

Alfred the Great and Asser's *Life*

From the death of Bede to the Sack of Lindisfarne

735 **Death of Bede**

Establishment of the School and Archbishopric of York and of York by Egbert, student of Bede, member of Northumbrian royal family

**750s-
770s** **Alcuin teaches at and ultimately leads the School of York**

780s **Alcuin to court of Charlemagne**

793 **Vikings sack Lindisfarne**

Alcuin on the sack of Lindisfarne

“The pagans have desecrated God's sanctuary, shed the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope and trampled the bodies of the saints like dung in the street.

...

When our lord King Charles returns from defeating his enemies, by God's mercy, I plan to go to him, and if I can then do anything for you about the boys who have been carried off by the pagans as prisoners or about any other of your needs, I shall make every effort to see that it is done.”

Letter to Higbald, Bishop of Lindisfarne

From early Northumbria to Alfred's Reign

| | |
|---------------|---|
| ca. 720s-820s | Mercian Ascendency, especially under Offa (757-796) |
| 865 | Arrival of the Great Heathen Army |
| 871 | Accession of Alfred as King of Wessex |
| 878 | Alfred defeats Guthrum and the Great Heathen Army at the Battle of Eddington |
| 880s-90s | Alfred establishes hegemony over English kingdoms, launches educational program |
| 899 | Death of Alfred |

The Great Heathen Army of 865

● town

○ place

✕ battle (Danish victory)

✕ battle (Anglo-Saxon victory)

MERCIA Anglo-Saxon kingdom

— settlement of 876

— settlement of 877

route of Great Heathen Army

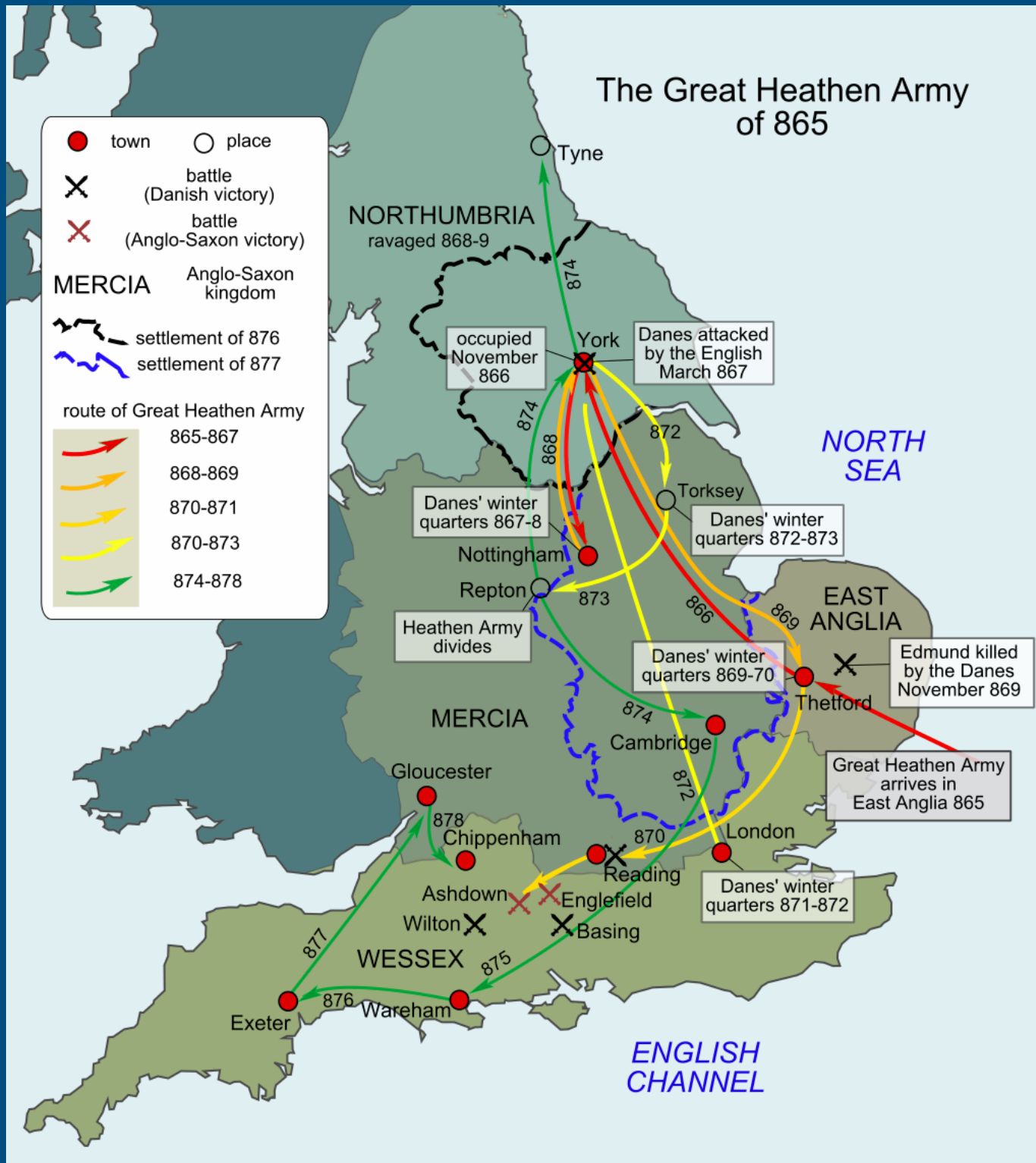
865-867

868-869

870-871

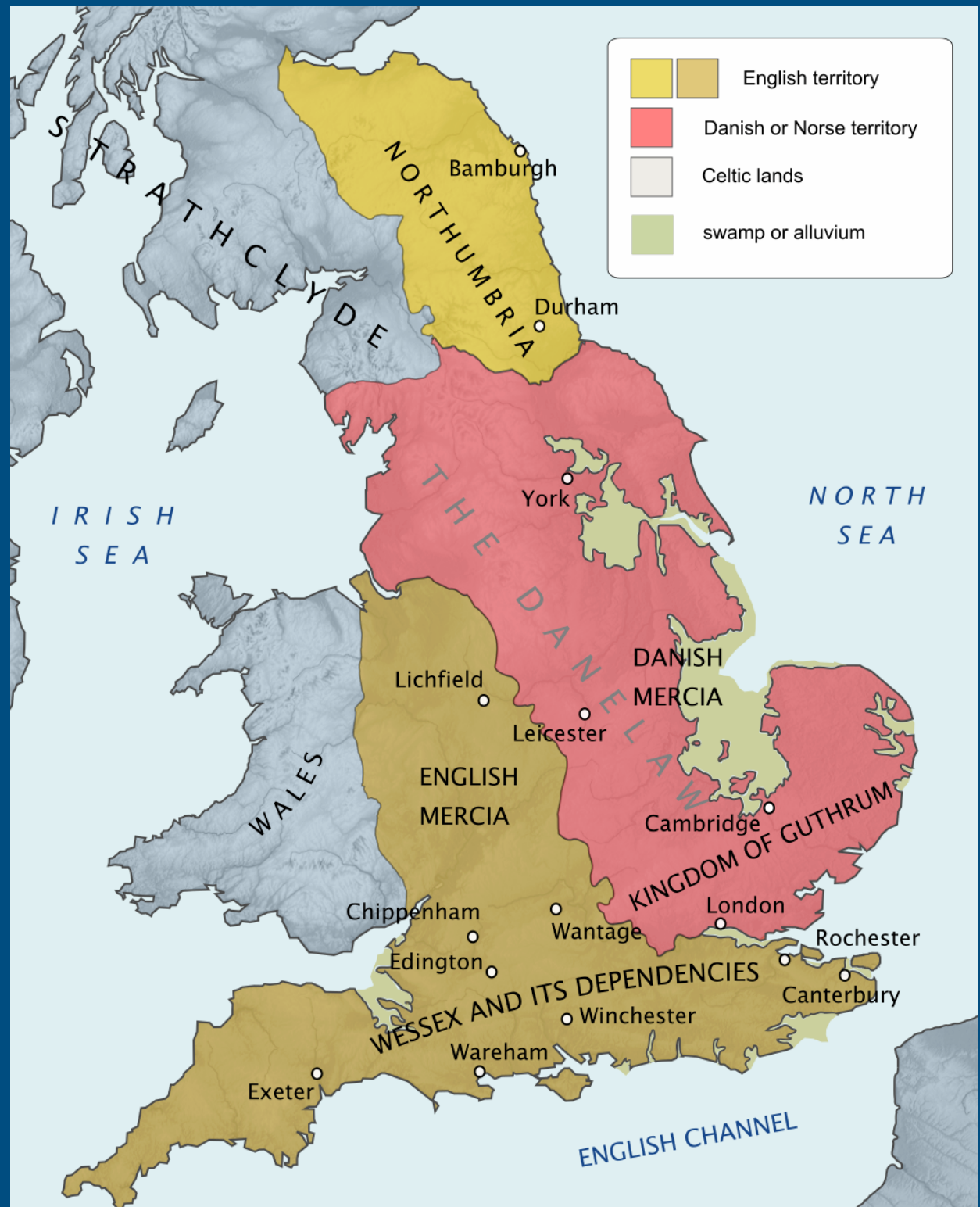
870-873

874-878



The Danelaw:

Division of
England as of
878 following
Alfred's victory
at the Battle of
Eddington and
the subsequent
Treaty of Alfred
and Guthrum



INTERMISSION

Who was Asser?

- A Welshman
- One of Alfred's team of scholarly advisors
- A bishop: Bishop of Sherborne from sometime after 892, but probably already a bishop before that
- Died 908 or 909

Doubts about Asser

V.H. Galbraith, 1964: Asser's use of Angul-Saxonum is an anachronism and he mentions the bishopric of Exeter when it didn't exist yet; therefore the Life is a forgery by Leofric, Bishop of Devon and Cornwall, 1046.

Dorothy Whitelock, 1967,
“The Genuine Asser”:
WRONG!

Alfred Smyth, 1995, 2002: Alfred wasn't a “pious wimp.”
Byrthferth of Ramsey wrote the text attributed to Asser.

Literally Everybody Else:
Have you even READ Byrhtferth?
Do you even READ Latin?

The Cotton Library

Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631)

- 1620s Cotton's library near Parliament an important resource for antiquaries
- 1629 Cotton arrested on charges of sedition; library closed
- 1633 Library restored to his heirs
- 1700 Cotton's grandson donates his collection as part of the founding collection of the British Museum
- 1730 Collection moved to Ashburnham House
- 1731 Fire at Ashburnham house!
- 1753 Collection moved with others to the new British Museum

958 items in the library

114 'lost, burnt or intirely spoiled,' 98 so damaged as to be defective, according to parliamentary report, though some were able to be partially recovered in subsequent centuries.

Completely lost:

- The only manuscript of Asser's Life of Alfred
- The only manuscript of The Battle of Maldon
- One of the copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

Seriously charred:

- Beowulf
- A 5th-century Greek manuscript of Genesis
- One of two copies of Magna Carta with King John's seal

20. þes. hys þer to hys byrgene ge feran
 ne. 7 feoþer æmpen þe ðone lichaman
 healdan seoldon. Ac he on ðam þriiddan dage
 of deaðe aras. 7 þa hyrdas hys eall a sedon 7
 hys for belan ne mihton. Ac þa udeas þa
 hys þe hyrdon. hys ðam hyrdon feohgea
 fon. 7 hys þe segan seoldon. þ hys crihtas
 mon. 7 þone lichaman for stolon. 7 þa hyr
 das þa þe feoh on fergon 7 hys swa þe hys
 festmisse þe ðer ge worðon þes for supran
 ne mihton. Nu leof cyning ic þe eac lere for
 ðis. þ þu næfre ðera udea leasunga ne ge
 lre. S; drihten lof 7 deoflum seoh a to
 worulde. **AN.**

Her rið hu sacunus. 7 saloman. fetode
 7 mbe heora wisdom. þa cpet sacunus to
 salomane.

ær me hper god sete þa hege porhtce heo

21. feorðan. Ic þe sege þe se
 faderum. Sage me hwile worð epiost faderum
 of godes munde. Ic þe sege fader lre a fader.
 lre. Sage me for hwile worð dingu heofon sege
 haren heofon. Ic ðe sege for þon. he be belad
 eall þ hys be ufan byð. Sage me hwæt 7 god.
 Ic þe sege. þ 7 god þe ealle ðing on hys se peal
 ðam hafad. Sage me on hwile dagum god se
 porhtce ealle ge swasta. Ic þe sege. on .vi. de
 gum god se seop ealle ge swasta. On þam epiost
 ðe hege seop leoh. On þam eferian ðe
 hege seop þare seopu ðe þine heofon healdad.
 On þam þriiddan ðe. hege seop se 7 eorðan.
 On þam feorðan ðe hege seop heofon es
 cinglon. 7 on ðam .v. ðe. hege seop fader
 7 fader. 7 on ðam .vi. ðe hege seop deop
 7 mtenu. 7 addam ðone epiostan man. Sage
 me hpanon þes adames nama ge swapen



Various fragments, found
loose in box.

Probably from
Tribute to the
State of New York

[Signature] 15/10/1957

9. 11. 51 A.P. 23/1/1957



Otto. D. VIII. part ii.

Fragments



[illegible]