

# Alfred and the Loaves

2017 Midlands Regional Arts and Sciences Faire, Division 1 Bardic Recitation

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**By Oswyn of Baðon**

## Introduction

We are on the last part of our journey. Oswyn, after leaving his homeland, journeying to Mickelgard, going on pilgrimage, finds himself in Jerusalem. His mind wanders to what his people have done to offend God to lose their homes to the Normans. He then recalls another time that the English asked this question; the time when the Great Heathen Army conquered most of England. Perhaps Oswyn too learns that he should not dwell on what was but on what is but unlike this story, he will not be going home. England, as he knows it, is gone.

The original story of Alfred and the Loaves (or Cakes) comes from the *Vita Sancti Neoti*. This was written in the late 10<sup>th</sup> c or early 11<sup>th</sup> c. 5 copies of that work survive to the modern day and it is not often translated. Keynes and Lapidge in their *Alfred the Great* work include the following new translation.

## Original story from *Vita Sancti Neoti*

"There is a place in the remote parts of English Britain far to the west, which in English is called Athelney and which we refer to as 'Athelings' Isle'; it is surrounded on all sides by vast salt marshes and sustained by some level ground in the middle. King Alfred happened unexpectedly to come there as a lone traveller. Noticing the cottage of a certain unknown swineherd (as he later learned), he directed his path towards it and sought there a peaceful retreat; he was given refuge, and he stayed there a number of days, impoverished, subdued and content with the bare necessities. Reflecting patiently that these things had befallen him through God's just judgement, he remained there awaiting God's mercy through the intercession of His servant Neot; for he had conceived from Neot the hope that he nourished in his heart. 'Whom the Lord loveth', says the apostle, 'He chastiseth; He scourgeth every son whom he adopteth' (Hebrews xii, 61). In addition to this, Alfred patiently kept the picture of Job's astonishing constancy before his eyes every day. Now it happened by chance one day, when the swineherd was leading his flock to their usual pastures, that the king remained alone at home with the swineherd's wife. The wife, concerned for her husband's return, had entrusted some kneaded flour to the husband of sea-borne Venus [Vulcan, the fire god, that is, the oven]. As is the custom among countrywomen, she was intent on other domestic occupations, until, when she sought the bread from Vulcan, she saw it burning from the other side of the room. She immediately grew angry and said to the king (unknown to her as such): 'Look here, man,

You hesitate to turn the loaves which you see to be burning, Yet you're quite happy to eat them when they come warm from the oven!

But the king, reproached by these disparaging insults, ascribed them to his divine lot; somewhat shaken, and submitting to the woman's scolding, he not only turned the bread but even attended to it as she brought out the loaves when they were ready." [1]

Keynes and Lapidge also include other versions of this story throughout the ages. In a homily based on St Neot from the 12<sup>th</sup> c, the story changes tone with Alfred being a coward before the Vikings, hiding in the swamps of Somerset, and the swineherd's wife being described as "evil." [2]

In yet another version of the story from the *Annals of St Neots* also from the 12<sup>th</sup> c, Alfred is seen preparing for war with his bow, arrows, and other instruments of war. [3]

Lastly, the story appears in *The Chronicle* attributed to John of Wallingford. In this version, all versions of the myth are exaggerated. Alfred is a quiet, thoughtful man. He flees battle to contemplate God's will, the swineherd's wife is forgetful but chastises Alfred anyway, and Alfred is at once humble and unskilled but strong in battle to unbelt other kings. [4]

### **Setting for performance**

While it is true that many Anglo-Saxon poems and stories would be accompanied, that is primarily true in a formal performance. As stated in my introduction to this pent, Oswyn is on pilgrimage at this point. At best, he is telling this story to his fellow travelers. At worst, he is recalling this story to himself. So the setting is informal. He is perhaps at camp with other travelers or an inn. He is reflecting on his past, his faith, and what all of that means now that England is behind him and what this "New England" might become.

### **My version of the story**

I am going back to the earliest version of the tale for my version. For me, it represents an important lesson and therefore, this is more like a sermon than a traveler's tale. It is intended to communicate a lesson to be learned rather than strict entertainment.

I believe Alfred as a penitent man is a stronger image and more in keeping with how Asser presents him in Alfred's biography, *Life of Alfred*. Is he a warrior? Yes indeed and a good one too. Is he a coward? There is no evidence that Alfred was a coward. He fought many battles, ultimately losing many of them before turning things around. Is the swineherd's wife evil? No. Good baked bread is a necessity for her family. Why shouldn't she take an unknown guest to task for being lazy?

## **Alfred and the Loaves**

Lo, it had come to pass that the Great Heathen Army of Danes had come to England's shores. They had conquered Northumbria, East Anglia, Kent, Essex, Sussex, Mercia, and much of Wessex.

They had driven Alfred, King of Wessex, back to the marshlands of Somerset. It was there on the Isle of Athelney that Alfred built a fortress. But most of Alfred's time was spent in contemplation, "what had his people done to offend God?" and "how could they atone for whatever this offense was?"

In this frame of mind, Alfred went for a walk. He came across a hovel in which lived a swineherd and his wife. Being good Christians, they offered him hospitality, as meager as they had. Alfred stayed with them for several days. As the chores still needed doing, the peasants continued their daily work.

So it happened that one day, as Alfred sat considering his fate and trials, the wife entrusted to him two loaves of bread. She returned from her chores to discover that the loaves had burned! She grew angry and chastised her guest,

"Look here, you are quite happy to eat the loaves warm from the oven yet you ignore them when they burn!"

Alfred, son of Aethelwulf, brother to Aethelbald, Aethelberht, and Aethelred, all King before him, took his chastisement humbly, for the wife was right. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he neglected the job he was given.

And in this moment, he realized that this was the lesson that God was trying to teach him. He was so wrapped up in trying to discern what he had done to offend the Lord that he neglected the duty God had entrusted to him, the defense of his people.

He left the peasant's house, leaving them in ignorance as to who was their guest. His lesson learned, he ceased brooding over what may have happened and returned to the task at hand, the restoration of his realm. Alfred drove the heathens from Wessex, from Sussex, from Essex, from Kent, from East Anglia and from most of Mercia. He even got Guthrum to surrender, sue for peace, and to be baptized in the Lord's name! And thus, for a time, peace returned to the English and they acknowledged Alfred as King of them all.

In time, Alfred's son, daughter, and grandson would finish what he started and drive the Danes completely from the lands of the English.

Thus did two loaves of bread help to restore England to the English.

## References:

[1] Keynes, Simon; Lapidge, Michael (2004). Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources. New York: Penguin Classics. [ISBN 0-14-044409-2](#). p. 197-198

[2] Keynes, Simon; Lapidge, Michael (2004). Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources. New York: Penguin Classics. [ISBN 0-14-044409-2](#). p. 198-199

[3] Keynes, Simon; Lapidge, Michael (2004). Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources. New York: Penguin Classics. [ISBN 0-14-044409-2](#). p. 199-200

[4] Keynes, Simon; Lapidge, Michael (2004). Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources. New York: Penguin Classics. [ISBN 0-14-044409-2](#). p. 200-201