

Athelstan, First King of All England

Daniel J. Thompson

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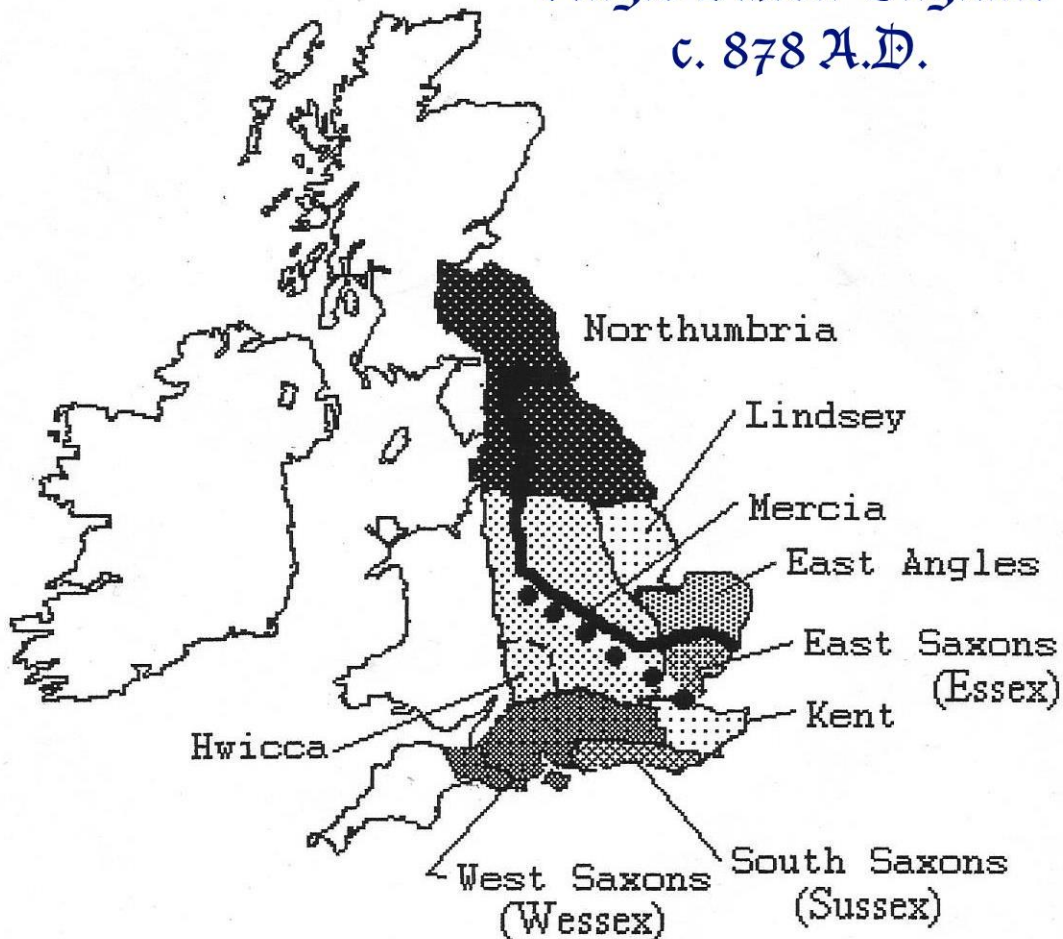
"When during the reign of Athelstane¹, his brother Prince Edwin of Glorious memory, obtained from the King a Free Patent or Charter to Masons..."

Thus begins The Constitution of Masonry as adopted by the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1791. This paper will discuss the historical Athelstan, his lasting influence on English history and explore his legendary ties to the Masonic fraternity.

To understand and appreciate this pivotal character in English history we must first have a basic understanding of the times in which he lived. After the departure of Rome from England in the 5th century, Celts from the North, Danes, and Saxons began to raid the rich lands of the native Britons and Welsh. While the Celts remained settled in Scotland, the Danes and Saxons settled the conquered lands. Over time the Britons in the east became assimilated with the invading peoples. The Anglo-Saxons kept only minimal ties with their homelands in Western Europe and by the 7th century considered themselves a separate people, governed by their own Kings.

¹ Athelstan, Athelstane, and Æthelstan are accepted variations of the same name. Except in direct quotes, the spelling "Athelstan" will be used throughout this paper.

Anglo-Saxon England c. 878 A.D.



*The heavy black line represents the approximate area of Danish settlements.
The black dotted line is the Danelaw, established by Alfred the Great in 878.*

The Danes who settled initially maintained allegiance to the Danish Crown, but as they themselves became the targets of Danish raiders, they established their own Kingdoms and sought the protection of alliances with the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms. Over the next two centuries alliances were in a constant state of flux and many battles were fought among the various Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Danish kingdoms. It must be remembered that during this period kings were little more than local war-lords and maintained their power by raiding their neighbors to enrich their Kingdoms.

Athelstan's grandfather, Alfred the Great, ascended to the throne of Wessex in 871. Alfred was probably the first king that we would recognize as being more than a war-lord. He was an educated and pious man and personally translated several books from Latin to English to spread knowledge among his people. He envisioned a united England as the best defense against hostile Viking and Celtic forces. He had a view towards history and is credited with commissioning the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles which remain one of the best sources of the history of this period. In 878 Alfred defeated the Danes at Edington and by the Peace of Wedmore, England was divided between Wessex in the south and west, and the Danes to the north and east, the *Danelaw*.

Athelstan was born c. 895, the eldest son of Edward the Elder. He was most probably illegitimate. His mother, Egwina was a Shepard girl whom Edward took a fancy to. Some chroniclers have tried to elevate her status to that of Noblewoman in an attempt to make Athelstan more legitimate. Perhaps because of the circumstances of his birth he was raised by Edward's sister, Athelfled at her court at Gloucester in Mercia. He was said to be a favorite of Alfred² and received the benefit of a good education. He was an imposing man about six foot tall with long blond hair, and was very handsome.

When Alfred died in 899, Edward the Elder ascended the throne of Wessex. His reign was marked by renewed tensions and many battles between the Anglo-Saxons, Scots, Welsh and Danes. Unlike his father Alfred or his son Athelstan, Edward was not inclined to scholarly pursuits. In between battles he did however find time to sire at least eighteen children, only five of them male. The first three by Egwina, whom he probably did not marry.

² This assertion must be taken with a grain of salt as Athelstan was the only grandson born prior to Alfred's death in 899.

Edward died in July of 924. At the time of his death Edward ruled all of England except that part of Northumbria around York. During this period in history succession of the eldest son was not guaranteed. The nobles would look at the available candidates and pledge their allegiance to the one deemed best able to rule. Upon Edward's death the nobility in Mercia immediately proclaimed Athelstan king. However, in Wessex the situation was not so cut and dry. Athelstan's brother Edwin was already sub-King of Kent and was possibly being groomed to ascend the throne of Wessex. Very little is known of Edwin. It is possible that he died very shortly after Edward's death and was never confirmed as King of Wessex but the exact date of his death is not known.

Athelstan may have been a compromise candidate³. In any event, there was some internal political trouble as Athelstan was not accepted as King of Wessex until several months had passed, and he was not coroneted until September of 925.

His ascension to the throne had an immediate effect on the politics of England. In 926 in an effort to secure his borders he summoned the Welsh Princes and laid down the boundary between Mercia and Wales. He extracted heavy tribute from them for supporting a Norse uprising in Chester in 924.

Sitric, the Norse king of Northumbria and York who had refused to recognize Edward as sovereign, recognized Athelstan almost at once. Perhaps it was the combined might of a unified Wessex and Mercia which caused this change of heart. As part of the treaty between Sitric and Athelstan, Sitric married Athelstan's sister Eadgyth in January 926. This alliance did not last long as Sitric refused to accept Christianity and died in March 927. Sitric's Brother Gothfrith, King of Dublin, attempted to claim the throne at York. After

³ Besides Edwin, other possible contenders include his half-brother Elfweard the Hermit and his half-brother Edmund, who would succeed him.

summoning the kings of Scotland at Eamont and making them swear that they would not support Gothfrith, Athelstan defeated Gothfrith in battle and entered York in July of 927. He was the first Saxon king to take York, and it was at this time that he proclaimed himself, with good reason, as King of all England, fulfilling Alfred's vision of unity.

Athelstan had a keen insight into the politics of the times and believed that closer alliances with continental Europe would be most beneficial to the culture and trade of England. To this end he married off his aunts and sisters to form political alliances. To Count Baldwin of Flanders went his aunt, Elfreda; his sister Edgiva married Charles III of France; his sister Edhilda married Hugh, Count of Paris; and the recently widowed Eadgyth married Otto, Duke of Saxony who was later crowned Otto I by Pope John XII as the first emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Another unnamed half-sister may have married Gorm the Old, the first king of a united Denmark.

The peace with the Scots lasted seven years, a remarkably long time given the politics of the day. During this time England flourished and Athelstan used this time to strengthen his kingdom by training troops and fortifying key cities. An able administrator, he codified the laws of the land, and standardized the minting of money. His laws were some of the earliest recorded in England that granted specific rights to the common man. He was probably the first English king to have a permanent bureaucracy and kept excellent records of his reign. Many royal charters were issued, mostly recording land grants to the nobility and to those that had provided him a service. He established thirty-nine mints in fortified cities throughout England and appointed moneyers to oversee their operation. The coins produced were inscribed "ÆTHELSTAN REX TOT BRIT", the abbreviation for the Latin "Rex Totius Britianea," King of all England. These were the first coins that depicted a crowned monarch in England, a devise that proclaimed his equality with European royalty.

Athelstan's efforts at aligning England with continental Europe bore fruit in 933 when Heinrich I, duke of Saxony and king of Germany presented him with the Holy Lance, one of the most sacred relics of Christendom. This relic was said to be the shaft of the lance used at the crucifixion to pierce Jesus' side by the Roman centurion. It was later returned to Germany as part of the dowry of the marriage of Eadgyth to Otto. The gift of this relic to Athelstan had the symbolic effect of acknowledging his equality to the royalty of the continent, a status no other monarch in the British Isles could claim.

A very pious man, Athelstan sent out agents throughout Christian Europe in search of relics. When found these were presented as gifts to Churches and monasteries throughout his realm. To Milton Abbey in Dorset he presented St. Samson's arm and St. Branwaladr's head. He granted large tracts of land to the Church. In one case he presented a book, *The Life of St. Cuthbert*, by The Venerable Bede to the monks at the shrine to St. Cuthbert. They were so appreciative of this gift that they commissioned a painting of the presentation which was included as the frontispiece of future copies. It must be remembered that during this time each book was hand written and to an educated man was more cherished than pure gold.

During this period of time it was the custom for princes to be fostered in foreign courts. This was done to educate the prince in foreign ways and also provided a hostage in the case of war, helping to preserve the peace. To this end, Haakon, the seven year old son of Harald Finehair, King of Norway, was fostered in Athelstan's court teaching him English law and customs and converting him to Christianity. Upon Haakon's return to Norway at Harald's death, the elders in Norway were so impressed with the young Haakon that they deposed his brother, Erik Bloodaxe, who soon became a problem to Athelstan's successors.

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In 934 the Scottish king Constantine married his daughter to Olaf Gothfrithson of Dublin. Athelstan viewed this marriage as a breach of the treaty of Eamont. To teach Constantine a lesson, Athelstan raised a huge army and marched north from Winchester laying waste to Scotland as far north as Fortune. While this had the desired effect of subjugating Constantine, it also gave him the resolve to form an alliance with Olaf as protection against English might. In 937 the combined army of Olaf and Constantine swept through Northumbria and into Mercia. Athelstan met the invaders at Brunanburh which may have been around Nottinghamshire and won the most decisive victory in English history ending for all time Scotland's dream of territorial expansion.

The Battle of Brunanburh defined Athelstan's place in history and he is remembered by most historians for this victory. Churchill called the Battle of Brunanburh the first of the three battles which defined the nation, the other two being the Norman invasion of 1066 and the Battle of Britain during WWII. In addition to ending the Scottish pursuit of expanded territories, it ended Scandinavian influence in the British Isles and aligned England closer to the continent and the fledgling Holy Roman Empire.

While it is true that the victor gets to write history, Athelstan commissioned a Norseman named Egil to chronicle the battle. Egil may have been a captive or possibly an emissary to Athelstan's court. In the first part of the chronicle Egil shows a bias for the enemy army and Olaf. As the battle progresses and Athelstan's army turns the tide of battle, his attitude and allegiance seems to shift to Athelstan. It is interesting to note that as important as this battle was to English history, the exact site where it took place is unknown.

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Establishing Athelstan's place in Masonic history is problematic, at best. The earliest documents are the Regius Manuscript from 1390 and the Halliwell Manuscript from the early to mid-fifteenth century. These were drawn from other earlier, unknown documents. These and other, later copies of the "Old Charges" retell the story of Athelstan, Edwin and the Council at York in 926. Most identify Edwin as Athelstan's brother; some others as his son. The date of the supposed council at York in 926 presents a problem in that we know Athelstan didn't enter York until the following year. They all cite the fifteen Articles and fifteen Points of Masonry which by our legend were supposed to have been established at York.

Athelstan died peaceably two years later in 939 at the age of 44 years. He never married and was succeeded by his half-brother, Edmund. He left behind a united England which would never again be considered as just a collection of small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms but a nation that would soon become a world power and remain in the forefront of world affairs for the next thousand years.