Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: ASSEMBLING CONSENT IN LATE NINTH- AND TENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

ABSENT ASSEMBLIES: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ANGLO–SAXON 'NATIONAL ASSEMBLY'

Felix Liebermann at the start of his seminal study of the 'national assembly' in pre-Conquest England characterized it as an 'institution [that] can never cease to deserve the attention of the historian of European or American civilisation, because it is one of the lineal ancestors of the British Parliament, to which the legislative assemblies of all the neighbours reverently look up as to their model and their teacher'.[1] Writing these words in 1913, Liebermann's perspective was understandable: his work stood at the end of a long line of distinguished studies dedicated to various aspects of political assemblies and their constitutional role.[2] It would, therefore, presumably have surprised him to know that his work would be almost the last serious foray into the field until the present day. The reasons why the subject has received so little attention since Liebermann's time are complex and cannot be fully examined here, but it is probably no accident that his work was published just before the outbreak of World War I, during the swan song of whig historiography. The so-called 'whig interpretation of history' (as it came to be known) was characterized by a keen interest in the development of the English constitution. The attempt, best exemplified by Bishop Stubbs' epoch-making *Constitutional History*, was to seek the origins of modern institutions in England's distant past. This encouraged the study of assemblies, which

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[1] F. Liebermann, *The National Assembly in the Anglo-Saxon Period* (Halle, 1913), p. 1.

[2] Amongst many others, see J. M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England*, 2 vols. (London, 1849), II, 182–240; E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England: Its Causes and its Results*, vol. I, *The Preliminary History to the Election of Eadward the Confessor*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1877), pp. 100–17 and 604–9; F. Purlitz, *König und Witenagemot bei den Angelsachsen* (Bremen, 1892); W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development*, vol. I, 6th edn (Oxford, 1897), pp. 133–57; and H. M. Chadwick, *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge, 1905), pp. 362–6.

were felt to represent the 'lineal ancestors' (to borrow Liebermann's own phrase) of later English parliamentarian traditions.[3]

The dangers and pitfalls of such an approach will be clear to modern readers and the quotation from Liebermann with which we began neatly illustrates its essentially teleological bent: medieval assemblies, so Liebermann seems to suggest, are chiefly important for what they can tell us about the modern parliament. Of course, Liebermann himself was not unaware of this danger and his own study was more cautious in its conclusions – at least where continuity of parliamentarian tradition is concerned – than had been many of those of his predecessors. Indeed, already by the late nineteenth century the tide had slowly begun to turn against the traditional whig paradigm, with more sceptical historians, led by the likes of Frederic William Maitland, starting to challenge elements of Stubbsian orthodoxy. The experiences of the Great War acted as a catalyst, contributing to existing doubts regarding constitutional history, at least as traditionally pursued. This move away from the assumptions of a previous era found its most enduring expression some thirteen years after the end of the war with the publication of Herbert Butterfield's hugely influential *Whig Interpretation of History*, in which Butterfield famously criticized what he saw as the cardinal dangers of whigishness: teleology and circularity (historical developments being valued only in terms of their contribution to the present); the tendency to abbreviate, eliding the unique and telling features of past societies; and the predisposition towards moral value judgements (history being a matter of 'Good Things' and 'Bad Things', in the immortal words of Seller and Yeatman).[4] Butterfield and his increasingly professionalized counterparts sought to replace the whig interpretation with what is termed modernism by Michael Bentley. In the place of the meta-narratives of the nineteenth century, historians began to focus more exclusively on individual periods, treating them as distinct entities, consciously eschewing the search for origins which had previously prevailed. Part and parcel of this process was a renewed focus on source criticism: the attempt was to build scientific and irrefutable interpretations on the basis of hard 'facts'

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[3] Historiographical orientation is offered by E. G. Stanley, *Die angelsächsische Rechtspflege und wie man sie später aufgefaßt hat* (Munich, 1999), pp. 52–66. On the obsession of nineteenth-century historians with origins, see P. J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), pp. 15–40; and C. Brühl, *Deutschland – Frankreich. Die Geburt zweier Völker*, 2nd edn (Cologne, 1995), pp. 7–31.

[4] H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931). See further M. Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 95–118; and cf. W. C. Seller and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (London, 1930).

and 'evidence'. Gone were the days of the gentleman-scholar; henceforth history would be a professional endeavour.[5]

It was in this atmosphere of increasing professionalization that new generations of Anglo-Saxon scholars came to the fore, led by Sir Frank Stenton and Dorothy Whitelock amongst others. In keeping with contemporary trends, they sought to approach Anglo-Saxon history as an independent field: the aim was not so much to trace the archaic roots of modern institutions, as to judge early medieval England by its own standards. Whilst the political importance of assemblies in the ruling of the realm was never really in doubt, they no longer stood at the heart of research interests: more pressing was the need to provide a basic framework for Anglo-Saxon history; to study the place names, to catalogue the coins and to edit the wills and charters.[6] It was in this new atmosphere that Stenton made a particularly fateful decision: in his *Anglo-Saxon England* (first published 1943), which was to set the tone for future generations of Anglo-Saxon historians, Stenton abandoned the Old English terms *witan* and *witenagemot* – meaning 'counsellors' (lit. 'wise men') and 'meeting/assembly of counsellors' respectively – in speaking of pre-Conquest political assemblies, choosing instead to write simply of the 'King's Council'.[7] Though this might seem but a minor semantic difference, it reveals a sea change in the way in which assemblies were conceived: whereas the *witan* had once been felt to constitute an at least nominally representative body (indeed at times a veritable proto-parliament), now it had become little more than a royal institution, shorn of representative functions. When the origins of parliament were sought at all by historians in this period – and it should be noted that scholarly interest in the parliament *per se* remained lively – it was in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. Thus it is telling that the *History of Parliament* project, energetically supported by Lewis Namier (a modernist of similar stature to Butterfield), was set to begin with the reign of Edward I.[8] No less a scholar than Stenton himself introduced this project in a special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1956,

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[5] For insightful discussion, see M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 119–218, esp. 119–43.

[6] See further J. C. Holt, 'Stenton, Sir Frank Merry (1880–1967)', in *ODNB* LII, 405–7; and S. Keynes, 'Whitelock, Dorothy (1901–1982)', in *ODNB* LVIII, 692–4.

[7] See H. R. Loyn, 'From witenagemot to concilium: The Antecedents of the House of Lords, 1042–1215', in *The House of Lords: A Thousand Years of British Tradition* (London, 1994), pp. 21–7, at 21; and cf. D. N. Dumville, 'The Medieval Foundations of England?' (2006), repr. in and cited from his *Anglo-Saxon Essays, 2001–7* (Aberdeen, 2007), pp. 266–310, at 272, n. 27.

[8] On the project, see Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past*, pp. 44, 143 and 159–60.

Kingship and Consent in Anglo-Saxon England

in an article which is notable for avoiding any mention of the *witan* or other precursors to the later medieval parliamentarian tradition.[9]

   This modernist backlash against constitutional readings of assemblies has cast a long shadow and continues in many ways to influence the way in which the subject is treated. Whereas meetings of the *witan* had once been a subject of lively debate amongst England's greatest historical minds, they now tend to be relegated to brief textbook overviews or even briefer encyclopaedia entries.[10] It is striking, moreover, that what attention the subject has received since Liebermann's day has come almost exclusively from historians outside the English historiographical tradition. Thus Fritz Kern, both in the original text and in the later revision of his *Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht* (published 1914 and 1954), gave a prominent place to Anglo-Saxon assemblies alongside their continental counterparts, arguing that these institutions provided an essential check on royal power in the early Middle Ages.[11] Following Kern's lead, Tryggvi Oleson, a Canadian of Scandinavian descent, addressed the subject in his monograph of 1955 – based on his University of Toronto Ph.D. thesis of five years earlier – on *The Witenagemot in the Reign of Edward the Confessor*.[12] Yet this latter work was ill-received within the English historical establishment, one suspects not only because of Oleson's problematic handling of the sources (particularly charters), but also because it so clearly cut against the grain of contemporary historiography – had he written some forty years later (or, for that matter, earlier), the reception might well have been much warmer.[13] Indeed, even as late as 1989 Pauline Stafford seems to have felt no need to include a dedicated discussion of political assemblies in her introductory textbook on later Anglo-Saxon history, *Unification and Conquest*, and it is notable that no entries are included in the index under the

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[9] F. M. Stenton, 'History of Parliament', *Times Literary Supplement* 2810 (6 January 1956), p. xii.

[10] See e.g. F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), pp. 349–53 and 550–4; D. J.V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age, c. 400–1042* (London, 1973), pp. 252–5; H. R. Loyn, *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England, 500–1087* (London, 1984), pp. 100–6; A. Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England, c. 500–1066* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 92–3; J. Pope, 'Witenagemot', in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York, 1989), XII, 665–6; B. Yorke, 'Council, King's', in *BEASE*, pp. 124–5; M. Lapidge, 'Witenagemot', in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. A.Vauchez, R. Barrie and M. Lapidge, 2 vols. (Chicago, 2000), I, 1556; and M. Frassetto, 'Witenagemot', in his *Encyclopedia of Barbarian Europe: Society in Transformation* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2003), p. 369.

[11] F. Kern, *Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht im früheren Mittelalter. Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Monarchie*, 2nd edn, ed. R. Buchner (Münster, 1954).

[12] T. Oleson, *The Witenagemot in the Reign of Edward the Confessor: A Study in the Constitutional History of Eleventh-Century England* (Toronto, 1955).

[13] See the reviews by Dorothy Whitelock in *EHR* 71 (1956), 640–2; and Frank Barlow in *JEH* 7 (1956), 86–7; and cf. the more positive review by Norma Adams in *Speculum* 32 (1957), 848–9.

Introduction

headings 'assembly(–ies)', 'council', 'counsellor(s)', 'councillor(s)', '*witan*' or '*witenagemot*'.[14]

It is, in fact, only relatively recently that English historians have begun to return to the subject of assembly politics in any detail. Here, as in many other respects, the path has been blazed in part by Simon Keynes and Patrick Wormald, whose work on charters and law-codes since the 1970s has served to bring assemblies slowly back into the picture. Though neither of these historians has produced a comprehensive study of the *witan* itself and the significance of assemblies thus often remains more implicit than explicit in their work, they have both helped lay the groundwork for a return of interest in the subject by throwing substantial light on some of the most important sources for these events.[15] The 1990s and early 2000s saw important further steps in this direction, often building on the work of Wormald and Keynes. Catherine Cubitt's work on church councils in the early Anglo-Saxon period is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Though her focus was on the ecclesiastical side of assembly politics, the Mercian kings of the eighth and ninth centuries regularly held court alongside councils, and Cubitt's monograph therefore illuminates not only the role of church councils in ecclesiastical affairs, but also the centrality of such assemblies for the operation of Mercian kingship.[16] More explicit treatment of such gatherings was to be found in two articles by Janet L. Nelson published in the early 2000s, which highlighted the key role of assemblies and public ritual in ninth-century Wessex.[17] Finally, in 2003 Charles Insley broke the informal silence on the subject of the *witan* in an article on assemblies and charters in later Anglo-Saxon England, which represents the first dedicated discussion since Oleson's book almost half a century before. Although relatively brief, this article is an important indication of recent trends, illustrating how scholars have begun to return to the subject of assembly politics.[18] This development is

[14] P. Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (New York, 1989).

[15] Their most fundamental contributions are S. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready', 978–1016: A Study in Their Use as Historical Evidence*, CSMLT 3rd ser. 13 (Cambridge, 1980); and P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. I, *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), and *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image and Experience* (London, 1999).

[16] C. Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c. 650–c. 850* (London, 1995). See also S. Keynes, *The Councils of Clofesho*, Brixworth Lecture 1993 (= Vaughan Paper 38) (Leicester, 1994).

[17] J. L. Nelson, 'Power and Authority at the Court of Alfred', in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy*, ed. J. Roberts and J. L. Nelson (London, 2000), pp. 311–37, esp. 326–7, and 'England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: III, Rights and Rituals', *TRHS* 6th ser. 14 (2004), 1–24.

[18] C. Insley, 'Assemblies and Charters in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages*, ed. P. S. Barnwell and M. Mostert (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 47–59.

further exemplified by J. R. Maddicott's Ford Lectures of 2004 (published 2010), in which Maddicott provocatively began his discussion of the origins of English parliament in Æthelstan's reign, making him the first serious historian to do so since Liebermann.[19]

Thus, while it would be wrong to suggest that scholarship has simply come full circle, there clearly is an increasing willingness to engage with the types of question about assemblies and their socio-political significance once asked by constitutional historians. In fact, the attempt of scholars such as Insley and Maddicott, though rarely couched in such terms, seems to be to combine aspects of the old whig interpretation with elements of modernism: to use modernist source-critical rigour to engage with the more traditional questions of constitutional history. With ongoing projects to produce new editions of the surviving Anglo-Saxon charters and law-codes promising further contributions to our understanding of these sources in the near future, it seems a particularly fruitful moment to do so.

ASSEMBLY POLITICS AND THE FORMATION OF THE 'KINGDOM OF THE ENGLISH', 871–978

The present study, therefore, seeks to examine assembly politics in the years 871–978, building on the work of Insley, Maddicott and others. The choice of start and finish dates has been dictated by both historical and pragmatic considerations. A full study of royal assemblies or meetings of the *witan* (as they will be termed here) from the earliest period up to 1066, as undertaken by Liebermann, would not only demand far more time and space than is available, but would also risk overly facile generalization (the abbreviation warned against so vehemently by Butterfield). The years of the late ninth and tenth centuries have been chosen for two reasons. Firstly, they offer particularly fertile ground for the study of assemblies, since the sources for these events are unusually detailed in these years (at least by the standards of Anglo-Saxon history): law-codes and diplomas survive in large numbers, while at the beginning and end of the period the Latin and vernacular works associated with the 'Alfredian Renaissance' and the Benedictine reform movement shed much further light on politics and society. And secondly, this period saw extremely important developments within the social and political make-up of England itself: it was in these years that a unified kingdom

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[19] J. R. Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924–1327* (Oxford, 2010).

Introduction

was first formed and much interest therefore attaches to the role of
assemblies in this process.[20]

   The decision to start with Alfred the Great seems only natural in this
context, since the main impetus behind many of these processes of expan-
sion and unification can be traced back to his court. Indeed, though Alfred
was building on foundations laid by his forebears, his reign in a number
of respects marks a point of transition. Hence, for all their successes,
Alfred's predecessors remained first and foremost 'West Saxon' rulers.
His grandfather, Ecgberht (802–39), and his father, Æthelwulf (839–58),
extended West Saxon dominance from its original base around Wiltshire
and Hampshire to encompass much of England south of the Thames, but
their kingdom remained in essence an enlarged Wessex. This is reflected
in their titulature: both are styled 'king of the West Saxons' (*occidentalium
Saxonum rex*) in charters.[21] The brief reigns of Alfred's elder brothers,
Æthelbald (858–60), Æthelberht (860–5) and Æthelred I (865–71), did
little to change this and it was only under Alfred himself (871–99), when
the activities of the viking 'Great Army' (*micel here*) created opportuni-
ties for expansion, that new developments could be seen. The decisive
moment seems to have come relatively soon after Alfred's stunning vic-
tory over the Scandinavian force led by Guthrum at Edington in 878 and
at some point between 879 and 883 he incorporated the previously inde-
pendent kingdom of Mercia into his realm, installing a certain Æthelred
as ealdorman to rule the region on his behalf. Alfred's predecessors had
already forged important ties with Mercia, but it was now in the face of
the sustained Scandinavian threat that these began to bear fruit.[22] This
sudden growth changed the complexion of the kingdom fundamentally,
a fact which finds expression in Alfred's titulature: whereas his predeces-
sors had been termed kings of the West Saxons, Alfred is henceforth
styled 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' or 'king of the Angles and Saxons' (*rex
Angulsaxonum* or *rex Anglorum et Saxonum*), titles which bear witness to
the union of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex with its Anglian neighbour
to the north in Mercia.[23] That contemporaries appreciated this change

[20] For discussion, see most recently G. Molyneaux, 'The Formation of the English Kingdom, *c.* 871–*c.*
   1016' (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2010).
[21] For example, S 277, 300, 302. However, in Kentish documents Æthelwulf is sometimes styled ruler
   of the men of Kent; see e.g. S 296–7.
[22] See esp. S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and
   Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century*, ed. M. A. S. Blackburn and D. N. Dumville
   (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–45.
[23] The significance of this change was first noted by D. Whitelock, 'Some Charters in the Name
   of King Alfred', in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W.
   Jones*, ed. M. H. King and W. H. Stevens (Collegeville, MN, 1979), I, 77–98, at 89. See further now
   Keynes, 'Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 34–9.

is suggested by Asser's careful use of titles in his *Vita Ælfredi regis*: whilst he invariably terms Alfred's predecessors kings of the West Saxons, Asser refers to Alfred throughout as *rex Angulsaxonum*.[24] This new 'Anglo-Saxon' identity seems to have been consciously fostered at court, and works such as the 'Common Stock' of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – which certainly circulated (if it was not also produced) at court – give expression to this, illustrating the common heritage of the English-speaking peoples in their common language.[25]

All of this makes Alfred's reign a natural starting point for our investigation, since it is from this point onwards that a more consciously pan-English sense of identity seems to have been fostered and that the kingdom began to expand into something approximating what we would now term 'England'. Indeed, Alfred's son, Edward the Elder (899–924), inherited the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons' from his father and expanded it substantially east of Watling Street, integrating both East Anglia and the so-called 'Five Boroughs' of the East Midlands into it. Moreover, he took over direct control of Mercia itself in 920, following the death of Æthelflæd, Ealdorman Æthelred's widow, who had ruled the region on Edward's behalf after her husband's death. Nevertheless, for all his successes Edward and his contemporaries seem to have conceived of his realm effectively as an expanded version of his father's and thus he continued to be styled 'king of the Anglo-Saxons'.[26] More fundamental change was first to come under Edward's son, Æthelstan (924–39). Though he too initially inherited the 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', and is accordingly styled *rex Angulsaxonum* in two of his earliest royal charters, after the conquest of Northumbria and submission of the neighbouring British rulers in 927 Æthelstan consistently bears more ambitious titles on his charters and coins, generally variations on either 'king of the English' (*rex Anglorum*) or 'king of all Britain' (*rex totius Britanniae*). Thus, while Alfred's and Edward's kingdoms were conceived of in terms of a West Saxon–Mercian alliance, this now began to give way to a more unified vision of the realm.[27] Still, success was not to be taken

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[24] Asser, *VÆ*, cc. 1, 7, 17 and 21 (ed. Stevenson, pp. 1–2, 7, 17 and 18–19); S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of Alfred and other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 38 and 50.

[25] Keynes, 'Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 34–9; A. Scharer, 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', *EME* 5 (1996), 177–206, at pp. 178–85; S. Foot, 'The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS* 6th ser. 6 (1996), 25–49, esp. pp. 35–6.

[26] S. Keynes, 'Edward, King of the Anglo-Saxons', in *Edward the Elder, 899–924*, ed. N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (London, 2001), pp. 40–66; S. Miller, 'Edward [Edward the Elder] (870s?–924)', in *ODNB* XVII, 779–83.

[27] On Æthelstan's reign, see now S. Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven, CT, 2011).

Introduction

for granted, and Æthelstan had to face a substantial threat late in his reign
when an allied force of Scandinavians, Scots and Strathclyde Britons
threatened the north of the nascent 'kingdom of the English', leading
to the famous battle of *Brunanburh* (937). Although Æthelstan won the
day, following his death two years later a similar alliance was formed, this
time to much greater effect. Indeed, Olaf Guthfrithson, who seems to
have been the driving force behind developments, not only managed to
establish himself in York at this point, but also proceeded to overrun the
Five Boroughs, leaving Æthelstan's half-brother and successor, Edmund
(939–46), with no choice but to sue for peace.[28] These events serve to
emphasize just how fragile Æthelstan's gains were. Nevertheless, Edmund
continued to style himself 'king of the English' (*rex Anglorum*), and there
can be no doubt that his ambition always was to regain these lost lands,
a matter which he was able to accomplish following Olaf's death in 942.
With hindsight this represents something of a turning point: the Five
Boroughs were thereby successfully integrated into the English realm
and henceforth it was only the control of York which was contested.
However, here too success was anything but inevitable, and Edmund's
brother and successor, Eadred (946–55), whose latter years were plagued
by illness, had to fight hard to maintain his claims to the region, which
was only brought under English control definitively in 954.[29]

Thereafter what had been primarily a story of conquest became one
of consolidation. Administrative developments can be discerned as early
as Alfred's and Æthelstan's reigns, and these seem to have become pro-
gressively more important as we move into the reigns of Eadwig (955–9),
Edgar (957/9–75) and Edward the Martyr (975–8). Though Eadwig's brief
reign, in which the kingdom was famously divided between the king and
his younger brother Edgar, has often been seen as a pause or even retreat
in an otherwise seamless march towards unification, modern scholarship
has done much to revise this picture.[30] Indeed, much of the negative
view of Eadwig's reign is a product of sources which were written long
after his death, within the circles of reformed monasticism. A less nega-
tive picture emerges, however, if we restrict ourselves to strictly contem-
porary evidence. In fact, the two most extraordinary events of Eadwig's

[28] See D. N. Dumville, 'Brittany and "Armes Prydein Vawr"' (1983), repr. in and cited from his *Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1993), no. XVI, pp. 147–51; and C. Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 107–36.

[29] A. Williams, 'Eadred (*d.* 955)', in *ODNB* XVII, 531–4; M. Costambeys, 'Erik Bloodaxe (*d.* 954)', in *ODNB* XVIII, 497–9; C. Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed? The Mystery of the Last Scandinavian King of York', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2003), 51–77.

[30] See esp. N. Banton, 'Ealdormen and Earls in England from the Reign of Alfred to the Reign of Æthelred II' (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1981), pp. 132–8; and S. Keynes 'Eadwig (*c.* 940–959)', in *ODNB* XVII, 539–42.

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reign – the extremely large number of diplomas issued in 956 and the division of the kingdom in 957 – need not be interpreted as signs of weakness or incompetence: the former speaks of a great intensity of rule and does not seem to have had any long-term impact on the holdings of the fisc; meanwhile the latter may have represented a mutually beneficial arrangement, designed to ensure that Edgar, who was clearly next in line to the throne, received sufficient experience of rule before his own succession.[31] In any case, Edgar's reign thereafter is noteworthy for its stability, as both monastic reform and administrative developments served to provide a more secure basis for a unified kingdom.[32] After Edward the Martyr's brief reign, about which all too little is known, the accession of Æthelred II ('the Unready') is a testament to what had been achieved over the last century: whereas in 871 Alfred's rule extended only over the regions south of the Thames (and he was hard-pressed there), by 978 a kingdom encompassing most of modern-day England had emerged and was stable enough to support the accession of a boy-king and a period of 'regency' rule on his behalf.[33]

It therefore makes sense to end our study at this point. Indeed, not only have the assemblies of Æthelred's reign been treated elsewhere,[34] but one has the impression that the English polity began to change in important manners after 978. As will be argued later, the return of the viking threat in these years seems to have forced the kingdom into overdrive, and, although we should not dismiss the tribute-raising and purges of Æthelred's reign as straightforward indications of royal incompetence, there is reason to doubt that they represent 'business as usual' for later Anglo-Saxon politics. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to trace the role of assemblies in English politics over the years between 871 and 978. It does not attempt to examine every known assembly, but rather to analyse in general terms how these gatherings functioned. It has long been suggested that assemblies may have contributed in important ways to a growing sense of unity in the ninth and tenth centuries,

[31] It should be noted that fraternal succession was favoured whenever possible in this period: P. Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex 800–1066' (1981), repr. in and cited from her *Gender, Family and the Legitimation of Power: England from the Ninth to the Early Twelfth Century* (Aldershot, 2006), no. IX.

[32] Molyneaux, 'Formation of the English Kingdom'; N. Banton, 'Monastic Reform and the Unification of Tenth-Century England', *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982), 71–86; S. Keynes, 'Edgar, *rex admirabilis*', in *Edgar, King of the English 959–975: New Interpretations*, ed. D. Scragg (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 1–58.

[33] That a kingdom's ability to survive a royal minority is a sign of stability is argued by T. Offergeld, *Reges pueri. Das Königtum Minderjähriger im frühen Mittelalter*, MGH: Schriften 50 (Hanover, 2001).

[34] Keynes, *Diplomas*, pp. 126–34.