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978-0-521-80350-2 - The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great

David Pratt

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Is there anything left to say about King Alfred? In part, the question is misconstrued: every age has reinterpreted his ninth-century memory. In his own lifetime Alfred's rule was celebrated in vernacular history and Latin biography; selectively revered in the later Anglo-Saxon period, his reign was partly eclipsed by the reputations of Æthelstan and Edgar.¹ Only in the later middle ages was Alfred singled out as a possible founder of 'English' political and administrative unity. The momentous account of Alfred's viking warfare, and successful extension of West Saxon rule, combined with a natural tendency to schematize jurisdictional uniformity. It was on this basis that Alfred was first styled 'the Great': for Matthew Paris his reign had been pivotal in replacing a former 'Hep-tarchy' of seven kingdoms with rule over the whole of England. Only in the sixteenth century did this vision accord with political needs for a formative Alfredian past. In the learned recovery of several Alfredian texts, Elizabethan antiquaries found deeper origins for a united English church. Under Stuart and Hanoverian rule, those origins extended to English 'liberties', conveniently undermining the alternative schema of a 'Norman Yoke'. By the early eighteenth century, such interpretations reached their climax in Alfred's status as acknowledged 'founder of the English constitution'. The 'Whig' view in turn laid the basis for Victorian rituals of popular commemoration, enshrining Alfred as a symbol of ancient freedom and nationhood.²

Modern reassessment has frequently wrestled with the baggage of retrospection. Beyond later myth lies the reality of an abundant collection of contemporary sources, many variously associated with Alfred

¹ S. Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 28 (1999), 225–356; B. Yorke, 'Alfredism: the Use and Abuse of Alfred's Reputation in Later Centuries', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. T. Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 361–80.

² P. Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture, c.1890–1914', *P&P* 186 (February 2005), 147–99.

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and his patronage. These include the principal narrative accounts in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the Latin *Life of King Alfred* by the king's Welsh assistant Asser; and, above all, a corpus of five vernacular texts attributed to Alfred's own authorship. As translations, often of considerable freedom, the latter rendered a distinctive selection of learned Latin sources: the *Regula pastoralis* of Pope Gregory the Great; the *Consolatio philosophiae* of the early sixth-century Roman aristocrat, Boethius; the *Soliloquia* of St Augustine; the first fifty Psalms; and Mosaic law in the introduction to Alfred's law-book. 'We hold that Alfred was a great and glorious king in part because he tells us he was', wrote Michael Wallace-Hadrill in his seminal paper of 1949.³ What explained these interests were Alfred's debts to the legacy of Charlemagne, which he now suspected 'in almost every direction: military, liturgical, educational, literary, artistic'. Faced by viking invasion, Alfred had 'turned for help to the experts on kingship, Charlemagne's descendants': that assistance had shaped his success.

Similar thinking reached its full potential in 1971 in the challenge of R. H. C. Davis, 'Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth'.⁴ Observing that 'almost all the sources [for Alfred's reign] may have originated with either Alfred himself or his immediate entourage', Davis argued that 'we must somehow liberate ourselves from the Alfredian sources to see Alfred as he really was'. Actually then depending on these sources, Davis proceeded to isolate logistical difficulties faced by Alfred in defending his kingdom from attack. What mattered to Alfred had been the exceptional burdens placed on his subjects in the course of his military reforms, especially the building of fortifications. This had relied on the wider nobility, but the king 'could not be sure of their strict obedience . . . unless he could indoctrinate them with loyalty to himself and enthusiasm for his cause'.⁵ This was why in Davis' view the sources were so problematic, as 'propaganda' designed for this immediate purpose. For him the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* had been the prime literary instrument, but by implication, the same applied to all Alfredian image-making.

In the event, Davis had a mixed reception, his case partly circular in equating learned self-record with concerted deception.⁶ In the *Chronicle*, where Davis saw exaggeration of Alfred's difficulties in the 870s, there

³ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Franks and the English in the Ninth Century: Some Common Historical Interests', *History* 35 (1950), 202–18, at 216–17, cf. 215 and 218; amended to 'rightly implies this' in his *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 201–16, at 213.

⁴ *History* 56 (1971), 169–82, at 169 and 177–82. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁶ D. Whitelock, 'The Importance of the Battle of Edington', in her *From Bede to Alfred: Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Literature and History* (London, 1980), no. 13; S. Keynes, 'A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready', *TRHS* 5th series 36 (1986), 195–217, at 196–201.

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were stronger signs that even the severity of his predicament may have been partly obscured.⁷ Yet in other ways his argument laid the basis for all modern enquiry; together with that of Wallace-Hadrill, his piece posed questions central to the understanding of Alfred's kingship. Their respective answers, too, have returned in new guises, the Carolingian dimension weighing as strongly on many aspects of Alfredian activity, while the *Chronicle* has re-emerged as a statement of unity. But what was the role of royal learning? How much can the king's own texts reveal about the character of his rule? As Janet Nelson observes, these translations were no mere exercise but displayed political thinking, consistent utterances on the source, distribution and uses of legitimate power.⁸ As such they are unusual in any early medieval context, and especially so in their attribution to a king; more typical were consciously ecclesiastical acts of rhetoric. Several factors explain the limits that remain in historical engagement.

A first is the striking fragmentation of Alfredian scholarship, necessarily involving many disciplines. The texts have largely remained the province of philology and literary criticism, clarifying the extent of Alfred's œuvre and the nature of Latin source-material.⁹ There is growing awareness of their sophistication as instances of translation; individual texts have been closely studied for signs of philosophical or translatory consistency.¹⁰ In the meantime, political historians have concentrated on the 'real' business of government, represented by charters, coins and law-code.¹¹ In combination, the record has yielded some control to the reading of Alfredian history. The impression is of occasional distortion, more often surpassed by merely selective or wishful disclosure, combined in Asser's case with no shortage of symbolic depiction.¹² It is the latter source

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 198–200.

⁸ J. L. Nelson, 'The Political Ideas of Alfred of Wessex', in her *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others* (Aldershot, 1999), no. 4.

⁹ See esp. work cited below on authorship and the Boethius, pp. 116–17 and 271–2.

¹⁰ Esp. K. Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, Studien zur englischen Philologie n.f. 3 (Tübingen, 1964); M. McC. Gatch, 'King Alfred's Version of Augustine's Soliloquia: Some Suggestions on its Rationale and Unity', in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (Albany, NY, 1986), pp. 17–46; J. C. Frakes, *The Fate of Fortune in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, New York, Copenhagen and Cologne, 1988); M. Godden, *The Translations of Alfred and his Circle, and the Misappropriation of the Past*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture 14 (Cambridge, 2004); N. G. Disenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius* (Albany, NY, 2005).

¹¹ E.g. M. Blackburn and D. N. Dumville (eds.), *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998); D. Hill and A. R. Rumble (eds.), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester, 1996).

¹² S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in *Kings, Currency and Alliances*, ed. Blackburn and Dumville, pp. 1–45, at 12–19 and 40–5; S. Foot, 'Remembering, Forgetting and Inventing: Attitudes to the Past in England at the End of the First Viking Age', *TRHS* 6th series 9 (1999), 185–200; A. Scharer, 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', *EME* 5 (1996), 177–206;

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which has dominated debates over royal presentation; where Alfred's texts are considered directly, historians have struggled to describe the role they might usefully have performed. Failing to appear 'practical', Alfred's law-book was judged 'ideological' by Patrick Wormald; Nelson has hesitantly reinvoked 'propaganda'.¹³ In Richard Abels' biography, Alfred's writings are treated separately, preceding the 'practice of kingship'.¹⁴ Yet it is precisely this relationship which is at issue in the interrogation of Alfred's learned kingship. These texts have much to reveal about royal practice: this much was agreed by all participants in a lively debate over Alfredian 'economic planning'.¹⁵

A second factor is the framework of 'Carolingian reception'. Historians have long been alive to the significance of sustained contact between the West Saxon and Carolingian dynasties, exploring points of similarity between their respective means of rule.¹⁶ The modern trend has been to maximize claims for positive Carolingian influence, taking a lead from the modelling of Asser's *Life* on Einhard's of Charlemagne; in law-making such contact has been plausibly documented.¹⁷ The question is how far Alfredian kingship can be understood as straightforwardly implementing a Frankish programme. Carolingian rule was not monolithic: modern reassessment has highlighted regional variations, most marked between East and West Francia, in methods, shared culture and aristocratic structures.¹⁸ Alfred's career has frequently been illumined by Carolingian

A. Scharer, *Herrschaft und Repräsentation: Studien zur Hofkultur König Alfreds des Großen* (Vienna, 2000); A. Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2004), pp. 3–70.

¹³ P. Wormald, 'Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis: Legislation and Germanic Kingship from Euric to Cnut', in his *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image and Experience* (London, 1999), pp. 1–43, at 11, 13, 15 and 25; J. L. Nelson, 'Power and Authority at the Court of Alfred', in *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in memory of Lynne Grundy*, ed. J. Roberts and J. Nelson (London, 2000), pp. 311–37, at 332–3.

¹⁴ R. P. Abels, *Alfred the Great* (Harlow, 1998), pp. 219–57, cf. 258–84.

¹⁵ R. Balzaretto, J. L. Nelson and J. Maddicott, 'Debate: Trade, Industry and the Wealth of King Alfred', *P&P* 135 (1992), 142–88; responding to Maddicott's 'Trade, Industry and the Wealth of King Alfred', *P&P* 123 (1989), 3–51.

¹⁶ W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, 3 vols., 5th edn (Oxford, 1891–8) I, 223–7, cf. 104–6, 112–16, 165–6 and 197–202; H. M. Cam, *Local Government in Francia and England* (London, 1912).

¹⁷ J. Campbell, 'Observations on English Government from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century', in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp. 155–70, esp. 162; P. Wormald, 'Engla Lond: the Making of an Allegiance', in his *Legal Culture*, pp. 333–55, at 366–7.

¹⁸ T. Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', *TRHS* 5th series 35 (1985), 75–94, at 92–4; T. Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages c. 800–1056* (London, 1991); cf. J. L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (Harlow, 1992); J. L. Nelson, 'Kingship and Empire in the Carolingian World', in *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge, 1994), ed. R. McKitterick, pp. 52–87, at 73–80; E. J. Goldberg, '"More Devoted to the Equipment of Battle than the Splendor of Banquets": Frontier Kingship, Martial Ritual, and Early Knighthood at the Court of Louis the German', *Viator* 30 (1999), 41–78.

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comparison: often revealing are suggestive differences in West Saxon experience.¹⁹ Where Wallace-Hadrill saw in Alfred's writings how far 'the Church had influenced the western concept of kingship', Nelson observes the unusual secularity of royal imagery and thought.²⁰ Every statement must be judged in this context: the detection of 'influence' can be but the first step to an understanding of Alfredian theorizing and rhetoric. Often overlooked is the backdrop of existing West Saxon practices and assumptions.²¹ Their recovery is vital, as the context for royal thought and action; with Alfred and his scholarly helpers, they hold the key to his rule.

Third, and most problematic, are the challenges of understanding Anglo-Saxon political structures and royal power. Behind Alfred's kingship lay a complex nexus of relationships, expectations and obligations creating effective parameters of action. Successfully negotiated, they offered considerable means of logistical and administrative control. The power involved has been well observed by its most enthusiastic proponent, James Campbell, rescuing the order and sophistication of Anglo-Saxon structures.²² Royal resources extended to systems of taxation and military assessment, organized by territorial subdivision; the latter established a strong relationship between centre and locality. Upon these basic instruments, Campbell detects extensive innovation in the later Anglo-Saxon period, perhaps beginning under Alfred; the case has been taken further by Wormald.²³ Though their perspective is at times extreme, the general argument has considerable weight in identifying an important contrast with the fragmentation of rule in tenth-century West Francia.²⁴ The question is how such divergence might be explained: the answers of both relate uncomfortably to the construct of an 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'English state'. The usefulness of the latter term has long been debated by medievalists, with differing implications: as Rees Davies pertinently suggested, its application carries several problematic assumptions.²⁵ Notions of legitimate force have limits for structures

¹⁹ J. L. Nelson, '“A King Across the Sea”: Alfred in Continental Perspective', in her *Ruling Families*, no. 1, pp. 49–52 and 62–7; Nelson, 'Political Ideas', pp. 126–7, 131, 144 and 147; D. Pratt, 'The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great', *ASE* 30 (2001), 39–90, esp. 40–55.

²⁰ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), p. 141, cf. 141–51; Nelson, 'Political Ideas', pp. 147–8.

²¹ Cf. esp. Keynes, 'Mercians', pp. 2–6.

²² Esp. J. Campbell, 'The Late Anglo-Saxon State: a Maximum View', in his *The Anglo-Saxon State* (London, 2000), pp. 1–30.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17; Wormald, 'Engla Lond', pp. 366–7 and 376–7.

²⁴ Further contextualized also by T. Reuter, 'The Making of England and Germany 850–1050: Points of Comparison and Difference', in *Medieval Europeans*, ed. A. P. Smyth (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 53–70.

²⁵ S. Reynolds, 'The Historiography of the Medieval State', in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. M. Bentley (London and New York, 1997), pp. 117–38; R. Davies, 'The Medieval State: the

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actively harnessing lordship and communal self-help.²⁶ Nor can one straightforwardly prioritize the ‘public’: as formalized behaviour its early medieval forms cannot safely be detached from the social and institutional forces that underpinned it.²⁷ Complex political and social relationships are effectively reified, relegating certain regions to ‘statelessness’. Yet it was precisely through such relationships that power was mediated and deployed.

There are real dangers of an almost circular process of conceptual recovery. A cultural dimension is acknowledged, but primarily detected in ‘state-like’ features of subjecthood and ‘national’ identity.²⁸ Wormald’s account assumes the essential replication of Carolingian structures, yet his vision is restricted to the phenomenon of oath-taking, here finding evidence for ‘allegiance’.²⁹ It is only on this basis that he can then claim a decisive role for ‘English’ ethnic identity, as if the only remaining variable.³⁰ In wider elite communication many practices of power are effectively sidestepped, neglecting questions of its distribution against an environmentally and socially determined resource-base. The point is important because Wormald’s position has gained wider currency as an ‘explanation’ of English political and cultural distinctiveness, seen to reside in a unique sense of ‘Englishness’ promoted in antiquity by King Alfred.³¹ This has in turn informed non-specialist exploration of ‘state-building’, influentially exporting the construct to pre- and post-colonial Africa.³² One might only wish for some engagement with the extensive trans-European historiography of ethnic identity, which has done much to problematize the phenomenon as a feature of the post-Roman world, raising questions of its force and evidential recovery.³³

Tyranny of a Concept?’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 16 (2003), 280–300; cf. the very qualified use of M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: the Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 12, note 12, cf. pp. 6, 141–2 and 251–63.

²⁶ Cf. below, pp. 232–41.

²⁷ Innes, *State and Society*, esp. pp. 253–4, 255–9 and 261–2; S. MacLean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 13–17.

²⁸ See esp. J. Campbell, ‘Stubbs and the English State’, in his *Anglo-Saxon State*, pp. 247–68, 255–6 and 261–7, effectively inviting this questioning. Cf. the more restricted critique of S. Foot, ‘The Historiography of the Anglo-Saxon “Nation-State”’, in *Power and the Nation in European History*, ed. L. Scales and O. Zimmer (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 125–42.

²⁹ Wormald, ‘*Engla Lond*’, pp. 362–71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 371–8.

³¹ E.g. H. M. Thomas, *The English and the Normans* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 20–31; P. Wormald, ‘Sir Geoffrey Elton’s *English: a View from the Early Middle Ages*’, *TRHS* 6th series 7 (1997), 318–25.

³² A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 39–43, cf. 148–66.

³³ The literature is vast: see esp. W. Pohl, ‘Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies’, in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (Oxford, 1998), pp. 15–25; G. Halsall, ‘Review Article: Movers and Shakers: the Barbarians and the Fall of

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Both are pressing for widely stratified societies primarily revealed in written sources of elite consumption and record.³⁴ Yet the observation is otiose against the selective teleology of statehood, the more so for accounts so insistently represented as a form of modern self-knowledge.³⁵ Anglo-Saxon history has often been studied for insight into later periods. As these examples demonstrate, it is here essential to abandon any quest for origins, whether of post-Conquest England or indeed our own. The only alternative is to approach Anglo-Saxon political structures on entirely their own terms, informed among other evidence by the ways in which power was understood by contemporaries.

It is towards such an understanding that this book is directed, through the evidence of Alfred's writings. Its overall aim is to reintegrate Alfred's learned kingship as a part of royal practice. This has necessitated a reconsideration and close analysis of the relationship between royal behaviour and the operation of political power. If the 'public' is to be integrated, one may proceed with the assumption that any activity might potentially be relevant to its practice. On this basis, the study seeks to recover the force and status of Alfred's texts in relation to contemporary structures of kingship and political authority. In so doing, it aims to place these textual utterances in the broader context of ninth-century thought and behaviour, with particular reference to the role of Alfred's Frankish and other scholarly helpers. Informed by this positioning both of texts and kingship, the book further seeks to assess the impact of royal writings in relation to other forces acting on contemporaries. In this complex interface one may hope to recover some of the effects of Alfred's learning as a tool of kingship; this in turn informs assessment of its longer-term legacy.

Learned kingship, royal authorship, inventive translation: each poses challenges of interpretation. Central to my approach is the minimum observation of an historical connectedness which must be embraced in any explanation. One might well focus on any one of these phenomena, yet to do so risks the neglect of this fundamental interrelationship. This is especially the case with translation, open to many forms of critical enquiry.³⁶ More pertinent is what irreducibly linked all three: the action

Rome', *EME* 8 (1999), 131–45; P.J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: the Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); J. Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: an Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997).

³⁴ Cf. esp. A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), often neglected here.

³⁵ Wormald, 'Engla Lond', pp. 361–2 and 380–1; Campbell, 'Anglo-Saxon State', pp. 26–7; Campbell, 'Stubbs', pp. 258–62 and 267–8.

³⁶ Cf. J. Beer (ed.), *Translation Theory and Practice in the Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1997); K. Davis, 'The Performance of Translation Theory in King Alfred's National Literary Program', in *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon: Essays in honour of Whitney F. Bolton*, ed. R. Boenig and

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of language. The pairing has been a central object of modern philosophical concern, in the understanding that speech is a form of action, whose meaning is necessarily public in any successful act of communication.³⁷ One effect has been the general shift towards discourse, yet another has been to heighten understanding of the properties of texts, as speech-acts minimally constituted by their particular relationship to discourse. It is this which Quentin Skinner has usefully termed ‘illocutionary force’: a text’s action in, for example, attacking or ridiculing a particular line of argument.³⁸ Both realizations have proved profitable in intellectual history: they immediately assist in prioritizing the recovery of discursive context, while clarifying the status of translation as a very particular type of text.³⁹ Yet it should be observed that there can be no end to this convenient hermeneutic. What did it mean to attack or to ridicule? Without addressing this problem, Skinner has upheld the recoverability of ‘social meaning’ in non-linguistic actions, through illocutionary redescription.⁴⁰ Sooner or later, there can be no escape from more totalizing engagement with the semantics of social behaviour, of the sort so influentially advocated by Clifford Geertz.⁴¹ Skinner’s thinking lends support to a broader project of social and cultural recovery.⁴²

In pursuing its implications for King Alfred, I have drawn on further conceptual resources.⁴³ Speech-acts can be more or less mighty: one must confront their very complex interaction with power. Again, the question is fundamentally social: a text’s action will relate most

K. Davis (Lewisburg, PA, 2000), pp. 149–70; R. Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2002); Discenza, *King’s English*.

³⁷ Q. Skinner, ‘Motives, Intentions and Interpretation’, pp. 97–8, and ‘Interpretation and the Understanding of Speech Acts’, p. 120, both in his *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 2002) I, 90–102 and 103–27.

³⁸ *Ibid.* (‘intentions’ are here detached from ‘the author’, as conventionally understood); J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Introduction: the State of the Art’, in his *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 1–34; K. Thomas, ‘Politics: Looking for Liberty’, *New York Review of Books* (26 May 2005), pp. 47–53.

³⁹ Below, pp. 169–70.

⁴⁰ Q. Skinner, ‘“Social Meaning” and the Explanation of Social Action’, in his *Visions of Politics* I, 128–44.

⁴¹ C. Geertz, ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973), pp. 3–30, esp. 12–13 and 27–30.

⁴² L. Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1989); cf. R. E. Sullivan, ‘Introduction: Factors Shaping Carolingian Studies’, in *‘The Gentle Voices of Teachers’: Aspects of Learning in the Carolingian Age*, ed. R. E. Sullivan (Columbus, OH, 1995), pp. 1–50, with material cited at p. 46, note 24; T. Reuter, ‘Nobles and Others: the Social and Cultural Expression of Power Relations in the Middle Ages’, in *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. J. Duggan (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 85–98.

⁴³ Here I am most grateful to Nicholas Brooks and Janet Nelson for their comments on my original thesis.

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consequentially to the contexts in which it is received. In considering such force, my approach is complemented by the insights of Michel Foucault into the power of language, its capacity to order and reinforce the organizing structures of social groups, through institutionalized speech and modes of thought.⁴⁴ In his attention to the cognitive dimensions of language, Foucault rightly pursued inwards the impossibility of truly 'private' meaning, the relationality of all mental acts to available discourses. One need not accept Foucault's own view of the middle ages, nor the uncritical application of his methodological apparatus.⁴⁵ Yet in probing the social basis of intellectual interaction he raised very pertinent historical questions about the political uses of knowledge, its relationship to wider social organization and collective psychology.⁴⁶ Foucault's notion of discourse is here necessary to explore the potential power of privileged language. Yet speech itself cannot be isolated from wider aspects of social practice. Here I have found useful Pierre Bourdieu's attention to the communicational basis of social distinction, its necessary reliance on shared practices and norms.⁴⁷ Primarily concerned with modern capitalist societies, Bourdieu himself has sought to isolate the 'cultural' as a field of inverted economic priorities; one should not be surprised to find different structures in the early middle ages.⁴⁸ In treating 'culture' more broadly, as the shared structures of communication and behaviour, my approach seeks to integrate the economic and political into questions of production and control.

To these general methods I have added an institutional focus, in the social and spatial operation of King Alfred's court.⁴⁹ Early medieval

⁴⁴ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970); G. Danaher, T. Schirato and J. Webb, *Understanding Foucault* (St Leonards, 2000); L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (ed.), *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst, MA, 1998).

⁴⁵ Cf. esp. J. Weeks, 'Foucault for Historians', *History Workshop Journal* 14 (1982), 106–19; M. Philp, 'Michel Foucault', in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Q. Skinner (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 67–81.

⁴⁶ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (London, 1991), pp. 135–292; M. Foucault, 'The Right of Death and Power over Life', and 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (Harmondsworth, 1991), pp. 258–72 and 273–89.

⁴⁷ P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. R. Johnson (Cambridge, 1993); W. Pohl, with H. Reimitz (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction: the Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800* (Leiden, 1998); C. Pössel, 'Symbolic Communication and the Negotiation of Power at Carolingian Regnal Assemblies, 814–840' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2003), pp. 33–49 (publication forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Cf. the different, though in part complementary, use of Bourdieu by N. G. Discenza, 'Symbolic Capital and the Ruler in the Translation Program of Alfred the Great', *Exemplaria* 23 (2001), 433–67; Discenza, *King's English*.

⁴⁹ Cf. D. Pratt, 'Persuasion and Invention at the Court of King Alfred the Great', in *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: the Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference*, ed. C. Cubitt (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 189–221.

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courts and court culture have become an increasing focus for scholarly enquiry: here one may learn much from the overarching insights of Norbert Elias, also on the rise in this literature.⁵⁰ Elias's own writings sought ultimately to explain modernity, locating its origins in a transformation of behaviour cultivated 'from above' by medieval and early modern courts.⁵¹ As such, he was also concerned with 'state-building', yet in a way which resolved 'state-like' functions into their constituent social processes. His theory was far more than a modelling of court-based cultural patronage; it extended critically to the power at stake in centralized interaction.⁵² This was fundamentally material, in the control and distribution of local political authority, administering nascent monopolies over violence and taxation.⁵³ In the right conditions, such power had a tendency to accumulate over a larger territory, monopolizing the functions of neighbouring agencies.⁵⁴ One precondition was economic, in the binding effects of towns and use of money; another was a net shortage of redistributable land.⁵⁵ The greater the monopoly, the greater the interdependence of administering interests; the effects were strongest when participating groups were finely balanced, heightening dependence on the coordinating power.⁵⁶ These delicate interests explained the centrality of court behaviour, its tendency to develop elaborate forms of interaction centred on the ruler.⁵⁷ As the latter held advantages of coordinating agency, socialized contact became ever more potent, controlling entirely rational competition among nobles for status and power. In behavioural rules were common features of self-control and symbolic gesture, potentially transmissible to

⁵⁰ C. S. Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (Philadelphia, PA, 1985), cf. E. J. Goldberg, 'Creating a Medieval Kingdom: Carolingian Kingship, Court Culture, and Aristocratic Society under Louis of East Francia (840–76)' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 1998), now published in revised form as *Struggle for Empire: Kingship and Conflict under Louis the German, 817–76* (Ithaca, NY, 2006); S. Airlie, 'The Palace of Memory: the Carolingian Court as Political Centre', in *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe*, ed. S. R. Jones, R. Marks and A. J. Minnis (York, 2000), pp. 1–20; M. de Jong and F. Theuvs (eds.), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001); Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture*.

⁵¹ N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. E. Jephcott, rev. edn (Oxford, 1994 [1939]); N. Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1983 [1969]); cf. P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, CT, 1992).

⁵² My assessment is more positive than that of C. Cubitt, 'Introduction', and M. Innes, "'A Place of Discipline'": Carolingian Courts and Aristocratic Youth', p. 76, both in *Court Culture*, ed. Cubitt, pp. 1–15 and 59–76; cf. J. L. Nelson, 'Was Charlemagne's Court a Courtly Society?', pp. 39–57 in the same volume.

⁵³ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, pp. 257–362; S. Mennell, *Norbert Elias: an Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1992), pp. 61–93.

⁵⁴ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, pp. 268–77. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 206–14 and 220–30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 312–44, esp. 317–23. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 340–4; Elias, *Court Society*, pp. 78–145.