

FROM ALFRED TO HAROLD II: THE MILITARY FAILURE OF THE LATE ANGLO-SAXON STATE

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"IT WOULD be a serious error," Warren Hollister acutely observed in the final chapter of his *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, "to attempt too radical a separation of military organization from military techniques, since the necessities of battle in large measure govern the structure of the army."¹ The problem that Hollister faced was explaining why, despite possessing a highly sophisticated military system and effective army, the Anglo-Saxon state, nonetheless, was conquered "once and almost twice by the Danes and again by the Normans."² His answer was that the English were defeated by Swein and Cnut because of "wretched overall leadership combined with widespread disloyalty," and that Harold simply had the bad luck to fight two major battles back to back.³ Hollister needed these explanations in order to rescue the Anglo-Saxon military institutions that he had so carefully detailed in the previous chapters from the charge that they had become obsolete and ineffective by 1066. His second book, *The Military Organization of Norman England* (Oxford, 1962), showed how unfounded that charge was.

Most historians now acknowledge that Hastings was indeed a close-run affair, won more by luck and perhaps generalship than because of fundamental structural or tactical differences in the forces or disparities in their military technologies.⁴ An apparent paradox, however, still remains: the Anglo-Saxon state was most militarily effective under King Alfred *before*, in Hollister's words, "it achieved maturity." Some of the reasons that Hollister gave for the failures of

¹ C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 127.

² Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 145.

³ Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 147–52.

⁴ Richard Glover, "English Warfare in 1066," *English Historical Review* 67 (1952): 1–18; Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 134–40. For recent assessments of Hastings, see Stephen Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066–1135* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), 27–28, 163–68; Ian Walker, *Harold, The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Thrupp, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 166–82; Matthew Strickland, "Military Technology and Conquest: The Anomaly of Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 19 (1997): 353–82. Cf. R. Allen Brown, *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* (London and New York: Constable, 1968), 43–51, 91–99, 116–17, 141–81; idem, "The Battle of Hastings," *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* 3 (1980): 1–21.

Æthelred II and Harold II are undoubtedly correct. But there is more to the story than bad leadership and bad luck. The “maturity” Hollister perceived in Anglo-Saxon military institutions on the eve of the Conquest had more to do with logistical than with strategic or tactical capabilities. Indeed, in terms of defense of the kingdom, English military institutions eroded between the death of Alfred in 899 and the Battle of Hastings. Alfred, his son, and grandsons owed their success in war to a military system that was originally designed to defend territory and then subsequently adapted to consolidate conquests. Their success rendered this costly system unnecessary, and the political disturbances that marked the reign of Edward the Martyr led to a new emphasis upon the personal military following of magnates at the expense of “national” defense. As a consequence, when Viking fleets reappeared along the coasts of England in the 980s and 990s, Æthelred and his ealdormen found themselves ill equipped to deal with the threat. And although he and his successors attempted to improve English defenses, Harold II was not much better off when he faced the imminent invasions of King Harald and Duke William in the summer and autumn of 1066.

The eleven-hundredth anniversary of the death of King Alfred seems a proper time to reconsider English military responses to the Vikings. For Frank Stenton and Warren Hollister, the success of King Alfred and the failure of Æthelred II was most readily explained by the different qualities of leadership exhibited by these two kings. Simon Keynes’s “A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready” (1986), however, suggested a different explanation for their contrasting fortunes. In a *tour de force* of textual criticism, Keynes demonstrated how historical opinion about Alfred and Æthelred, has been colored by the biases and perspectives of the extant sources.⁵ There is more to the story, Keynes declared, than “a contrast between a brave man and a coward, or a strong king and weak one, or a good policy and a bad one, or indeed between success and failure.”⁶ Perhaps, but from a military standpoint, at least, the last is precisely the point. Alfred did succeed, and Æthelred did fail. Their contrasting fortunes are why students of the Anglo-Saxon era, including Keynes, have been drawn to this otherwise unlikely comparison.

Although Keynes’s reservations about the quality and limitations of the extant sources are well taken, the evidence, archaeological as well as literary, permits

⁵ Simon Keynes, “A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 36 (1986): 195–217. Keynes’s reconsideration of Æthelred II’s historical reputation began earlier with his article “The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready,” in *Æthelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978), 227–53. See also his *The Diplomas of King Æthelred “the Unready” 978–1016: A Study of their Use as Historical Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). See also Eric John, “War and Society in the Tenth Century: The Maldon Campaign,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 27 (1977): 173–95, who makes a similar point about the “defeatism” of the Chronicle account.

⁶ Keynes, “Tale of Two Kings,” 204.