

SARAH FOOT. *Æthelstan: The First King of England*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. 283. \$40.00 (cloth).  
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Sarah Foot's *Æthelstan*, who ruled England from 924 to 939, was a remarkable man, not just the first to rule over a unified England, but a sophisticated, innovative, and pious warrior king. Until now, however, he has lived in the shadows of his more famous royal relatives, Alfred and Edgar. Given how little we actually know about him, this biography is a notable achievement, a meticulously researched and well-written example of how to interpret and deploy the limited and difficult sources available to Anglo-Saxon historians.

Foot begins by defending the value of biography for early medieval figures like *Æthelstan* by invoking Anthony Giddens's model of structuration. Biography, she asserts, is a "means of putting the question of agency back into analysis of the past," while still acknowledging the "underlying social, economic and political structures [that] may have formed and taught the agent" (6). We can know, in other words, quite a bit about what King *Æthelstan* did from the documentary and administrative evidence, but it is only by thinking about the world around him that we can even begin to approach what he might have thought or felt. This is why Foot abandons a chronological approach in favor of one that illuminates the various arenas in which he lived. This, she argues, "builds an image of the king as a person by accretion" (9). She is arguably more successful in some chapters than in others, but organizing them by spheres of influence (family, court, church, kingdom, etc.) allows her to consider *Æthelstan's* actions in their contexts and to suggest plausible motives for many of them.

*Æthelstan's* story begins in an introductory chapter titled "English King?" Here Professor Foot acknowledges the limitations of a thematic approach by providing the reader with an overview of the king's reign. The following three chapters explore the context of the court, including the king's immediate circle of extended family (he had a *lot* of sisters!) and courtiers, both lay and clerical. Here we learn that despite King Alfred's ambitions for his grandson, *Æthelstan* was apparently pushed aside when his father, Edward, remarried and produced more sons. It is not clear what the future king's childhood was like, only that he grew up in the court of his aunt, *Æthelflæd* of Mercia. It is also unclear if Edward intended for *Æthelstan* to succeed him, at least to the entire kingdom. His stepbrother certainly challenged him in Wessex, but when *Æthelweard* died in 924, *Æthelstan* became king of his father's lands in Wessex as well as Mercia. Another failed rebellion in Wessex, in favor of yet another stepbrother, probably cemented the king's lifelong discomfort with the barons of Wessex. After his death at Gloucester, for instance, he was buried at Malmesbury Abbey, rather than with his family in the New Minster at Winchester.

That *Æthelstan* was always more comfortable in Mercia, surrounded by male companions of all ages, seems likely from the extant evidence. *Æthelstan's* court was apparently teeming with relatives, young and old, a host of secular courtiers, some of whom he wanted to monitor (i.e., the Welsh subkings), and a fair number of clerics, both English and foreign born, all of whom sought preferment in what Foot asserts was a surprisingly cosmopolitan court. In her words, "[T]he extent and variety of England's contact with the continent during *Æthelstan's* reign make his rule remarkable and certainly introduced the English to a range of contemporary continental ideas, as well as flooding the court and religious houses in England with texts, images and precious objects" (91). It is hard to know if Foot overstates the grandeur of *Æthelstan's* court, but the continental contacts he fostered, particularly by marrying off his sisters to various counts and dukes, as well as one king, did provide unprecedented opportunities for the interchange of people and things, not the least of which were the many relics he collected over his relatively short life.

The last few chapters of the book consider *Æthelstan's* actions in the wider context of a kingdom both at peace and at war. Here again, the king was an innovator. He spent a considerable amount of energy, for example, wrestling with ways to promote peace, particularly at the

local level, by curtailing theft, which he seems to have equated (and uniquely so) with disloyalty. Foot is sympathetic to Æthelstan's efforts as a lawmaker, which she believes indicate a sincere and sustained interest in the well-being of his people, although she acknowledges Patrick Wormald's verdict that the king's lawmaking had only a "spasmodic impact" (144). Perhaps more significant in practical terms was the Grately code's "first full, official statement of the judicial procedure of the ordeal" (147), which, Foot argues, was just one manifestation of the increased sacralization of royal law in this period.

While Foot sheds light on some of the darker corners of Æthelstan's world in the first half of the book, in the second she pulls together the evidence for his prowess in battle, his remarkable piety, and his deployment of imperial imagery in the written instruments of his government, including coins, charters, and law codes. A chapter in this section titled "Death" is somewhat misleading; although it begins by discussing the king's death, it is a detailed exploration of Æthelstan's relic collection. These later chapters thus hint at the difficulty of organizing such disparate material thematically.

Given the tremendous gaps in our knowledge of most tenth-century Anglo-Saxon kings, successful biographies require as much imagination as erudition. While Professor Foot's interpretations are individually subject to debate, her portrait as a whole is based on a reasoned and imaginative consideration of the sources. If I have one criticism, it is that there is quite a bit of overlap from one chapter to another. In the end, however, this book has something to offer everyone, even if it will always be easier to celebrate Æthelstan's "public glories" than "his private, more personal triumphs" (226).

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RICHARD GORSKI, ed. *Roles of the Sea in Medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012. Pp. 204. \$90.00 (cloth). Sebastian I. Sobceki, ed. *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011. Pp. 262. \$90.00 (cloth).

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Medieval historians have been slow in interpreting the maritime history of the British Isles. Until recently, they ventured little beyond editing documents or making vague noises about the role played by water routes in particular events such as the *adventu* of the Anglo-Saxons or transportation during the Hundred Years' Wars. Thus *Roles of the Sea in Medieval England* and *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages* are welcome additions.

Richard Gorski's *Roles of the Sea in Medieval England* is a superb group of studies covering the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The first two essays set the tone with Gorski's "Roles of the Sea" and Richard Unger's "Changes in Ship Design and Construction." Gorski gives a widely ranging introduction to the topic with particular attention to the topic of shipping. Unger presents a "state of the theme" on a matter of which he is an acknowledged expert. The following essays fall into two general groups: ports and shipping. Susan Rose's "Value of the Cinque Ports to the Crown" and Craig Lambert's "Contribution of the Cinque Ports to the Wars of Edward II and Edward III" tackle the question of whether those ports remained indispensable to the Crown or were merely antiquarian curiosities. Both essays show that the Cinque Ports were important, although their contributions varied and changed with the passage of time. Tim Bowly's "Herring of Sligo and Salmon of Bann" examines the passage of goods from one port to a specific region, in this instance from the port of Bristol to Ireland. The relatively low commercial value of Irish exports such as hides meant that merchants with fewer financial resources could participate in the trade; by the end of the medieval period, it seems that much of the trade was in Irish ships. Other essays examine specific times