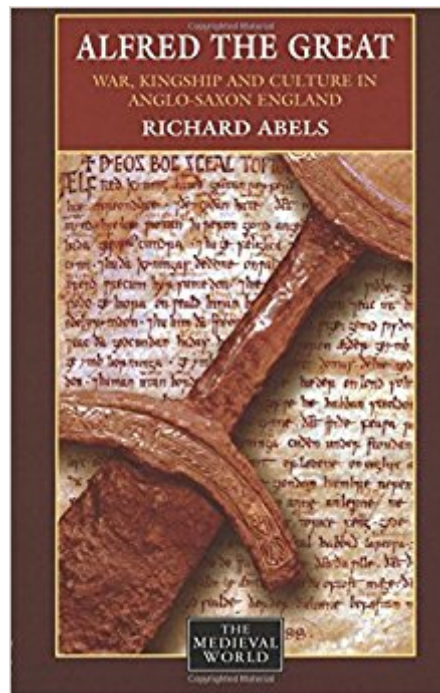


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Alfred The Great: War, Culture And Kingship In Anglo-Saxon England



Synopsis

This biography of Alfred the Great, king of the West Saxons (871-899), combines a sensitive reading of the primary sources with a careful evaluation of the most recent scholarly research on the history and archaeology of ninth-century England. Alfred emerges from the pages of this biography as a great warlord, an effective and inventive ruler, and a passionate scholar whose piety and intellectual curiosity led him to sponsor a cultural and spiritual renaissance. Alfred's victories on the battlefield and his sweeping administrative innovations not only preserved his native Wessex from viking conquest, but began the process of political consolidation that would culminate in the creation of the kingdom of England. Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England strips away the varnish of later interpretations to recover the historical Alfred pragmatic, generous, brutal, pious, scholarly within the context of his own age.

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Customer Reviews

'...based on wide knowledge, and not infrequent reconsideration, of the sources...this is a most useful book'.
English Historical Review
'Abels' Alfred is a remarkable man...made believable, intriguing, relevant... this is a book for anyone who enjoys history.'
Times Literary Supplement

FRONT OF COVER: Final: 2.4.98 ALFRED THE GREAT War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England RICHARD ABELS THE MEDIEVAL WORLD SPINE: ALFRED THE GREAT ABELS [colophon] OUTSIDE TRIM: Probable price: Probable publication: BACK

OF COVER: THE MEDIEVAL WORLD General Editor: David Bates Professor of Medieval History, University of Glasgow

The influence of Alfred - king of Wessex from 871 to 899 - pervades English history. His victories on the battlefield and his administrative innovations not only preserved his native Wessex from viking conquest, but also began the process of political consolidation and unification that would culminate, within a couple of generations, in the creation of the kingdom of England. Alfred was a great warrior king, and an effective and inventive ruler. But, even more remarkably, he was also a lover of wisdom, who sought to preserve and disseminate Latin learning by translating into English the books most necessary for all men to know. The spiritual and literary renaissance he spearheaded gave rise to a lasting tradition of English vernacular prose and learning. He himself claimed that what he most desired was to live a worthy life, and to leave to posterity his memory in good works. This is precisely what he accomplished. Few bearers of the sobriquet the Great have so firm a hold on the title: eleven hundred years after his death, his name still resonates, and modern scholarship has not undermined his reputation. Yet that status carries its own dangers: he seems such a modern figure that each generation is tempted to recreate him in its own image. One of the great virtues of Richard Abels's splendid new study of the king, however, is to strip away the varnish of such later interpretations, in order to recover the historical figure - pragmatic, generous, brutal, pious, scholarly - within the context of Alfred's own age. The book is timely, fresh and authoritative. It is based throughout on the primary sources, but it also presents a judicious assessment of recent scholarship in interpreting the man and his times. It has been written with a student and non-specialist readership in mind, but fellow specialists will find much in it to stimulate and challenge (and many will especially welcome the re-assertion of Asser's life of Alfred as a key contemporary source for the reign, against recent scholarly attack). Richard Abels's Alfred convinces as a man who combined within himself the complexities and contradictions of his time. But, fascinating though that portrait is, this is more than just a study of an individual, however Great: the book investigates, and illuminates, the whole nature of warfare, culture and kingship in Anglo-Saxon England. RICHARD ABELS is Professor of History at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis.

Alfred, being the only English monarch styled "the Great", is a notoriously difficult subject to write history about. The Victorian cult of Alfred made him a marked man for the debunkers of the Dead White European Male focus of history. Attempts at an even-handed review of the Wessex king's life are fraught with peril. This book does the job magnificently. Alfred the warrior, ruler, innovator, strategist, and moralist are all presented well within the context of a 9th century Anglo-Saxon world.

Alfred the pious and Alfred the ruthless are both shown as parts of the same man. While concluding that Asser's "Life" is a legitimate source of biography for Alfred, the author does not limit himself. Extensive use and comparison between versions of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" is combined with what limited charter evidence survives, archaeological discoveries and an examination of coinage patterns to round out the picture of Alfred and his times. One major strength of this work is its very careful comparisons of Alfred and his activities to those of predecessor kings of Wessex and successor kings of the Anglo-Saxons. Alfred's reign is not studied in isolation. How Alfred was both traditional and innovative in contrast to his father and brothers helps place Alfred in the context of his times. The legacy which Alfred left his descendants (to become kings of all England) is given special attention. The author is circumspect in trying to get inside of Alfred's head. Alfred's physical afflictions are examined with an eye to a modern medical diagnosis and their effects on Alfred's personality. Using the marginalia in Alfred's own translations from Latin into the vernacular, the author tries to see inside Alfred the man - all the while cognizant that such a review is only speculative. This is a great book and a very good read.

Having read both Pollard's biography of Alfred and that of Abels, I much prefer the latter. Both try to bring Alfred to life for the reader but Abels brings more historical detail into the narrative and there is less of an attempt to imagine often obscure motives or scenes. Also, unlike some biographies, the details in this book add to the narrative rather than distract from it. The writing flows smoothly and the reader becomes immersed in the times. Alfred was an incredible man who not only forged the beginning of a nation politically but whose intellectual curiosity and self-motivated learning set the tone for the value of education in the West. All of this in the midst of the Vikings! I found Abels' biography to be an enjoyable reading experience about one of the pivotal people in Western history.

This book was recommended by a medieval scholar as the best biography of Alfred, and I can easily believe it is. Despite a scarcity of written sources about Alfred, the author has painted a vivid portrait of the man, showing the justification of the title great. We not only read about the person of Alfred, but are filled in with a full background of what life was like in ninth century Britain. A terrific book!

The scholarly book that I'd been looking for on this subject. Fascinating

Alfred the Great is one of England's greatest kings , and these book deals with every aspect of alfred

life and his kingdom .. my only criticism is the book sometimes get dry ! its not an easyread that goes like a novel , Alfred the Great : War , ... is completely scholarship book and theauthor had done a perfect job from that point of view .

The subtitle gives us a good insight as to why we bought this book by author Richard Ables.As the title implies the strength of this book is not that is just dry facts about Alfred's life in a vacuum. We get information on Anglo-Saxon England of that time; also some of the reasons that Alfred did or thought and acted on. Still focusing on Alfred the great we see what his influences were on the politics and the people at the time.One nice advantage about this book is that it has (quality) footnotes at the end of the page; that way it's easier to read for references and meanings instead of having to dig in the back of the book. If this had been a Kindle with x-ray than that would've been okay however for hard copy it's always easier to have your references near what the referencing. The footnotes themselves are quality and show other people's writings and thoughts on the subject as the subject becomes relevant.If you're not familiar with the area and the time or even if you are, we are treated to a genealogical table of maps and figures that even though it is in black and white gives us a feel for where the people were and what they were doing at the time.There is an appendix of the authenticity of Asser's "Life of King Alfred." In this Richard Ables section on Asser's life, he discusses whether Asser's writings are relevant and not a tenth century forgery. "Asser's biography of King Alfred is a source of inestimable value for understanding Alfred and his times."We also have a section on further reading tells about the sources and gives a little description on why you want to read these writings.A different view of Alfred and Asser can be found in "King Alfred the Great" by Alfred P. Smyth.

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