

David Pratt. *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great.* Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 413 pp. \$117.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-80350-2.



Reviewed by Janet Nelson

Published on H-Albion (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

Making a fine book out of a fine doctoral thesis is less a matter of magical transformation than of skillful, painstaking development. David Pratt's book is a case in point. He began with high-quality materials: a set of five translations associated with King Alfred of Wessex (871-899). In his thesis, he decided to treat them with the respect due to foundational texts in the history of European political ideas, at a stroke filling a many-centuries-wide gap in the syllabus as delivered at Cambridge and elsewhere, and giving the earlier Middle Ages their place in a major field of intellectual endeavor. The book goes further. Pratt has applied insights from Quentin Skinner, long the Cambridge doyen in this field: he has allowed the texts their full "illocutionary force" in political debate, and insisted that they, and their uses, be historically contextualized, and in such a way as to do even more for Anglo-Saxon history than the doyen did for early modern England. The original insights here do not just bring a new perspective but require a comprehensive as well as radical re-envisioning.

Part 1, "The West Saxon Political Order," constitutes nearly a third of this book. Pratt's analysis is ground-breaking not least because it brings so much recent historiography to bear concertedly on the West Saxon kingdom's economic resources, on secular office-holders, and on military resources and accepted obligations. There is nothing merely modish about Pratt's use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital: here it illuminates the parts played in government by the royal household and the court. The brief discussion of gifts and gift-giving is absolutely to the point (pp. 38-43). Into the picture, Pratt firmly integrates ecclesiastical office-holders and resources, and the rituals and documentary forms through which power was "articulated." All these agents and agencies were thoroughly tested by Viking attacks, Pratt argues, and some robust inferences about their efficacy are therefore warranted. If Vikings, on this evidence, can't quite do the trick on their own, Pratt's very positive judgment on Alfred's regime is persuasive because he emphasizes its roots in earlier ninth-century practice, es-

pecially in the reign of Alfred's father Æthelwulf (838-58); insists on its political character, which meant, at its most basic, getting people to do things in an age where the coercive apparatuses of states, large or small, were weak; and constantly weighs West Saxon performance against Continental comparators, whether in terms of resources, rituals, or legal documents. Readers are well advised not to treat part 1 as a mere assemblage of prolegomena, but to allow time and attentiveness for its underlying themes to penetrate: land and land-lordship (pp. 19-21, 38-39, 44-47, 53-54, 62, 66-68, 97-102), aristocrats' perception of themselves as office-holders (pp. 28-33, 35-37, 42, 52-54, 63-70, 76-78, 96), and, last but certainly not least, the importance of language, spoken as well as written, and hence of communication as two-way political action (pp. 7-9, 34-35, 50, 55, 78-85, 87-92). Only once these themes, and their interrelatedness, have been grasped, should you embark on part 2's discursive depths.

An insight of Pratt's own offers a bridge: translations communicate in special ways (p. 8). Aptly, then, this next, major, and final part, "Alfredian Discourse and its Efficacy," opens with an illuminating account of the expansion of the "field of knowledge" through "shifts" to vernacular prose and vernacular literacy, and, especially, "the construction of Alfredian discourse" (pp. 130-178) through the court-inspired production of a corpus of texts translated into the Old English vernacular. Pratt succeeds in establishing the distinctiveness of Alfred's educational program for the West Saxon elite. He carefully contrasts the more ecclesiastically driven and, at the same time, aristocratically generated, Continental equivalents in the Carolingian kingdoms. In the ensuing discussion of the biblical model of Solomon, Pratt, again, in comparing Frankish with West Saxon appropriations, convincingly rates contrasts more significant than similarities: despite some evident Carolingian influences on Alfred's court and kingdom, a key difference is that "Solomonic wisdom was transformed from a [West Frankish notion

of] royal responsibility borne towards the church to a quality shared between all members of the West Saxon order, without special 'ecclesiastical' arrangements" (p. 163). In all this, Pratt presents the role of Alfred himself as absolutely critical. Hence, Malcolm Godden's recent efforts to detach the "Alfredian" translations from the king himself present an even tougher challenge for Pratt. His defense opens tactically with partial retreat: he concedes "the manipulation [in these texts] of multiple voices and *personae*, including those of the original Latin authors." But then comes the agile counter-attack: "Godden neglects [the fact that] translation is distinguished by its special relationship to performance, as a written record of imagined reading ... [an] imaginative 'literate' appeal.... The imagined reading of translation was endowed with an imagined reader, King Alfred, operating in a specific location, at the heart of his household. The conceit of translation offered potential for an active royal presence, beyond any straightforward goals of replication" (p. 169). This line is effective precisely because it re-invokes the court and its *familia/familiaritas* as the setting in which political communication took place in Alfred's kingdom, and it reaffirms the contrast with the West Frankish kingdom of Charles the Bald (p. 177, and cf. pp. 34-43). In a further, brief but cardinal chapter on "Alfredian Technology," Pratt considers the practicalities of the royally sponsored production of books, and, more remarkably, those apparently uniquely Alfredian portable artifacts, the *æstels*, or book-pointers, which accompanied some, at least, of the translations, and projected wisdom "through the personal theatre of reading" (p. 190). Since Pratt wrote this, two more *æstels* have been found, strengthening the case for "reading" these objects as "tools of lordship ... that gave vital substance to the power of royal *cræft*" (p. 192). Even if we lacked a contemporary author's well-informed word for the king's keen interest in the production of small valuable objects and his recruitment of suitably qualified craftsmen, this very material evidence means we

should have to assume these kingly and courtly drivers of a concerted program. Clever scripting has ensured that we as readers are ready for what follows.

The final chapters of the book consist of detailed studies of the translations with which Alfred has been associated: the *Hierdeboc*, or *Shepherd's Book*, the Old English (OE) version of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, which extended the obligations of the "shepherd" to all those with power and hence duties of service; the *Domboc*, Alfred's *Laws*, with their "overall effect [of] a novel royal monopoly over crime and punishment, actively harnessing shared seignorial concern" (p. 238); the first fifty *Psalms*; the *Froferboc*, the OE version of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which *Philosophia*, masculinized in the vernacular *Wisdom*, stands for wise lordship (pp. 286-288); and the *Soliloquia* where vivid evocations of the "king's home" (*tun*) are echoed in other inserted passages about the home of the loyal servant (pp. 326, 333-334). What emerge strikingly are connections linking these texts to each other and to the precious objects that Pratt examines. The reciprocal relationship between lordship and service is discussed in varied ways in *Hierdeboc*, *Domboc*, *Froferboc*, and *Soliloquia*. The notion of spiritual seeing elaborated in the OE *Soliloquia* recurs in yet another small valuable object, the Fuller Brooch (p. 335). "Æstels directed eyes to the written page; royal speech developed similar connections, in the recurring value of written testimony" (p. 336). It takes Pratt's exceptional linguistic skills to tackle these translations from both ends, Latin and OE, and to savor the semantic play between *treowu*, the timbers of a great house, and *treow*, "faith" or "trust" (p. 333). Texts and material objects are cunningly brought together as complementary aspects of Alfred's cultural project. Like it, this book is more than the very considerable sum of its parts.

There are one or two loose ends. When the defection from Alfred of the oath-breaker Ealdor-

man Wulfhere, usually dated to 878, is said to "suggest the scope and complexity of Alfredian treachery," a chronological label sounds misleadingly (and alarmingly) like a personal trait, but, more seriously, neither Wulfherian treachery, nor the question of "how far such cases hinged on the articulation of law in writing" (pp. 239-240), is pursued: yet aristocratic Anglo-Saxon attitudes are too fundamental to Pratt's argument not to be probed at just this point of agonizing tension. Scattered comments on the economy raise without resolving problems of late-ninth-century disruption of the silver supply (pp. 19, 22, 39, 105, 338, 344) or hiccups in "development." The "maximum" view of governmental effectiveness implied by assertions that "West Saxon rule offered an extreme homogeneity of political and tenurial relationships" (p. 62), or that there was "extreme royal monopoly in the settling of contentious disputes" (p. 165), is assumed rather than demonstrated, and the word "extreme" hangs, tantalizingly. If West Saxon expansion meant that the royal court could no longer function so well as the "arena of contact" between the king and his agents (pp. 348-349), alternative arenas need pinpointing. Still, not every loose end can be tied in a single book, nor can every Alfredian topic be pursued into what happened next.

This book, with its focus on political thought, and exceptionally large coverage of political practice and the real-life contexts in which ideas were generated and discussed, is a manifesto for a history uniting thought and action. Pratt's central contention, that Alfred was a considerable political thinker in his own right, as well as being a king with a notably successful style and performance of his own, is presented with maximum conviction. It convinces this reviewer. Anyone arguing to the contrary will have to contend with a new-powered case. Anglo-Saxonists will not be the only scholars to await further David-and-Goliath contests with bated breath. Meanwhile this wide-ranging, deep-delving, shinningly crafted book ought to put its author on the historiographi-

cal map as surely as it puts King Alfred on political ideas syllabi.

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Citation: Janet Nelson. Review of Pratt, David. *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

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