

The *Ealdormen* of Alfred's Reign

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The title begs three fairly obvious questions.¹ Why use that alien (although not foreign) word *ealdorman*? Why limit oneself to Alfred's reign? And, most importantly, what did *ealdormen* do during Alfred's reign?

First, why employ the antiquated vernacular term '*ealdorman*'? *Ealdorman* was the word used in texts written in Old English in the ninth century to describe a specific official. In Latin texts of that period the same official was often called a *dux*. In an important late ninth-century source, the biography of **Alfred 8**² by **Asser 1**, an *ealdorman* is, however, always called a *comes*. Let us take an example: **Ealhhere 11** is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as both a *dux* and an *ealdorman*, but is referred to by Asser as a *comes*. This is not just limited to *ealdormen* from the West Saxon kingdom: **Æthelred 1**, the Mercian husband of Alfred's daughter, **Æthelflæd 4**, and such an important figure in his own right that in the chronicle compiled in the tenth century by **Æthelweard 23**³ he is called a 'king', also appears like **Ealhhere 11** as an *ealdorman* in the Chronicle and a *comes* in Asser.

Today an 'alderman', the modern cognate of *ealdorman*, refers to a very local figure, and is most notably associated with the City of London. On the other hand, the modern cognate of *dux* is 'duke'. English-speaking historians of early medieval Continental history have no difficulty in referring to people like Tassilo III as a duke. But they are not inclined to use it of figures from Anglo-Saxon history. Although dukes are high in the order of precedence at formal ceremonies and there have been some who received their dukedoms because of martial prowess such as Marlborough or Wellington, one tends to think instead of Edinburgh or Buckingham, or duchesses such as Newcastle and Cleveland. Perhaps it is the association with some distinctly odd or louche personalities that gives Anglo-Saxon historians cause to avoid the modern term. Somehow the associations seem all wrong. And as for *comes*: well the odd native countess is permitted to grace the British scene but 'counts' are people that are regarded as distinctly Continental.

¹ This paper was written to accompany a demonstration of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE) database. It has been lightly edited but essentially represents the database as it existed in July 2004.

² Names of persons that appear in the PASE are highlighted in **boldface**. The numerals employed after a name (used to distinguish different individuals bearing the same name) are those used in the PASE master database as of 27 May 2005. Unnamed persons and groups, designated 'Anonymous' and 'Anonymi' respectively, are likewise highlighted and assigned the number used in the master database. Because Alfred and Asser are mentioned so frequently in this paper they will hereafter be excluded from this practice.

³ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. A. Campbell, [Nelson's] Medieval Texts (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962).

In fact, as we shall see, all three modern terms contain elements in common with the *ealdorman* but all are freighted with associations that are anachronistic. When we look earlier than the ninth century we find that *princeps* is also used occasionally, the forerunner of the Modern English 'prince'. Sometimes this term is not inapposite, as holders of the *ealdorman*'s office could indeed be royal sons: the witness list consistent with a date of *ca* 854 appended to a grant of King **Æthelwulf 1** to Winchester⁴ bears the names of no less than four of his sons. **Æthelbald 13** and **Æthelberht 12** appear among the *duces*, who are listed just after the bishops in order of precedence.⁵ Two other sons of **Æthelwulf 1**, **Æthelred 15** and Alfred, are recorded as *fili regis* ('sons of the king') lower down in the list of witnesses after the abbots. Since Alfred could only have been about five at the time, it is understandable that he should be ranked low in precedence—but there are other charters where 'sons of the king' appear among the *duces*. The problem with the term 'prince' is that an *ealdorman* was not necessarily someone of royal kin in the ninth century.

Later on, perhaps under the influence of Scandinavian terminology, the *ealdorman* tends to be referred to as an *eorl*. Already in the core text of the Chronicle, the Danish *jarlar* are being called *eorlas*. Consider the unfortunate Danish *jarl*, **Osbern 1**, who was killed at the Battle of Ashdown in 871. In the Chronicle he is called an *eorl*. Asser translates the same passage and turns him into a *comes*, which is the term he also uses for an *ealdorman*, as we have seen. Later still *ealdorman* tended to be supplanted by the term *eorl*. Take **Osric 7**, for instance. In texts deriving closely from the earliest recension of the Chronicle, the so-called 'Common Stock', he is called a *dux* and an *ealdorman*. But in the F version of a Chronicle, written by a highly interventionist compiler active in the first decade of the twelfth century, we find *ealdorman* has been supplanted by *eorl*.

With such linguistic variety it seemed most prudent to keep the native form of the word for this title. Increasingly the researchers in the PASE project have felt that it is wiser to retain most of the native terminology rather than unduly influence users by selecting a modern term that may carry with it inappropriate associations, such as the Modern English term 'alderman'.

Now, the second question: Why restrict oneself to the reign of Alfred? Already the examples cited show that, in fact, I am not going to limit myself completely to the period from 871 to 899. But there are several reasons why I have decided to focus primarily on the period of Alfred's rule.

The first is a practical one. The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England team decided that during mid-2004 they would focus on uploading into the master database material up to the end of Alfred's reign. As you will may surmise, this is not a straightforward mechanical process. After uploading we have had to consider whether

⁴ P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handlists (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968), no. 312. Listed in the PASE database under 'Sources' as **S312**.

⁵ The charter is generally deemed to be spurious, but there has been little or no discussion of the witness list, which appears to be consistent with a date of 854. **Æthelberht 12** is listed separately in the PASE database from **Æthelberht 9**, who is indubitably the son of **Æthelwulf 1** with the note: 'This is probably the later King **Æthelberht 9**.'

to merge names from different sources if we are satisfied that they refer to the same person. If you were to consult A. J. Robertson's estimable *Anglo-Saxon Charters* about the **Osric 7** just mentioned you will read on page 275 the following:

Osric's signature appears for the first time in a highly suspicious Malmesbury charter dated 5 November 844 (B. 447) and makes its last appearance (in the form *Oric*) in a Kentish charter (B. 502) granted by Æthelbert, King of Wessex and Kent, sometime between 860 and 862. He is mentioned twice in the Saxon Chronicle, first (s.a. 845) as Earl of Dorset, and later (s.a. 860 A, D, E) as Earl of Hampshire. On both occasions he took part in defeating the Danes.

Initially two Osrics were listed in the database but the charter subscriptions seem to suggest that Robertson was correct in assuming that the *ealdorman* associated with the people of Dorset in 845 was the same as the *ealdorman* linked with the people of Hampshire in 860. This suggests that *ealdormen* among the West Saxons could either switch ealdormanries or could have ties with more than one shire.

More than practical considerations are at stake, however. We all know that titles, status and offices can change greatly, often over a very short period of time. Today, it seems that the place where we are least likely to find a lord is in the House of Lords, unless that person holds a lifetime peerage. Yet I was well into my youth before life peerages were created. Though the title can still incite some entrepreneurs to change their citizenship or their tax status, for many people today the term 'Lord' is a bizarre anachronism. The very change in Anglo-Saxon terminology for an *ealdorman* between the eighth and the tenth century should caution us against seeing the office an unchanging one. Indeed before this paper concludes, it will be necessary to consider whether the office did not change even within Alfred's reign itself.

And now to address another of the questions posed at the beginning of this paper: What did an *ealdorman* do? One of the most important of his functions was to lead the local levy called a *fierd* into battle. Let us return to **Osric 7**. We read in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that together with the people of Dorset he fought in 845 against a Danish *here* (the customary Chronicle word for a Scandinavian military force).⁶ His colleagues included a high-status cleric **Ealhstan 3** (bishop of Sherborne 816x825-867) and *Ealdorman Eanwulf 4* with the people of Somerset.⁷ A few years later in 851 *Ealdorman Ceorl 2* and others⁸ fought against another heathen *here*. The 845 Chronicle entry shows that already before the reign of Alfred *ealdormen* were associated with particular shires.⁹ This process of administrative division¹⁰ of the territory under the control of Anglo-Saxon kings had its roots at least as far back as ca 705: the Chronicle entry for 708 reporting the death of **Aldhelm 3** mentions that the

⁶ On the distinction between the terms *fierd* and *here* see Richard Abels, 'Alfred the Great, the *micel hæðen here* and the viking threat', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter, Studies in Early Medieval Britain (London: Ashgate, 2003), 265-79. The final version of the PASE database retains these vernacular terms rather than attempting to find approximate (but inevitably inexact) Modern English equivalents but provides a glossary of the various Old English and Latin terms to assist users.

⁷ People of Dorset: **Anonymi 961**; Danish *here*: **Anonymi 851**; people of Somerset: **Anonymi 850**.

⁸ **Anonymi 854**.

⁹ In fact, as early as 800 the *ealdorman Wiohstan 2* with the people of Wiltshire (**Anonymi 823**) went into battle against another *ealdorman*, **Æthelmund 2**.

¹⁰ The Old English verb *sci(e)ran* means 'to cut, to divide'.

West Saxon bishopric had been divided, with **Aldhelm 3** having one part and **Daniel 1** the other. The western bishop's shire (*bisceopscir*) was based in Sherborne, the see of the eastern one was located at Winchester, and Selwood in Somerset acted as the boundary between the two. Selwood remained a boundary as late as 893, when the Chronicle records forces were assembled from 'west and east of Selwood' (listed under **Æthelred 1** → **Event** → **Meeting** → '**Æthelred 1**.meeting with others'). We know from other sources that two *ealdormen* present were from Wiltshire and Somerset. Their responsibilities thus straddled the Selwood divide.¹¹ By the reign of Alfred there were many more divisions and *ealdormen* can be also assigned to these additional individual shires.

In what follows I must acknowledge my debt to Nicholas Banton's outstanding Oxford D.Phil. dissertation on the *ealdormen* of Alfred's reign and later. Sadly Banton did not live to publish his thesis and inevitably rather few people have consulted his study since it was deposited in the Bodleian back in 1981.¹² Banton identified *ealdormen* from Wessex during Alfred's reign with responsibilities for Berkshire, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Somerset and Devon. He showed that as the West Saxons had expanded their sphere of influence, their *ealdormen* increased in number, so that during Alfred's reign there were also *ealdormen* for the South Saxons and East Saxons and the kingdom of Kent, including Surrey and East and West Kent. Though I do not recall Banton's mentioning this, we should probably see the two divisions of East and West Kent as representing the old dual kingship that used to exist in Kent as signified by the two bishoprics of Canterbury and Rochester.

I think we can deduce that *ealdormen* remained responsible for managing the levy from their area into Alfred's reign. My reason for saying this lies in a curious textual discrepancy between an entry in the 'A' version of the Chronicle for the year 871¹³ and the other versions. Let us consider the office of *ealdorman* again. Amongst the *ealdorman*¹⁴ entries in our master database is one for **Anonymi 963**. You will notice that in the master database 'A' and its direct copy 'G' say that 'an individual *ealdorman* and king's thegns often rode out on forays [*oft rade on ridon* is the Old English], which were not counted'. Details of these forays are not provided, presumably because they were deemed to be minor skirmishes. The other versions of the Chronicle drop the word *anlipig* 'individual' and turn *ealdorman* into the plural. 'A' is the more reliable text and *anlipig ealdormon* is the *difficilior lectio*—but what does 'A' mean and why have the later redactors changed the text? What I *don't* think the author behind the 'A' version was referring to was a single individual intent on war, come what may. Instead the author was indicating that during the year 871 an

¹¹ They were **Æthelhelm 7** of Wiltshire (887-97) and **Æthelnoth 14** of Somerset (878-94). See Nicholas Banton, 'Ealdormen and Earls in England from the Reign of King Alfred to the Reign of King Aethelred II', Oxford D.Phil. dissertation, 1981, esp. p. 368.

¹² Twenty-two people as of June 2004 had consulted the thesis in the Bodleian (including two members of the PASE team); some others will also have consulted the work through inter-library loan.

¹³ And its copy, 'G'. For editions of these two manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* see *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, Volume 3: *MS A*, ed. Janet Batley (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986) and *Die Version G der angelsächsischen Chronik: Rekonstruktion und Edition*, ed. Angelika Lutz, Münchener Universitäts-Schriften 11 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1981).

¹⁴ The PASE database will permit searches of specific terms such as *ealdorman*, some of which are highlighted in **boldface** in the discussion below.

ealdorman such as **Ceorl 2** mentioned in the Chronicle 851 entry still undertook assaults against the invaders, presumably with the *fierd* from his area. In other words, 'A' is not referring to a single bellicose, heroic or mad *ealdorman* but instead to *ealdormen* who were taking responsibility independently of the king for the defence of their own territorial division or shire (*scir*), i.e., they were acting as an *individual* rather than jointly with the king in battle. The redactor of a later version of the Chronicle saw the confusion inherent in the 'A' text and replaced it with the plural *ealdormen*, in the process losing some of the sense of the 'A' version. The same event records that there was also collaboration between servants of the king (*cinges thegnas*), who are identified in the PASE master database as **Anonymi 964**. When we use 'servants' in this context, we should think of someone with the status of a senior civil servant such as a Permanent Secretary or (to use a ninth-century Continental parallel) **Charlemagne 1**'s *vassi dominici*. Let us consider **Anonymi 997** in our master database by first looking under **king's thegn**. Here we find reference to a number of 'king's thegns' who died between 893 and 896. These included the bishops of Rochester and Dorchester,¹⁵ and the *ealdormen* of Kent, Essex and Hampshire.¹⁶ (We have already seen that bishops could be participants in military campaigns and could work hand-in-glove with *ealdormen*. Since there were at most only eleven *ealdormen* within Alfred's realms at any one time, the loss of three *ealdormen* as well as two bishops in four years must have been a huge loss, both militarily and in terms of morale.)¹⁷

As has been mentioned, *ealdormen* could be of royal kin and so it is natural that holders of the office were required to undertake high-status duties. The Chronicle mentions one especial duty that must have demanded great integrity and considerable diplomatic finesse. I refer to the responsibility to take alms from the king and from the West Saxon people (better known as 'Peter's Pence') to Rome. This was presumably done on a regular basis, though the Chronicle reports only four trips for this purpose during Alfred's reign. In 887 an *ealdorman* called **Æthelhelm 7** took alms to Rome. Asser tells us that he was the *comes* of Wiltshire.¹⁸ In 888 'the alms of the West Saxons and King Alfred' were taken by *Ealdorman* **Beocca 2**. Charter evidence shows that he flourished between ca. 882 and 904.¹⁹ In 890 the alms were taken by another high-status individual, Abbot **Beornhelm 8**. The charter attestations suggest that an **abbot**'s standing was regarded as a little lower than that of an *ealdorman* but individual abbots, particularly those with close ties to the king, could well have been very influential.

These entries pose a question as to the identity of **Sigehelm 2** and **Æthelstan 5**, who several versions of the Chronicle report took alms in 883, not just to Rome but—

¹⁵ **Swithwulf 2** and **Ealhheard 6**.

¹⁶ **Ceolmund 9**, **Beorhtwulf 5** and **Wulfred 12**.

¹⁷ See Banton, 'The Ealdormen', p. 368.

¹⁸ Our database indicates that his life was not entirely peaceful: he took part in siege of Buttington in Gloucestershire with **Æthelred 1** of the Mercians, husband of **Æthelflæd 4**, Lady of the Mercians and Alfred's daughter. **Æthelhelm 7** first mustered his forces with **Æthelred 1** before the siege. The Chronicle records that he died in 897. The mere fact that the Chronicle records his date of death underlines that he was a significant figure.

¹⁹ Information from Banton, 'The Ealdormen', p. 368.

rather sensationally if accurate—to St Thomas in India²⁰ and St Bartholomew. Charters here provide a possible solution: there was **Sigehelm 4**, an *ealdorman* of East Kent, who subscribed between 898 and 902, and **Æthelstan 8**, *ealdorman* of Berkshire, who subscribed sometime between ca. 871 and 877. At this stage in our investigations we cannot assert that they were the same people but, as we have seen, those who took alms to Rome in 887 and 888 were likewise *ealdormen*.

The final function of *ealdormen* takes us back to chronology and change—and thus helps address a final question that arises from this discussion: Was an *ealdorman*'s role an unchanging one? Asser has two most illuminating comments about *comites*, which, as has already been mentioned, was his word for *ealdormen*. If we examine the list of those defined as a *comes* we will light upon **Anonymi 169** and **Anonymi 170**. In chapter 106 Asser tells us of nobles and commoners²¹ who very often disagreed with decisions taken in assemblies both by *comites* and by those Asser calls *praepositi*, his word for reeves.²² The plaintiffs did not just disagree with these *ealdormen* and reeves: they subsequently submitted themselves to the judgment of the king, who, we are told, was zealous in judicial matters.

Ealdormen were not merely subject to the humiliation inherent on having their judgments overturned by the king on appeal but they could even be stripped of office. Here we need to look at **Anonymi 170**. Our information is contained within the 'Education' factoid, where it is recorded that Asser says that *comites* (i.e., *ealdormen*), *praepositi* (reeves) and *ministri* (unspecified officials of the king) who were illiterate 'were eager to read, preferring to learn this unaccustomed discipline, albeit laboriously, rather than give up the offices of power.' In my view this makes it clear that Alfred demanded that those who held judicial power should be able to read—which helps explain why there is a written law code associated with his name and translations into Old English promoting the acquisition of wisdom.

We should not overlook the menace inherent in Asser's account. He indicates that literacy was an inherent component of judicial competence, and that incompetence could result in dismissal. Alfred's fostering of education is evidence of his zeal for change in his society. His reforms also extended to the military levy under his control:²³ the Chronicle entry for the year 893 tells us that Alfred divided his *fiere*²⁴ into two so that there was always one half at home, one in the field, except for those men who had to hold the burhs.

²⁰ So the 'D', 'E' and 'F' versions. MSS 'B' and 'C' say 'Iudea'. Bartholomew, like Thomas, was early in Church history associated with India. His relics migrated to Rome, whence **Emma 2** brought an arm to Canterbury during the reign of **Cnut 3**. The normally most reliable text of the 'Common Stock' of the Chronicle, MS 'A' (the so-called 'Parker Chronicle') omits reference to the journey. It could be that the source text originally read something other than 'on Indea'. The donation could thus have been to a church in or near Rome that purported to hold Thomas's relics.

²¹ **Anonymi 192**.

²² **Anonymi 169**. See **Office** → *praepositus*.

²³ I choose my words with care here as I am by no means convinced that this was a levy of the whole West Saxon people.

²⁴ **Anonymi 974**. See **Event** → **Mustering**.

Nicholas Banton suggests that Alfred was in the process of making one further reform that was cut short by his death. It brings us full circle back to Alfred's terminology. Banton argues that the adoption of the term *comes*, first seen in a charter of King **Æthelwulf 1** to *Ealdorman Ealdred 18* in 856²⁵ (the year **Æthelwulf 1** returned from Rome *via* the Frankish court) was a significant change that came to fruition in Alfred's reign (and can best be seen, one might add, in Asser). Unlike the term *princeps* that sometimes had formerly been used of *ealdormen* because of their royal connections, Banton observes (p. 57) that 'the *comes* was a functionary in the Frankish royal administration with no such royal associations. The new title given to the ealdormen in the texts of diplomas diminished their role as rulers of the old West Saxon sub-kingdoms and associated their offices with that of the counts of Carolingian France.' Banton wrote when the initial brouhaha about the authenticity of Asser's *Life of Alfred* had died down but in my view his arguments provide powerful support for the case that the *Life* is genuinely a work of the last decade of the ninth century. One has only to think of the seemingly anachronistic *fasellus* or 'vassal' used twice by Asser, which crops up just ten years later in a seemingly genuine charter of **Edward 2** (Edward the Elder) to **Tata 1**, his *fasallus*.²⁶ Like Banton we need to cross the Channel and revisit Frankish sources to understand Alfred better. Certainly we cannot assume that an *ealdorman* in 971 was the same in all respects as an *ealdorman* a quarter of a century later. They were no longer mainly martial figures of high status, they were also being turned into administrators. There were yet more changes in store as the *ealdorman* transmuted into an *eorl* in the course of the following century.

²⁵ S317.

²⁶ S369.