



Æthelstan: The First King of England

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The powerful and innovative King Æthelstan reigned only briefly (924-939), yet his achievements during those eventful fifteen years changed the course of English history. He won spectacular military victories (most notably at Brunanburh), forged unprecedented political connections across Europe, and succeeded in creating the first unified kingdom of the English. To claim for him the title of "first English monarch" is no exaggeration.

In this nuanced portrait of Æthelstan, Sarah Foot offers the first full account of the king ever written. She traces his life through the various spheres in which he lived and worked, beginning with the intimate context of his family, then extending outward to his unusual multiethnic royal court, the Church and his kingdom, the wars he conducted, and finally his death and legacy. Foot describes a sophisticated man who was not only a great military leader but also a worthy king. He governed brilliantly, developed creative ways to project his image as a ruler, and devised strategic marriage treaties and gift exchanges to cement alliances with the leading royal and ducal houses of Europe. Æthelstan's legacy, seen in the new light of this masterful biography, is inextricably connected to the very forging of England and early English identity.

Æthelstan: The First King of England Details

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From Reader Review *Æthelstan: The First King of England* for online ebook

Jason Wilson says

As blade runner has it , the light that burns shortest burns brightest and you have burned so very very brightly good account of a short but important reign .

Sarah says

Sarah Foot's *Æthelstan* is one of the few biographies written about the life of the West Saxon king, Aethelstan. The book covers every aspect of his life: Lineage, upbringing, travels, royal expenses, his Court, his private life and religious devotion (Aethelstan never married), and his success as a king who would rule all of England.

However, the mistake I made in reading this book, was that I chose to read it immediately following Neil Oliver's brilliant *A History of Ancient Britain*. I found myself constantly comparing how different the two were in the way they'd been written. Foot's biography, whilst containing a hefty amount of information, just isn't presented in a particularly interesting way. It feels hefty, daunting and, at times, completely overwhelming. It isn't free-flowing and it feels very academic.

I would not recommend this to anyone but the most ardent history-nerd who harbours a special interest in this particular era.

Christina says

This book is incredibly well researched, and everything Sarah Foot says is thoroughly proven and explained. When she is unsure about something, which is quite common when you are researching anything from the 10th century, she gives the background about her assumptions and ideas from both contemporary and medieval historians. I loved how she never seemed to exaggerate, and she was okay with admitting we don't have the answers to a lot of things surrounding Æthelstan's life.

I also appreciated how she set up the chapters. Instead of going through Æthelstan's life chronologically, she goes through his life based on topic, including family life, religion, battle, etc. My favourite section was the one around saint cults and relic collecting; I had no idea how much a saint's decaying arm was actually worth. (Gross. Weird. Oh, and cool.) I also particularly loved it when she cleverly threw shade at other historians, (like John Maddicott, whom I love, but put me to sleep with his obsession of the symbolism of the crown in *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924-1327*.) Thanks for not doing that to me, Sarah Foot.

The reason I did not give this 5/5 is because her tone was rather inconsistent. Some of her chapters were dryer than most dissertations I have read, while other chapters were written in a very conversational style.

4triplezed says

This is an exceptional book. Very academic in tone so for those readers that have a deep interest in pre Conquest England. Not recommended to those that are after popular history.

The author has delved into every source available to give a thorough coverage of Æthelstan and his reign. No stone has been left unturned to cover areas from his early life, an area very bereft of information through to his modern legacy.

There are 8 chapters and an epilogue covering debates as to Æthelstan place in English history, coverage of his family, his role in the church, his kingdom and wars. The epilogue made wonderful reading on his initial popular memory to the disappearance of such as time went by.

On finishing this book I looked at 2 popular history's of England that I have at hand, Seaman's A New History of England from 1981 and the recent Foundation by Ackroyd. Seaman makes reference to Æthelstan on page 22 calling him "one of the most successful Kings" based on his overlordship of other British kings via the Battle of Brunanburh. This is covered by all of a scant paragraph. Æthelstan receives a short mention in relation to laws on page 38. Ackroyd does better with coverage from page 69 to 72. Ackroyd says that Æthelstan was "revered for centuries" and covers the meaning of his name, Noble Stone, his lineage through to the precedents he set as to lordship and landownership. Considering the scope of Foundation Ackroyd seemingly does a fine job considering the limitations of his subject.

With that I came away considering that Sarah Foot has produced one of the most important biographies from Anglo Saxon England. My 2 popular histories are fairly scant on the subject but do both make mention of Æthelstan's importance to English history. This is why this book by Sarah Foot is of such importance. Her research of the source's is superb, they lack any form hyperbole with interpretation, she makes it abundantly clear as to their limitations and with that brings us up to date with what little information is available. Her footnotes and bibliography are of the highest quality. Highly recommended.

Pam Shelton-Anderson says

This was an excellent book on a lesser known Anglo-Saxon king. The author does a great job bringing Aethelstan to life and I can't help but wonder why he is forgotten where another childless warrior king, Richard I, has been so remembered. Aethlestan was a much better king to his people, mentor for many younger relatives and a man of noted piety. This biography was very well researched and documented.

Robert Hall says

So far so good. Well researched and written, The author has thus far has used plain language; no unproveable assertions or judgements.

Will Elliott says

Sarah Foot does a fantastic job in illuminating the life of one of England's great Anglo-Saxon monarchs. The thematic, rather than chronological, approach is the correct one for a figure lacking in reliable early sources. Whilst this does mean certain facts are repeated, this for me was not a problem, allowing deeper understanding of the structure of Athelstan's life and the events that shaped it.

Other readers have criticised Foot's prose style. In fact, rather than finding it dull as others have, I found it to be straightforward yet deeply engaging. Foot handles very well, as one would expect of such a well-qualified historian, traditional historical narratives, such as military exploits or religious patronage. However, Foot is also at home in other important and fascinating areas which I have often found other historians to be weaker in, or to neglect totally, such as art historical analysis or numismatics.

Overall an excellent book.

Jan says

Foot's narrative of Aethelstan is surely a very well researched piece of work. As the author states right at the beginning, this book tries to shine a light on the person of Aethelstan as a whole, not just as warrior, lawgiver or promoter of the church. This goal is, I'd say, duly achieved.

So one might ask: Why just a two-star-rating?

The answer to this is, that Foot's book constitutes a textbook for students of early English history and is therefore written in a very scientific manner. This let me, as I normally read biographies for relaxation and fun, more than once think of putting the book away for good.

The other thing I have to say is something that all authors of books on early history might know: For my taste there is a bit too much of what Aethelstan might have done, where he presumably went or what this or that charter of his possibly meant. So there are too few facts and too much speculation for my taste.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

I'll start off by saying this is not necessarily written for the casual reader of history. It is a well-researched, as-detailed-as-possible biography of one of England's greatest, but long-forgotten, kings. In fact, even I - a more than casual reader of very specific history (Anglo-Saxon England) - had to pause at times, read and reread, because of the wealth of information. It truly surprises me that this book has such a (what I consider) low rating, leaving me to wonder if we've even read the same book.

This period is by far one of my favorite historical subjects, but one we can never truly know about, which makes it all the more intriguing. Foot uses the very best resources she has and makes quite educated statements about this man and king. While at the end of the day, many statements are still simply conjecture, it didn't feel that way while reading. I've read many books in the past where the info was presented with more 'possibilities' and 'probabilities' than I knew what to do with. Yet here, while clear that much is still supposition, it's still presented in a very readable way that doesn't leave you wondering at the end why the author even bothered to write it. Very, very well-done, highly recommended.

Ruth says

interesting

Angrbrenna says

As is the problem with a lot of literature on Anglo-Saxon kings, writing that could be described as biographical is few and far between, Æthelstan being a prime example of that. In modern times all pre-conquest kings tend to be overshadowed by Alfred the Great - and this is something that Foot tries to rectify. She is successful in uncovering something of a real person from among the various sources that exist, creating an image of a man with interests, passions, love and obsessions. However, she remains careful throughout to provide evidence for everything she says, making the portrait she creates all the more believable. If anything Foot is too sympathetic to Æthelstan, and could be accused of playing down the flaws that many past writers have dwelt on, but maybe that's just to balance the scale a little bit. Overall, bias seems minimal and Foot has succeeded in creating a highly learned piece of work.

As for her endeavour to write a biography, Foot is less successful. In the introduction she states her intention to break down Æthelstan's life into the different spheres in which he existed, from the more intimate spheres of his family and immediate entourage, to the church and finally to war and international politics. However, in doing so Foot fails to produce any sort of coherent narrative, which could be considered a defining feature of a biography. While the book passes seamlessly from one subject to the next, Foot's method doesn't allow for analysis of how the different aspects of Æthelstan's life interconnected, which is relegated to a relatively short final chapter. The analysis in each of the chapters is superb, but the Yale English Kings series was meant to provide a baseline of information for each King, and in some ways Foot's work is a more sophisticated piece. In summary, while Foot makes some excellent points and the book itself is well-written, it fails to fill in a gap in the market of a biography for Æthelstan, England's first king.

Rebecca says

Wonderfully written in depth biography of an under appreciated Anglo-Saxon king of England. Fascinating first king of a united England.

Matt Brady says

Æthelstan seems like one of those interesting and very important "forgotten" kings, with his main flaw being the fact that he wasn't long sighted enough to pay for a biographer like his granddad Alfred the Great did. He also seems like an interesting personality, a contended ascension to the throne possibly influencing his subsequent decision to never marry and have kids, thus ensuring a smoother succession for his half-brother. Most of what little fame Æthelstan still has today comes from the Battle of Brunanburh in 937, when he defeated an allied army led by five different Kings and cemented his rule over the whole of England, something none of his predecessors ever quite managed.

So, some of that interest carries this book a fair way, but after a while it gets a bit buried by some pretty dry details. I always feel like a dick giving work of history a bad rating when it's obvious a lot of work went into it and it doesn't have any contentious or bad opinions or arguments but there's a whole long chapter in here about holy relics given to King Aethelstan with detailed descriptions of where they came from and where they might have gone and it actually put me to sleep twice.

Bill Meyer says

Seems exceptionally well researched but still you don't get much of the story of the man or the times

Mary Ronan Drew says

Ah, Aethelstan. The first English king. A great warrior - he conquered or threatened all of England into recognizing him as king. A scholar - he learned to read, not something everybody did back in 900, and supported the intellectuals of the time. A lawgiver - and his laws were pretty much obeyed, which is impressive as this was the depths of the "dark ages" when it could not be assumed that one was safe from mayhem just because the king said you should be. Devout, brave, honest, just.

The grandson of Alfred, the only English king called "the great," Aethelstan was the one chosen by the great man to accede to the throne after his father, Edward the Elder. Even as late as the 12th century it was said that "no one more just or more learned every ruled the kingdom." This is from William of Malmsebury, upon whom we must rely for much of what we know about the late years of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Sarah Foot's biography, Aethelstan: The First King of England, is crammed with information, surprising (at least to me) since there wasn't a lot of history being written back then and the historian has to rely on documents from all over Europe created for other purposes. This is the first of the series of books in the Yale English Monarchs series. The next one chronologically is Frank Barlow's Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), great-grand-nephew of Aethelstan.

I won't send you to read this book unless you are deeply interested in the English monarchs before William the Conqueror. The book is by necessity dry and filled with dates. The author has compiled a time-line telling us where Aethelstan was at almost every moment during his reign, 927-939. She does bring to life the important battle of Brunanburgh in which Aethelstan defeated the combined forces of the Norse and the Scots. She describes the king's household, and she gives the reader an idea who lived there. But this is not a social history. You are on your own to figure out what the common folk do.

But do remember Aethelstan, in the shadow of his famous grandfather, forgotten in the later struggle between the House of Wessex and the House of Denmark, and of course, overwhelmed, as is much of Anglo-Saxon history, by the bastard from Normandy.
