construction and manipulation' needed to overcome them. The problems in piecing together Æthelstan's biography are compounded by the difficulty of the sources for his reign. Æthelstan had no Asser or Einhard; no contemporary biographer to enshrine his reputation in terms which would survive to resonate with later readers. Knowledge of his achievements must be spliced together from a broad and sometimes unpromising array of sources – even more so than is usually the case with early medieval history. Few are more difficult to handle than an important passage in the *Gesta regum Anglorum* composed by the 12th-century writer William of Malmesbury, which on the face of it constitutes an adulatory survey of Æthelstan's life and achievements. Yet although William states that he did indeed draw on an older source, the age and authority of that source have been the subject of debate, and so Foot is only able to deploy its evidence with caution. Not all the sources for Æthelstan are mired in such difficulties, or at least not any more. Scholars of recent generations have risen with aplomb to the challenges posed by the sources for Æthelstan's reign. Simon Keynes has shown what can be learned from the charters and from a collection of

associated manuscripts; Michael Lapidge has gathered contemporary Latin poems and mined them for information; and Christopher Blunt has turned Æthelstan's complex coinage into a showpiece of numismatic scholarship. Foot's contribution to the story of Æthelstanian studies is primarily a synthesis of earlier research; a most valuable exercise given the disparate locations, perspectives and contexts of previous publications. Points where her own interpretation adds significantly include, for example, an intriguing discussion of the background to the crowns which the king sports in both manuscript illuminations and on coins. This might be taken further with reference to earlier Anglo-Saxon practice and contemporary comparisons with other European kingdoms. Here, Foot suggests that Æthelstan's crowns might well reflect the actual appearance of crowns worn at royal gatherings. In this way she tugs on the same thread as John Maddicott, who has recently taken Æthelstan's accession as the starting-point of his history of the English parliament. For both writers, Æthelstan's reign comes across as a time of innovation and reorientation of power, creating a model for his successors.

The legacy of Æthelstan's reign is another area in which Foot expands substantively on previous scholarship. The 'cult of Alfred the Great' is well known, but those of other kings (though much smaller in impact) have attracted less attention. Æthelstan's reputation in the millennium since his death has endured several peaks and troughs. In the late 10th and 11th centuries he was a hero, and the relative attention he received in Anglo-Saxon sources carried his fame through into the writings of 12th-century historians. William of Malmesbury – whose home monastery was Æthelstan's final resting place – devoted particular attention to fleshing out the patchy account of the king he pieced together from earlier sources. But Foot also traces the sad decline of Æthelstan's memory in modern times. The Freemasons preserved one holdout of respectful but garbled memory of Æthelstan, for they traced their origins in England back to him and his 'son' Edwin. What must surely have been Æthelstan's nadir came in a 'British Faire' held in the southern United States in 1983, where the local Freemasons touted their patron, Æthelstan, as 'king of Wessex and grandson of Albert the Great'.

This survey of Æthelstan's posthumous fate forms a natural epilogue to a book which is fundamentally thematic, as befits a figure whose life is so filled with lacunae, though the book's arrangement makes certain allowances to chronology. Foot's study is divided into eight principal chapters. After a more general and theoretical introduction, the first chapter states the claim for Æthelstan's recognition as the first king of England and briefly surveys some of the martial and political highlights of his reign. Chapter two focuses on 'Family', including the king's curious surfeit of sisters. In Foot's words, 'any man whose parents managed to provide him with eight or even nine sisters deserves our sympathy'. Foot pauses to consider the possible impact of the king's complex family situation, and of Æthelstan's upbringing in the household of his aunt in Mercia. She suggests that the overbearing femininity of Æthelstan's early life perhaps led him not to take a wife – a curious decision for any medieval ruler, which meant that perpetuation of the dynasty was reliant (after 933) on his much younger surviving half-brothers. Æthelstan's affection for them and for the numerous other royal youths fostered to him from all over western Europe even lead Foot to ask if he might have been 'happiest in a male environment', but she wisely exercises restraint before venturing too far into consideration of Æthelstan's sexuality.

Æthelstan was certainly not lacking in machismo, and his military achievements figure as prominently here as they do in the original sources. A chapter on 'War' goes through the several campaigns of Æthelstan, from York and expeditions against the men of Cornwall and what would become Scotland, to the famous battle of *Brunanburh*. It was there, in 937, that Æthelstan faced off against a combined host of Dublin Vikings, Scots and Strathclyde Welsh. According to an anonymous poet whose work was preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'never was there greater slaughter on this island ... since from the east the Angles and Saxons came over the broad sea'. Bloody though it was, the battle ended in resounding victory for Æthelstan, and his enemies were put to flight. *Brunanburh* remains among the most important unknown locations in Anglo-Saxon history. Foot reviews the many sites which have been proposed, and she cautiously supports an identification of Brunanburh with Bromborough, Cheshire. Her approach largely focuses on discussion of the diverse, and often discordant, primary sources, supplemented with reference to subsequent analysis by later scholars. Much the same is true of her treatment of Æthelstan as a manipulator

of justice and administrative mechanisms in a chapter on his 'Kingdom'; the focus here falls on charters, law-codes and coinage. Other chapters cover the 'Church', especially the king's relations with the English episcopate and patronage of education and ecclesiastical institutions; while the king's household and itinerary are discussed in 'Court' (supplemented by an appendix listing attestations of the king's movements). Slightly surprisingly, it is the penultimate chapter which opens with the king's death and interment, which is used as a lead into Æthelstan's taste for relic collecting and support of English saints. Following this is a chapter entitled 'British monarch' which picks up the general political themes of the very first chapter, but which is positioned as a prelude to the epilogue on Æthelstan's posthumous reputation, in that it revisits in more detail the king's claims to pan-British rule and his establishment of grand ambitions for the West Saxon dynasty.

There can be no doubt that Foot has laid out the evidence for all aspects of Æthelstan's fascinating reign in a fashion which makes the underlying point abundantly clear: that although his impact must be pieced together from scraps and fragments, they are clearly the remnants of what was once a mighty edifice, greater than the sum of its considerable parts. Hers is the culmination, it would be fair to say, of a collaborative effort. In bringing the work of previous scholars together and arranging and juxtaposing their scattered contributions intelligently – with her own important observations as well – Foot has shed much-needed fresh light on the 'First King of England's' life, times and works. Readers outside the narrow academic fraternity familiar with all branches of recent research will now be able to access Æthelstan in all his glory.

Yet it is worth asking again the question Foot herself poses at the start of the book: is this indeed a biography? One has to wonder if, impressive though they are, the available materials are more notable for what they lack and imply than for what they make clear. Æthelstan 'the man' remains very much an elusive figure – even more so than many of his Anglo-Saxon counterparts: rescuing him from obscurity means confronting a portrait which is irretrievably faded. One would have appreciated a return to this question at the close of the volume. In some instances, such as the treatment of *Brunanburh* or of William of Malmesbury's controversial Æthelstanian material, it might also be claimed that Foot is perhaps overly cautious in her discussion, and it would have been interesting to learn if her years of work on the king had led Foot to harbour stronger opinions on any of these matters. Finally, the excellent production standards of Yale University Press should not go unnoticed: they have produced a volume of very high quality, with full annotation, a generous 16 pages of illustrative plates and a number of maps, all for a price within reach of general readers and students as well as academic libraries. Æthelstan may remain, fundamentally, an icon rather than a fully fleshed out individual, but in laying out all of the evidence so clearly Foot has created a valuable synthesis of the very best of Anglo-Saxon scholarship and highlighted a pivotal period in English history.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1151>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7794>