

Ian Ashton

ashtonid@appstate.edu

HIS 3144-101

Dr. Valante

December 8, 2025

As Viking raids evolved from sporadic attacks to incessant campaigns between the eighth and ninth centuries in England, their constant raiding did more than wreak destruction. Instead, the Viking raids became such a nuisance that it forced the early English to adapt militarily. What began as plundering raids, transformed into settlements and large-scale invasions that created the demand to develop stronger defenses. Each kingdom in early England was independent but faced a common enemy that gradually was reshaping the political landscape of England. The last early English kingdom, Wessex, coughed up Alfred the Great, who established the burghal system, trying to build on earlier military developments such as the early English navy. The burghal system became an organized defensive fortification that functioned as centers for logistics, refuge, and coordinated defense. While the early English navy was built to counter small Viking raiding parties and was more prepared for skirmishes rather than fleets. Among Alfred's military developments, the burghal system was a more efficient military development that outperformed the navy at countering and limiting the Vikings mobility, ensuring stability.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, contains vital firsthand accounts of the evolving Viking strategies and raid patterns that establish the tactical problems Alfred faced. These were problems the burghal system countered more reliably than the navy. *Alfred's Laws*, displays Alfred's effort to systematize governance and defense so it could support the burghal system's need for coordinated manpower. The third primary source *Alfred and Guthrum's Peace* illustrates

the need for fixed boundaries after years of Viking mobility, reinforcing the importance of the burghal system to maintain stability. Lastly, the *Charter of King Edgar* shows how Alfred's defensive and administrative reforms continued after him with later West Saxon rulers, supporting the success of the burghal system. Together, these primary sources establish why the burghal system was a more enduring military development and effective countermeasure to Viking mobility than the navy.

The Burghal Hidage and the West Saxon Burghs: A Reappraisal, offers an extensive reinterpretation of Alfred's defensive network. The source demonstrates that burghs operated as fortifications but also functioned as strategic centers of supply, refuge, and military coordination that reduced Viking mobility. *The Fortress Kingdom: The Wars of Aethelflaed & Edward the Elder* highlights how Aethelflaed, Alfred's daughter, built and maintained burghs in Mercia by using her father's defensive system to resist Viking attacks. Her success highlights the long term effectiveness and adaptability of the burghal system compared to the early English navy. *The Viking Age* provides historical context on how Viking strategies evolved from coastal raids to inland campaigns and overwintering settlements. These changes created a larger demand for land-based organized responses such as the burghs instead of naval defense. Finally, *Evolving English Strategies during the Viking Wars* examines and explains how the West Saxon military adapted towards the late ninth century. This source argues that organized land defenses, such as burghs, became the backbone of successful early English resistance while naval actions played a less effective role. Ultimately, all of these sources provide evidence that supports the burghal system as being a more effective and enduring military development in resisting the Vikings compared to the navy.

Naval defense had been a military development used before Alfred the Great by his predecessors to fight the Vikings but during Alfred's reign they became a territorial threat that operated beyond the reach of ships. By the time of Alfred's grandfather, king Egbert, the Vikings were forming alliances with neighbors such as the Welsh to fight the West Saxons. For instance, in 835 A.D., "this year came a great naval armament into West-Wales, where they were joined by the people, who commenced war against Egbert, the West-Saxon king. When he heard this, he proceeded with his army against them and fought with them at Hengeston, where he put to flight both the Welsh and the Danes."¹ This demonstrates that decisive fighting was happening inland and required armies instead of a navy early in the ninth century. A strong naval presence could not influence battles miles away from the coast. As the decades proceeded, the Vikings began a new strategy of overwintering in places like the Isle of Shepey, allowing them to have more mobility to move inland. For example, in 854 A.D., "this year the heathen men for the first time remained over winter in the Isle of Shepey."² Moving forward, the Vikings also began prioritizing tactical advantage over honoring agreements. For example, in 865 A.D., "In this year, the heathen army occupied Thanet and made peace with the people of Kent. The Kentishmen promised money in return for peace. Taking advantage of the promise of money, the heathen army stole up by night and raided the whole of east Kent."³ By utilizing rapid movement and treachery, the Vikings were becoming more of a threat on land than the sea. The Vikings ability to mobilize with rapid movement, combined with their treachery escalated when a humongous heathen army arrived and wintered in East Anglia. For instance, in 866 A.D., "this year Ethered, brother of Ethelbert, took to the West-Saxon government; and the same year came a large heathen army into England, and fixed their winter-quarters in East-Anglia, where they were soon horsed; and the inhabitants made peace with them."⁴ Once they were established, the

heathen army could advance with inland campaigns that the navy could not defend against. By the time Alfred was a young man, he and his brother personally fought with the great heathen army during draining battles in 871 A.D., but while they were fighting his brother died. For instance, “King Ethered and Alfred his brother fought with the army at Basing; and there the Danes had the victory. About two months after this, King Ethered and Alfred his brother fought with the army at Marden. They were in two divisions; and they put them both to flight, enjoying the victory for some time during the day; and there was much slaughter on either hand; but the Danes became masters of the field; and there was slain Bishop Heahmund, with many other good men. After this fight came a vast army in the summer to Reading. And after the Easter of this year died King Ethered. He reigned five years, and his body lies at Winburn-minster. Then Alfred, his brother, the son of Ethelwulf, took to the kingdom of Wessex. And within a month of this, King Alfred fought against all the Army with a small force at Wilton, and long pursued them during the day; but the Danes got possession of the field. This year were nine general battles fought with the army in the kingdom south of the Thames; besides those skirmishes, in which Alfred the king's brother, and every single alderman, and the thanes of the king, oft rode against them; which were accounted nothing. This year also were slain nine earls, and one king; and the same year the West-Saxons made peace with the army.”⁵ The Chronicle illustrates the exhausting pressure the Vikings were putting on Wessex and other neighboring kingdoms. Most notably, all of the pressure stemmed from inland battles and skirmishes that depleted the influence of the early English naval defense. To add more, if the navy was such an effective military development, then why were so many Viking armies able to reach England and overwinter. As a result, the Vikings were becoming an increasingly more entrenched and mobile

inland enemy that created the demand for Alfred to make a new defensive strategy focused on fortified burghs.

During 871 A.D., Alfred began creating a new code of laws with legal reforms that suggest they were inspired by the detrimental impact the Vikings had on early English kingdoms. The reforms reflect inland violence and support the idea that the navy had limited protective value. More specifically, the code of laws does not explicitly mention Vikings but it hints at their influence. The reasoning is because during Alfred's rule many monasteries and Christian communities were becoming increasingly vulnerable targets for Vikings. One of Alfred's laws explains the strong legal penalties for abducting nuns which could suggest that Alfred created this as a response to the Viking instability. For example, "If anyone takes a nun from a nunnery without the permission of the king or bishop, he shall pay 120 shillings, half to the king, and half to the bishop and the lord of the church, under whose charge the nun is."⁶ Additionally, there is another law Alfred created that suggests it was made to reinforce the protection of churches. The reasoning for this is because it mentions that anyone that steals from a church will have their hand chopped off and will have to pay a fine. To add more, it does not mention Vikings specifically but the law has a harsh penalty which suggests that it could be interpreted as a legal response to the Christian devastation caused by Viking incursions. For instance, "If anyone steals anything from a church, he shall pay the value of the article and the fine which is appropriate to the value in question, and the hand shall be struck off which committed the theft."⁷ Another law created by Alfred does not explicitly mention Vikings but it suggests it was made because of the Vikings raids on monasteries and churches during his reign. The reasoning for this is because it describes if one is attacked by enemies they should seek protection in a church and it mentions there are penalties for violating the sanctuary. For example, "Further, we grant to every church

consecrated by a bishop this right of sanctuary: if a man, attacked by enemies, reaches it either on foot or on horseback, he shall not be dragged out for seven days, if he can live despite hunger, and unless he [himself comes] out [and] fights. If, however, anyone does try to drag him out, he shall forfeit the amount due for violation of the king's guardianship and the fine for violating the sanctuary of the church-and a greater amount if he seizes more than one person in such a place."⁸

A fourth law created by Alfred that indirectly suggests it was made because of Viking incursions was his law regarding monasteries serving as places of asylum for people fleeing enemies. The reasoning it can be interpreted as created to address Viking instability is because Alfred's reign was full of Viking incursions that created instability amongst communities. This particular law could have been created as an attempt to control population movement to address the widespread danger the Vikings posed to Alfred's kingdom. For instance, "If a man flees, for any manner of offence, to any monastery which is entitled to receive the king's food rent, or to any other free community which is endowed, for the space of three days he shall have right of asylum, unless he is willing to come to terms [with his enemy]."⁹ Although not all of Alfred's laws that he created function to address the Vikings, some of them indirectly suggest they were created specifically for addressing the instability the Vikings created and support limiting their mobility.

While Alfred was fighting and creating his code of laws, he also had to negotiate with Vikings leaders to settle on boundaries between his kingdom and the Viking settlements that began appearing in places such as York and Repton. These negotiated boundaries did not address coastlines but instead inland rivers and routes. This highlights that if the navy was such an effective military development, then why were they allowing so many Vikings into the point that Alfred had to negotiate. One of the leaders Alfred negotiated boundaries with was named Guthrum. By negotiating with Viking leaders such as Guthrum, it highlighted the importance and

demand for the burghal system because the navy was ineffective at combating the Viking mobility since they could not travel up rivers and primarily focused on the coast. Additionally, the Vikings kept taking vast swaths of land and encroaching deeper into Alfred's kingdom, all while conquering neighboring kingdoms. Alfred and Guthrum's peace led to them drawing out boundaries to separate Wessex from Viking controlled areas because the Viking armies were moving through early English territory with ease. For instance, "Concerning our land boundaries: Up on the Thames, and then up on the Lea, and along the Lea unto its source, then straight to Bedford, then up on the Ouse unto Watling Street."¹⁰ The previous excerpt from Alfred and Guthrum's peace demonstrates how bad Viking mobility had gotten and provides the incentive for the burghal system to be introduced as the physical enforcement on the border. Additionally, another excerpt from Alfred and Guthrum's peace suggests that Alfred anticipated the Vikings were not going away and had a permanent presence amongst the early English kingdoms. Alfred understood that the Vikings were not going to leave and he had to create a long term defensive system that could function throughout the year to combat inland attacks. For example, "Then is this: If a man be slain, we estimate all equally dear, English and Danish, at viii half marks of pure gold; except the ceorl who resides on rented land and their [the Danes'] freedmen; they also are equally dear, either atccc. Shillings."¹¹ A third excerpt from Alfred and Guthrum's peace suggests that the strict control of movement was necessary because the Vikings' mobility was a key factor that made them so dangerous and difficult to combat. The excerpt suggests Alfred needed a defensive military system that could reduce Viking mobility and force Vikings to confront fortified positions. -For instance, "And if a king's thegn be accused of manslaying, if he dare clear himself on oath, let him do that with 12 king's thegns. If any one accuse that man who is of less degree than the king's thegn, let him clear himself with xi of his equals and with one

king's thegn. And so in every suit which may be more than iv mancuses. [A money of account representing thirty pence] And if he dare not, let him pay for it threefold, as it may be valued.”¹²

Furthermore, a fourth excerpt from Alfred and Guthrum’s peace highlights the unregulated movement across borders and the requirement that one needs permission to travel between borders. To add more, the same excerpt mentions that traders must go with hostages to provide trustworthiness. For example, “And we all ordained on that day that the oaths were sworn, that neither bond nor free might go to the host without leave, no more than any of them to us. But if it happen that from necessity any of them will have traffic with us or we with them, with cattle and with goods, that is to be allowed in thiswise: that hostages be given in pledge of peace, and as evidence whereby it may be known that the party has a clean back.”¹³ All of these agreements in the excerpt demonstrate how vulnerable the military was and the need for a more effective land defensive system like the burghal system instead of the early English’s navy.

Alfred’s burghal system became an effective fortified defensive system that successfully combated the Vikings and significantly reduced their mobility better than his navy could. The same idea of the burghal system would go on to be utilized by future generations against the Vikings and endured long after Alfred’s lifetime, supporting the success of the burghal system. One particular ruler called King Edgar the Peaceable, issued a royal charter in 974 A.D. that does not explicitly mention Vikings or burghs but mentions building bridges and castles. More specifically, he required nobles to build bridges and castles and he also obligated landowners to maintain fortifications or infrastructure while fighting in the army. For instance, “Therefore I, Edgar, having by divine grace obtained the pre-eminence of royal rule over all Britain, being willing to endow with perpetual freedom a certain part of the country under my jurisdiction, do, in reward of his devoted service, grant unto Ælfhere, my faithful minister, three plots of ground

in the place which is called in common parlance Nymed, that he may hold it, as we have above said, in perpetual inheritance, with all fields, woods, and meadows thereunto of right appertaining. Moreover, the aforesaid land is to be free of all secular tribute and royal service, excepting only going to the wars, and the building of bridges or castles.”¹⁴ Based on the excerpt, it suggests that fortification work remained a key obligation that first developed under Alfred’s burghal system. In addition, Edgar’s emphasis on bridges and castles demonstrates that future rulers after Alfred focused on land based fortifications similar to burhs instead of naval defense to reduce movement. Moreover, the continued fortification work on infrastructure such as bridges and castles reinforces the value and success of Alfred’s land based burghal system and helps to illustrate how the burghal system became a core factor in England’s military resilience.

By the time Alfred introduced the burghal system, it became extremely effective at unifying the early English population to work together in fortified strongholds that were strategically set up close to one another. Through innovative defensive networks, Alfred created a system that successfully diminished the Vikings mobility, especially with the burghs being strategically close allowing armies to assemble and help neighboring burghs under attack. For instance, “It was, after all, only by means of the control of populations through the broad but multi-faceted instrument of the obligations for service at the burhs that King Alfred and his successors were able to pursue effective long-term strategic and military goals at all.”¹⁵ More specifically, the burghal system offered more efficient population control than the navy regarding manpower, supported every aspect of inland warfare, and it endured as a long term strategy. Alfred’s burghal system was not only effective because of its manpower but because the burghs were built strategically interconnected to one another while also being in strategic areas such as near rivers and roads. To add more, Alfred’s defensive system became a long term military

strategy that helped expand his kingdom while cutting down the Vikings mobility, demonstrating the burghal system's superiority to the early English navy. For example, "It follows that the new strategic initiatives represented by the creation of the group of burhs at Buckingham, Oxford, Wallingford and Sashes and the determination of their interlocking burghal territories, which defined only a relatively small part of what had been southern Mercia, must have been put in place before the sequence of events which marked this fundamental expansion of Alfred's hegemony at this juncture of late 879 or early 880."¹⁶ Although the navy was effective at countering Viking fleets, it was ineffective at restricting Viking expansion inland and could not stop the Vikings from landing in England. However, the combination of interconnectivity, extended manpower, and strategic placement from the burghs helped to significantly reduce Vikings mobility better than the early English navy could.

Reduced Viking mobility continued with future rulers that utilized Alfred's burghal system such as his daughter and ruler of Mercia, Aethelflaed. She specifically commissioned the construction of multiple burhs that would be set up in strategic places such as rivers and estuaries. Some of these places Aethelflaed chose to set up burhs included Tamworth, Stafford, Warwick, Scergeate, and Bricege. To add more, she went on the offensive utilizing Mercian burhs to muster enough men to assault the Viking fortification at Derby in 917 A.D. For example, "The army Aethelflaed took to Derby may have been drawn from any number of the recently-built Mercian burhs, along with senior nobleman and their retainers. But the assault was a brutal affair."¹⁷ By utilizing the burghal system that her father had created, Aethelflaed was able to go on the offensive and take back territory in Mercia from the Vikings that was part of the Danelaw. The reason this is important is because Aethelflaed was expanding the burghal system closer to the contested borders of the Danelaw, within Mercia. Another relative of Alfred that utilized the

burghal system to great effect was his son Edward. He employed the exact same strategy of using burhs to defeat the Vikings situated at Stamford in 918 A.D. For instance, “This is thought to be the Northern burh which Edward took over and then commenced the building of the southern burh linked by a bridge. Each of these burhs would have been assigned a burghal territory by the king and his planners. It is not known precisely how quickly the Danes of Stamford submitted to the king of the Anglo-Saxons. Like others before them, however, they are recorded as seeking Edward as their lord.”¹⁸ Once again, the burghal system was used to great effect by significantly reducing Viking mobility and being used not only for defensive purposes but also for offensive purposes which allowed the early English to take back Derby and Stamford within two years. Additionally, the reason this is crucial is because Edward was expanding the burghal system geographically to the borders of the Danelaw, strengthening the network that had been founded by his father. As a result, the previous evidence highlights how integral the burghal system was at diminishing Viking mobility and being utilized as a more effective military development than the navy, especially for seizing Viking territory.

Despite the many setbacks and blows the Vikings inflicted on the early English, they persevered and kept fighting while evolving their strategies to combat the territorial conquerors. The military developments that were initially in place by the early English were inadequate at dealing with Viking armies that were highly mobile and overwintering. In essence, the early English had a poor defensive system in place that took too long to mobilize men, before the burghal system, which made it easier for the Vikings to strike with ease against them. For example, “The former, a standing force, may have been the professional core of the king’s army, but its numbers were too few for it to conduct full-scale campaigns on its own. For that shire levies were needed. These territorial forces, consisting mainly of landowners and their followers,

were raised on an ad hoc basis, a method of recruitment that severely limited their effectiveness against the Vikings. By the time the warriors could be gathered from the various localities, a highly mobile raiding party could have devastated a region and moved on.”¹⁹ However, Alfred the Great had learned from his mistakes and devised a new defensive system called the burghal system that would effectively counter and change the warfare in England. For instance, “Defense-in-depth strategy assumes that an invader will enter the defender’s territory but establishes conditions that make it difficult for the invading force either to take land or profit from raiding. This is exactly how Alfred’s system operated in practice. Well-garrisoned burhs along the primary travel routes presented a major obstacle for Viking invaders. Even if a Viking force avoided the English field army and successfully raided the interior, the booty-laden marauders would face burghal garrisons as they attempted to return to their ships or strongholds.”²⁰ Ultimately, the early English evolved and utilized a new defensive strategy created by Alfred that would go on to be used by future rulers to diminish Viking mobility and was used to help recover formerly conquered land better than the navy could.

In conclusion, the introduction of the burghal system by Alfred the Great was the most important military development of all his developments because it significantly minimized Viking mobility. Alfred generated the burghal system which became a coordinated defensive strategy that involved strategically placing fortifications in areas that were interconnected with other burhs and fyrds. The burhs were strategically placed at rivers, towns, and estuaries to cut off Viking movement and significantly reduce their mobility because nearby towns or burhs could coordinate where the Vikings were at. Although the burhs had extended manpower, they were not considered a large standing army but rather a flexible and mobile safety valve of reserved manpower that could defend the burgh or reinforce fyrds. Despite the navy being able to

counter Viking fleets, it never could reliably prevent Viking landings and reduce Viking mobility like the burghal system did. Overall, the key military development that outperformed the navy at countering and limiting Viking mobility more reliably, was Alfred the Great's burghal system.

¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. James Ingram (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/angl11.asp>

² *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Ingram, p. X.

³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Ingram, p. X.

⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Ingram, p. X.

⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Ingram, p. X.

⁶ Alfred the Great, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, trans. and ed. Frederick Attenborough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 5, <https://www.theanglosaxons.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-Laws-of-Alfred.pdf>.

⁷ Alfred, *Laws*, Attenborough, p. 4.

⁸ Alfred, *Laws*, Attenborough, p. 3.

⁹ Alfred, *Laws*, Attenborough, p. 2.

¹⁰ "Alfred and Guthrum's Peace", trans. Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein, in *Source Problems in English History*, ed. Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1915), prepared for the Internet Medieval Sourcebook by Seth Seyfried (University of Utah), <https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/guthrum.asp>

¹¹ "Alfred and Guthrum's Peace," in *Source Problems in English History*, 1915.

¹² "Alfred and Guthrum's Peace," in *Source Problems in English History*, 1915.

¹³ "Alfred and Guthrum's Peace," in *Source Problems in English History*, 1915.

¹⁴“Charter issued by the Anglo-Saxon King Edgar.” *The National Archives*, The National Archives of the UK.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/edgar-charter/>

¹⁵ Jeremy Haslam. “The Burghal Hidage and the West Saxon Burhs: A Reappraisal.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 45 (2016): 141–182. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026367510008025X>.

¹⁶ Haslam, “Burghal Hidage,” 141-182.

¹⁷ Paul Hill. 2022. *The Fortress Kingdom : The Wars of Aethelflaed & Edward the Elder, 899–927*. Pen & Sword Military. EBSCOhost.

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¹⁸ Hill, *Fortress Kingdom*, 899-927.

¹⁹ Richard Abels. 2025. “Evolving English Strategies during the Viking Wars - *Medievalists.net*.” June 14, 2025.

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²⁰ Abels, *Evolving English Strategies*

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