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The Cultural and Spiritual revival of the Anglo-Saxons during the Reign of King Alfred the Great

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Abstract

The first years of King Alfred the Great's reign were characterized by continuous attacks of the Vikings and by a general state of spiritual degradation. He managed to defend the country from the invading Danes and in a spiritual counter-offensive, brought to faith a part of the invaders settled on the island. One of the main concerns of Alfred, especially in the period of relative external tranquillity, was the religious and cultural life of its people. The king established a strong school in his court to get out of ignorance the children of the noble families and also took care to open religious and secular schools throughout the kingdom. In his attempt to refresh the religious life of the people, he founded three monasteries and brought monks from Europe to teach the Anglo-Saxon the real monastic life. Besides the cultural revival and stemming the tide of Viking invasions, Alfred gave his kingdom a code of laws, *Alfred's Doom* and prepared the British union in one state, made in the 10th century.

Keywords

King Alfred the Great, Anglo-Saxon, ninth century, Church, Vikings.

In the preface to the translation of philosopher Boethius' works King Alfred confessed that he always sought to live a dignified life and leave his followers the memory of good deeds¹. He founded a dynasty that ruled the whole England after two generations and lasted almost for two hundred years. He is one of the most famous and beloved Anglo-Saxon kings until today. The English people honoured him as a saint until the troubled centuries of the Reformation, being the only leader whom has given the epithet „the Great”. Alfred is the one who managed to defend the country from the invading Danes and in a spiritual counter-offensive, brought to faith a part of the Vikings settled on the island through the help of two great British saints, St. Cuthbert and St. Neot².

Alfred was the last child of Ethelwulf King of Wessex and he seemed to have no chance to ever reach the throne of the kingdom, whereas before him there were four other boys with claims to the throne³. So his father, who loved him most, was mainly concern about his spiritual life. When the boy was only four years old, his father sent him to Rome with men of confidence, where Pope Leo 4th made him his spiritual son⁴. Shortly Ethelwulf widowed and the death of a child led him to return to church. He began to make alms for the souls of the dead, teaching his youngest son to be merciful and generous⁵. Asser, Alfred's biographer, says that much of the royal estate was designed for alms: „venerable king Ethelwulf released the tenth part of his entire kingdom from all royal service and tribute, and... offered it up to God the One and the Three in One, in the cross of Christ, for the redemption of his own soul and of his predecessors.”⁶ When the child turned six years, pushed by a particular devotion, Ethelwulf decided to make another pilgrimage to Rome and take with him little Alfred⁷.

In his biography, *The Life of King Alfred*, Asser bishop of Sherborn said that, despite the lack of concern of his parents to make him learn until

¹ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great, War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013, p. 1.

² Fr. Andrew Phillips, *Orthodox Christianity and the Old English Church*, www.orthodoxengland.org.uk.

³ Benjamin Merkle, *The White Horse King: The Life of Alfred the Great*, Thomas Nelson Inc., 2009, p. 4.

⁴ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 10, <http://omacl.org/KingAlfred/alfred.html>.

⁵ B. Merkle, *The White Horse King ...*, p. 20.

⁶ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 11.

⁷ Benjamin Merkle, *The White Horse King ...*, p. 17.

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he was 12, Alfred was mainly attracted by Saxon poems, which he easily memorized. He was able to remember hundreds and thousands of lyrics⁸. In this way he won a beautiful manuscript with drawings containing secular English poetry, as prize for managing to recite the entire book in front of his family⁹.

Since then Alfred began to learn to read and either during adolescence or as a young soldier on the battlefield, or caught in countless affairs of the kingdom, he carried a book containing the prayers and psalms and opened it from time to time, day or night, „amid all the bustle and business” of his king life¹⁰.

Slowness of reading and little knowledge put a pressure on him much of his youth. Alfred blamed the shortage of teachers and scholars to give him the holy emulation, which leads man closer to God through knowledge. The past golden ages of 7th and 8th remained only in chronicles and libraries. Names like St. Theodore of Tarsus, Adrian and his school in Kent, Aldhelm, Bede, Wilfred, Benedict Biscop and local libraries filled with manuscripts from Europe, Lindisfarne or York, were all far in the past. The simplicity and deep meditation - the coordinates of monastic life lived in cells taken from the world turmoil, were present only in the pages of manuscripts¹¹. Now monasteries were rich, and monks and clergy led a life full of delights. How many of them still knew Latin and understood the words of religious services? The condition of the common people was a greater concern.

Little Alfred grew orphan of both parents in the shadow of his older brothers who arrived in turn on the throne. He was faithful to them, leading the army in numerous battles in the years 860-870 when West Saxons were forced to fight the Vikings. Year 871 was full of large and heavy fighting with the Norse. There occurred eight wars and Albert became King by the death of his brother, wounded in battle¹² and will force the Vikings to leave the kingdom at the cost of paying a tribute¹³. He was 23.

⁸ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great, The King and His England*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956, p. 106.

⁹ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 28.

¹⁰ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 29.

¹¹ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great, The King and His England*, p. 108.

¹² Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, James R, Osgood & co, Boston, 1871, p. 81.

¹³ Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester University Press, London, 1995, p. 110.

The vision the new king has of a people leader outlines how he will lead his country in all the years of reign: „to obey God and His Messengers, keep the peace, morality and authority within the borders of the country and to stretch out its territory”¹⁴

The first years of his reign were disturbed by the incessant attacks of the Vikings, who occupied Northumbria and Mercia, and from there they committed slaughter, robberies and murders on Wessex. Constantly harassed by the Vikings, Alfred ends up not to have people and resources but he did not give up the fight for the survival of his kingdom. „...with a few of his nobles, and certain soldiers and vassals, used to lead an unquiet life among the woodlands of the country of Somerset, in great tribulation”¹⁵ He told the people who did not leave him that „we are Christians in name only, and few of us have the works of faith”¹⁶.

But Asser goes deep and finds the reason Alfred had restless years at the beginning of his reign:

“We may believe that the calamity was brought upon the king aforesaid, because, in the beginning of his reign, when he was a youth, and influenced by youthful feelings, he would not listen to the petitions which his subjects made to him for help in their necessities, or for relief from those who oppressed them; but he repulsed them from him, and paid no heed to their requests. This particular gave much annoyance to the holy man St. Neot, who was his relation, and often foretold to him, in the spirit of prophecy, that he would suffer great adversity on this account; but Alfred neither attended to the reproof of the man of God, nor listened to his true prediction. Wherefore, seeing that a man’s sins must be corrected either in this world or the next, the true and righteous Judge was willing that his sin should not go unpunished in this world, to the end that he might spare him in the world to come. From this cause, therefore, the aforesaid Alfred often fell into such great misery, that sometimes none of his subjects knew where he was or what had become of him.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 61

¹⁶ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 219.

¹⁷ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 66

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St. Neot, a pious that Alfred had chosen him as a spiritual father, was not ashamed to rebuke the young king for harshness and pride with which he treated others, especially the Archbishop of Canterbury. Making the prophecy about invasion of the country by the Vikings and suffering that will accompany St. Neot asked Alfred: „Listen to me, beloved child, if you wish and return your heart to my counsel. Reject wickedness; repent for sins by alms and delete them with tears.”¹⁸

Alfred has the strength to begin changing his life and for this St. Cuthbert appeared in a dream, and informed him the tough test time is over¹⁹.

In 878, after eight years of fighting, Alfred defeated the Vikings in Edington and asked them to leave the kingdom, not before baptizing their leader, Gothrun. Alfred was his godfather as the usual political tradition of sponsorship started in the island as early as the 7th century²⁰. In gratitude for God helped him defeat the enemies, Alfred erected a monastery at Athelney, close to the places where he resisted the Danes. From now it follows years of relative peace (interrupted only by a few fighting), as Vikings choose the Frankish kingdoms as their new target.

I point out some landmarks from the peaceful years of Alfred's reign. His inner life and his concerns are of great help to elucidate the way in which he knew to lead the country. First he decided to divide his time so as not to neglect any of his duties as king and Christian. He gave a third of a day clocks serving as king, the other third serving God, and the third for flesh needs (sleep and food)²¹.

The seeds carefully placed by his father in infancy, will bear fruit in the years of youth and maturity. Alfred was a man of the Church, well settled in faith and never ceased to put God before all worldly cares. As-ser's words are powerful:

„He alone never desisted from studying, most diligently, to the best of his ability; he attended the mass and other daily services of religion; he was frequent in psalm-singing and prayer, at the hours both of the day and the night. He also went to the churches, as we have already said, in the night-time to pray, secretly,

¹⁸ Vladimir Moss, *King Alfred the Great, The English David*, 2011.

¹⁹ Vladimir Moss, *King Alfred the Great, The English David*.

²⁰ Catherine E. Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2004, p. 27.

²¹ Henry Soames, *The Anglo-Saxon Church, Its History, Revenues and General Character*, Parker, 1838, p. 151.

and unknown to his courtiers; he bestowed alms and largesses on both natives and foreigners of all countries; he was affable and pleasant to all, and curiously eager to investigate things unknown... the king was in the habit of hearing the divine scriptures read by his own countrymen."²²

One of the main concerns of Alfred, especially in the period of relative external tranquillity, was the religious and cultural life of its people. Wishing to know reading from infancy and not being trained, he did not forgotten this desire once on the throne, but he surrounded himself by learned men, who will be teachers and mentors not only to him, but to the nobles and the whole country:

„But God at that time, as some consolation to the king’s benevolence, yielding to his complaint, sent certain lights to illuminate him, namely, Wenefrith, bishop of the church of Worcester, a man well versed in divine scripture, who, by the king’s command, first turned the books of the Dialognes of pope Gregory and Peter, his disciple, from Latin into Saxon, and sometimes putting sense for sense, interpreted them with clearness and elegance. After him was Plegmund, a Mercian by birth, archbishop of the church of Canterbury, a venerable man, and endowed with wisdom; Ethelstan also, and Werewulf, his priests and chaplains, Mercians by birth and erudite. These four had been invited out of Mercia by King Alfred, who exalted them with many honours and powers in the kingdom of the West-Saxons, besides the privileges which archbishop Plegmund and bishop Wenefrith enjoyed in Mercia.”²³

However the most beloved of these wise men will be the Welshman Asser, whom he brought from his homeland with difficulty where he was abbot of two monasteries and to whom he gave a bishopric (Sherborne) and his love. Asser was brought up according to the Irish church typicon and not the Roman one. Alfred sees the treasure from depth and asks him to move to his court. Unable to leave his congregation without a shepherd, Asser gets from the English to spend half the year in Wessex and the other to be with his Welsh²⁴. In Wessex he will be assigned to rule another mon-

²² Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 88.

²³ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 89.

²⁴ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 25.

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astery - the newly formed Exeter. For now Asser will spend most of the time near Alfred, daily reading and commenting together from the Holy Scripture²⁵. Bishop Asser will reply with much gratitude to King's love, writing his life in words of loyalty, from the small, but significant events of childhood, to the major acts of a Christian king. *The Life of King Alfred* is a portrait of an enlightened king and a wise ruler, an example for all those who will follow to the throne.

At 38 years old full of worries for his kingdom, on St. Martin's feast day, Alfred begins to learn Latin, not only to understand the services and the books but to lift his people from ignorance²⁶. He speaks with grief about this state of affairs in the preface of one of the books he translated:

„When I considered all this I remembered also how I saw, before it had been all ravaged and burnt, how the churches throughout the whole of England stood filled with treasures and books, and there was also a great multitude of God's servants, but they had very little knowledge of the books, for they could not understand anything of them, because they were not written in their own language.”²⁷

From now nothing will stop Alfred to increase his knowledge of the holy books. „For this is his most usual custom, both night and day, amid his many other occupations of mind and body, either himself to read books, or to listen whilst others read them.”²⁸

After his scholars showed him everything they knew Alfred turned his gaze toward the continent, seeking to collect nectar from as many flowers as a wise bee.

„He sent messengers beyond the sea to Gaul, to procure teachers, and he invited from thence Grimbald, priest and monk, a venerable man, and good singer, adorned with every kind of ecclesiastical discipline and good morals, and most learned in holy scripture. He also obtained from thence John, also priest and monk, a man of most energetic talents, and learned in all kinds of literary science, and skilled in many other arts. By the

²⁵ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 25.

²⁶ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great, The King and His England*, p. 111.

²⁷ *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, with an English Translation, the Latin Text, Notes, and an Introduction*, edited by Henry Sweet, Early English Text Society, London, 1871.

²⁸ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 95.

teaching of these men the king's mind was much enlarged, and he enriched and honoured them with much influence."²⁹

Alfred was not the man to keep only for him what he received, so he felt a duty to establish a strong school in his court to get out of ignorance the children of the noble families. He also took care to open religious and secular schools throughout the kingdom. He attended the classes at the palace. The King's goal was all children who could afford to learn book, to read the Holy Scripture in English, while the most zealous, in Latin too, the latter being meant for the Church service³⁰.

Alfred's clear conscience to take care of everything related to material but especially spiritual and cultural life of his subjects is found in his own words: „Consider what punishments would come upon us on account of this world, if we neither loved it (wisdom) ourselves nor suffered other men to obtain it.”³¹

Always tireless in giving the people what he had received from so many minds, Alfred found great need to start translating in the Saxon language as many useful spiritual books. He directed himself to do so, managing to translate four works: *Pastoral Care* of St. Gregory the Great (that he sent bishops and priests to study and implementation), Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (the most popular book of philosophy of the Middle Ages), St. Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and the first fifty psalms of the Psalter³². He helped with money the cultural, literary and spiritual reviving of his people following the example of Frankish king Charlemagne. The most important works of theological and secular Western culture were translated into Old English especially the works of St. Gregory the Great.

Alfred is the first English king who wrote himself pages of comments or translations, his example being followed in the 18th century by King James I. Historians consider him not only the father of the English nation, but also of the literature from the British Isles³³. He encouraged what nobody ever thought in the West - using their own language in their national culture and Church. Unfortunately, this emulation ended after the Norman invasion from 1066³⁴.

²⁹ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 90.

³⁰ Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, p. 207.

³¹ *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, with an English Translation, the Latin Text, Notes, and an Introduction*.

³² Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 220.

³³ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 24.

³⁴ Vladimir Moss, *King Alfred the Great, The English David*.

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Alfred linked his nation's cultural decline to the decline of the monastic life. As such, he was forced to bring monks from over the English Channel or from Gaul. It remained recorded the aid application sent by the king to bishop Fulk of Rheim. This, together with Asser, will make a clear x-ray of the religious causes of England's decay: in the territories attacked by Vikings devastation of churches and monasteries was the main reason, but in other territories, wealth and clergy's lack of care, on the one hand and people's ignorance, on the other, led to the plight of church in the 9th century³⁵.

In his attempt to refresh the religious life of the people, the king was supported not only on the tradition of the Church of Rome, but also on his own Anglo-Saxon roots³⁶. He founded two monasteries, one for monks and another for nuns, but for the first one it will be hard to find Englishmen willing to leave their livelihood and to harness the hard work of the true monastic life:

„he ordered that two monasteries should be built, one for monks at Athelney... he placed there as abbot, John the priest and monk, an old Saxon by birth, then certain priests and deacons from beyond the sea; of whom, finding that he had not as large a number as he wished, he procured as many as possible of the same Gallic race.”³⁷ „Another monastery, also, was built by the same king as a residence for nuns, near the eastern gate of Shaftesbury; and his own daughter, Ethelgiva, was placed in it as abbess.”³⁸

„For at first, because he had no one of his own nation, noble and free by birth, who was willing to enter the monastic life, except children, who could neither choose good nor avoid evil in consequence of their tender years, because for many previous years the love of a monastic life had utterly decayed from that nation as well as from many other nations, though many monasteries still remain in that country.”³⁹

The abbot was born in Germany and monastery with a community made up of foreigners will not survive long after its founder's death. Half a

³⁵ Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 193.

³⁶ Catherine E. Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2004, p. 28.

³⁷ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 111.

³⁸ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 118.

³⁹ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 112.

century later, unfortunately Athelney monastery and its school so appreciated were no longer than a memory⁴⁰.

Towards the end of his life, Alfred started work at his third monastic foundation and the most beautiful - Winchester, dedicated to St. Peter the Apostle, which became his necropolis, but he did not see it finished⁴¹. It was completed by his son, King Edward the Elder, and the congregation was led by a Frenchman Grimbold from St. Bertin. On the inscription founder, Edward the Elder wrote that this settlement was built „for the salvation of my soul and of my venerable father, King Alfred”⁴².

In his spiritual work of elevating the English people, Alfred did not set aside the Viking attackers now established in his kingdom or in other provinces of the island. In the second half of the 9th century the Norse settled in large numbers in the areas they controlled. Some increased their power by concentrating a huge tract of land from the British took by robbery or willingly given by their kings, in order to achieve peace⁴³. Alfred supported the Danish nobles sending their sons to Athelney monastery school, in order to enter the clergy. Also during his reign missionaries were sent from London and Canterbury to christen the Vikings in Eastern England⁴⁴. Alfred will make Vikings a good leaven for future monarchs⁴⁵.

Returning to the golden past of English Orthodoxy, Alfred encouraged and strengthened the tradition of venerating icons and holy relics⁴⁶. „For king Alfred was always from his infancy a frequent visitor of holy places for the sake of prayer and almsgiving.”⁴⁷

Relations with Rome were close, but Alfred always kept his independence and that of the English church. Popes who were contemporaries did

⁴⁰ David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963, p. 33.

⁴¹ Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, p. 200.

⁴² *Edward the Elder. 899-924*, editat de N.J. Higham și D.H. Hill, Routledge Press, Abingdon, 2001, p. 233.

⁴³ Richard Fletcher, *Bloofeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 45.

⁴⁴ Douglas Dales, *Dunstan: Saint and Stateman*, James Clarke & co, Cambridge, 2013, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Vladimir Moss, *The Fall of the Orthodox England. The Spiritual Roots of the Norman Conquest, 1043-1087*, 2007, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Henry Soames, *The Anglo-Saxon Church, Its History, Revenues and General Character*, Parker, 1838, p. 155.

⁴⁷ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 86.

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not keep him from it, giving a great freedom for the believers of the island. Thus, the king made a real harmony between Church and state, whose father was considered by appointing bishops of confidence⁴⁸. He supported the creation of a greater number of bishoprics, strengthening the role of diocesan hierarchs, thus making it easier to shepherding believers⁴⁹.

Alfred saw the English society divided not by wealth, rank or the like, but after what each did: one class was the fighters, always ready to defend the kingdom from any threat; than the workers of the earth and the craftsmen. They were most numerous. Last, but perhaps most important was the prayer group, either priests or monks. This social structure was first mentioned in a note to one of King Alfred's translations⁵⁰.

Besides the cultural revival and stemming the tide of Viking invasions, Alfred gave his kingdom a code of laws, *Alfred's Doom*. It cited Moses' Ten Commandments received at Sinai and whole paragraphs from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament⁵¹. As the guiding principle of the Alfredian code a quote from St. Gospel stood at the beginning of the law: „And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”. Alfred Codex sets the days or periods before religious feasts were holidays such as: Resurrection, Assumption of Our Lady, St. Apostles and St. Gregory the Great, to whom the king had a special reverence⁵².

In addition, Alfred commanded chronicle covering mainly his reign, but also other periods from the Anglo-Saxon history⁵³. In a time when few people can write and read these documents preserved what the collective memory already withheld. The English have always cherished past and took care to pass it on to future generations, and Alfred encouraged this. Chronicles were written and kept by monks⁵⁴. They constitute one of the main sources of information for historians, especially since they pursue

⁴⁸ Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, p. 204.

⁴⁹ Douglas Dales, *Dunstan: Saint and Stateman*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars, Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2010, p. 11.

⁵¹ Michael Marlowe, *Anglo – Saxon Versions of Scripture (AD 600-1150)*, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/anglo-saxon.html>.

⁵² Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, p. 167.

⁵³ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, 3, p. 218.

⁵⁴ Sarah Foot, *Remembering, Forgetting and Inventing: Attitudes to the Past in England at the End of the First Viking Age*, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series, vol. 9 (1999), pp. 185-200, p. 186.

historical events year by year. The achievements of his reign will bring the respect of other European monarchs and the blessing and gratitude of the Roman Pontiff:

„Year 884... pope Martin, of blessed memory, went the way of all flesh; it was he who, in regard for Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, and at his request, freed the school of the Anglo-Saxons resident at Rome from all tribute and tax. He also sent many gifts on that occasion, among which was no small portion of the holy and venerable cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ was suspended, for the general salvation of mankind.”⁵⁵

Openness towards others was shown by numerous aids that Alfred always sent to Christians in different parts of Europe and even in India, the land christened by St. Thomas the Apostle⁵⁶. It is interesting to note that in the 9th century Alfred spread its wing of mercy to India, a territory which, ten centuries later, his descendants will conquer for its riches.

Alfred became in time a man of mercy, remembering not only his father's urging, but also many words from the Holy Fathers read with zeal. Thus, the king divided his annual revenues in several parts: for the poor who sought his help, for the two monasteries he founded, for the newly established schools and for all the monasteries and churches in the kingdom Brittany, Gaul, Northumbria and Ireland⁵⁷.

„Encouraged by this example, and wishing to exceed the practices of his predecessors, he vowed humbly and faithfully to devote to God half his services, both day and night, and also half of all his wealth, such as lawfully and justly came annually into his possession.”⁵⁸

King Alfred the Great bore fruit in his successors. Perhaps his deepest joy was to see his daughter Ethelgiva starting on the hard road of monastic life. He supported her fully, endowed her like a princess, and from the estate received from his father she managed to build a monastery in Shaftesbury, where she spent the rest of her life as abbess⁵⁹. The community became one of the most powerful English monasteries of nuns, with an

⁵⁵ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 83.

⁵⁶ Fr. Andrew Phillips, *Orthodox Christianity and the Old English Church*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hughes, *Alfred the Great*, p. 191.

⁵⁸ Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, 119.

⁵⁹ Brian Daniel Starr, *Dictionary of Saints*, Xlibris, Bloomington, 2013, p. 152.

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uninterrupted existence until its closing during King Henry the 8th. There will be placed to worship the relics of King Edward the Martyr and, over the centuries, many princesses of English royal families will serve as abbesses.

Ealhswith, the king's widow, founded a small convent, dedicated to Theotokos, placed near the ecclesial complex built by her husband in Winchester. There one of Alfred's nieces, Edburg, daughter of Edward the Elder will become a nun and abbess⁶⁰.

What did King Alfred during the 28 years of reign can be summarized in a few words: he kept upright the only kingdom that successfully opposed the second wave of Viking attacks and created a sense of national unity in front of the common enemy, bringing under his wing British in Wessex, Kent, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria and preparing the British union in one state, made in the 10th century. Also, through all his work, this enlightened king revived the culture and the Orthodox faith in the archipelago, delaying its fall by nearly two centuries⁶¹. The fruits of his labours could occur due to the priority that Alfred gave to changing the spiritual life of all the people, from king to the last slave. The English people were in a state of hibernation and spiritual decay, due to their powerlessness, but also because of the difficult years of the first half of the 9th century. The success - even in part - of Alfred's efforts was due to the fact that the nobles and the people did not resist him, but they regarded him as a father and master, who lead their lives toward God and all the good⁶². Asser called him "my honest and very reverend master, the leader of all Christians from the island of Britain, the king of Anglo-Saxons"⁶³.

Also strengthening of the monarchy and its involvement in all facets of life kingdom will put Anglo-Saxon kings in a special position, similar to the Byzantine monarchs: the king was God's anointed and thus hallowed almost like a priest, and he was seen as a mediator between God and people. He was not only the leader but also the one who, according to Alcuin "must pray to God for the welfare of all his people"⁶⁴. In a period in which

⁶⁰ *Edward the Elder. 899-924*, p. 231.

⁶¹ Vladimir Moss, *King Alfred the Great, The English David*.

⁶² Vladimir Moss, *The Fall of the Orthodox England. The Spiritual Roots of the Norman Conquest, 1043-1087*, p. 17.

⁶³ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great...*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ William A.Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1970, p. 71.

the English Church had no strong rulers and ready to sacrifice to fulfil our Saviour's commandments, God provided for His people an enlightened monarch, who showed not only to be a king, but also a true Christian, trying to raise the Church and the people.