

Torben R. Gebhardt (Münster)

## From Bretwalda to Basileus: Imperial Concepts in Late Anglo-Saxon England?

In 924 Æthelstan ascended the throne of Mercia after the death of his father Edward, while his younger half-brother Ælfweard received the crown of Wessex. The question whether or not this division of Edward's realm would have proven to be permanent was rendered obsolete by the death of Ælfweard only sixteen days after his father's, leaving Æthelstan as the sole sovereign of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom.<sup>1</sup> This kingdom in itself was already a conglomerate. A kingdom forged by Edward the Elder who obtained direct rule over Mercia in 918 and was accepted *to fæder and to blaforde*<sup>2</sup> by the kingdoms of York, Scotland and Wales. Yet it was Æthelstan who established direct rule over the Yorkish kingdom in the north, which was never held by a southern king before. Hence, historians, medieval and modern alike, for instance Sarah Foot in a recent biography, often styled him "First king of the English".<sup>3</sup> Yet, it might well be that this title, already loaded with a variety of implications which are hard to prove beyond doubt, does not reflect the aspirations of the king to their fullest, but that he contemplated over an imperial claim. Æthelstan is frequently called *rex totius Britanniae* ("king of all Britain") and even *basileus*,<sup>4</sup> titles implying an im-

---

1 Foot, Sarah: *Æthelstan. The First King of England*. (Yale English Monarchs Series). Yale University Press: New Haven / London 2011, p. 17.

2 The quote is from the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" meaning "as father and as lord". It can be found in Version A (the Winchester or Parker Chronicle) for the year 920.

3 This is the subtitle of Foot's biography of Æthelstan. See also Dumville, David N.: "Between Alfred the Great and Edgar the Peacemaker: Æthelstan, First King of England". In: Id. (ed.): *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar. Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival*. (Studies in Anglo-Saxon History). Boydell & Brewer: Woodbridge 1992, pp. 141–171.

4 All charters in this article will be quoted according to the *Electronic Sawyer*: Sawyer, Peter et al. (eds.): *The Electronic Sawyer*. A revised, updated, and ex-

perial hegemony because they extend the king's rule beyond the boundaries of the English kingdom. The question whether this implication really was on Æthelstan's mind will be the topic of this article.<sup>5</sup>

At the dawn of Æthelstan's ascension to power, the kingdom was far from being an ethnic unity. Edward the Elder styled himself *angul saxonum rex* or *rex saxonum et anglorum* in his charters, clearly referring to two separate gentile groups which he united under his rule.<sup>6</sup> Although this intitulation

---

panded version of Peter Sawyer's *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography*, published in 1968, retrieved 23.7.2015, from <http://www.esawyer.org.uk>. The charters that call Æthelstan a variant of *king of all Britain/Albion* or *basileus* are S 388 (spurious), S 391 (spurious), S 401 (spurious), S 403, S 405, S 406 (spurious), S 407 (spurious), S 408 (spurious), S 409 (spurious), S 410 (spurious), S 411, S 412, S 413, S 414 (spurious), S 415 (spurious), S 416, S 417, S 418, S 418a, S 419, S 420 (spurious), S 421, S 422, S 423 (spurious), S 425, S 426, S 427 (spurious), S 429, S 430, S 431, S 432, S 433 (spurious), S 434, S 435 (spurious), S 436 (spurious), S 437, S 438, S 439 (spurious), S 440, S 441, S 442, S 444, S 445, S 446, S 447, S 448, S 449, S 455 (spurious), S 458. These represent the majority of Æthelstan's charters.

- 5 Æthelstan is not the first king whose rule has been connected to imperial concepts. The idea of an Anglo-Saxon emperorship has sparked a vast amount of scholarly discussion. See already in the mid-twentieth century Stengel, Edmund E.: "Kaisertitel und Suveränitätsidee. Studien zur Vorgeschichte des modernen Staatsbegriffs". *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 3, 1939, pp. 2–55; or Drögereit, Richard: "Kaiseridee und Kaisertitel bei den Angelsachsen". *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 69, 1952, pp. 24–73. More recently Fanning, Steven C.: "Bede, 'Imperium' and the Bretwaldas". *Speculum* 66, 1991, pp. 1–26; Molyneaux, George: "Why Were some Tenth-Century English Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?". *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society Ser. 6*, 21, 2011, pp. 59–91.
- 6 The vast majority of the surviving 29 charters by Edward use a style that refers to the Saxons and Angles. In few instances he is called *rex angolsaxonum* (for example S 363), turning the two ethnic references into a composite, yet still referring to two separate ethnic groups. There are some exceptions from the rule: S 360 and 374 name Edward *rex anglorum*. While the former is almost certainly a forgery, see Rumble, Alexander R.: *Property and Piety in Early Medieval Winchester. Documents Relating to the Topography of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman City and its Minsters*. (Winchester Studies 4,3). Clarendon: Oxford 2002, no. XVIII, the latter seems to be genuine. S 365 uses the title *saxonum rex*, yet, is also spurious, see Whitelock, Dorothy: "Some Charters in the Name of King Alfred". In: King, Margot (ed.): *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*. Saint John's Abbey

did not die with Edward, it became very rare after his demise. Æthelstan changed his denomination quite quickly to *rex anglorum*,<sup>7</sup> thereby dropping the division of his subjects and suggesting an internal ethnic as well as political unity. The peculiar aspect about this development is that a West Saxon king dropped the Saxon aspect of his title for that of a different, yet of a similar origin, *gens*. Three points might, however, offer an explanation. First, Æthelstan had strong bonds to Mercia, an Anglian kingdom. He probably received most of his education at the court of his aunt and uncle, Æthelflæd and Æthelred, and gained first military experience during their campaigns against the Danes. Furthermore, after Edward established his rule over all of Mercia and East Anglia, Æthelstan stayed in the north of the realm to continue the defence and consolidate the region. Meanwhile, his brother Ælfweard built a power base south of the Thames, especially in the important cathedral town of Winchester.<sup>8</sup> The possible arrangement of joint rule between the two and the overall threat of the southern part of the kingdom might have tilted

---

and University: Collegeville, Minn. 1979, 77–98, p. 93, n. 21. Rumble, Alexander R.: “Edward the Elder and the Churches of Winchester and Wessex”. In: Higham, Nick / Hill, David (eds.): *Edward the Elder, 899–924*. Routledge: London 2001, pp. 230–247, p. 231 considers it trustworthy, however. The very atypical title *rex Anglie* is used in S 370, but is also generally believed to be a forgery, see Rumble 2002, p. 178, no. III. S 372 names Edward *occidentalium Saxonum rex*, thereby limiting his power to the West Saxons. While this in itself is curious, it strengthens the argument that during Edward’s reign, the kingdom was perceived as a conglomerate of different ethnic groups. S 379 styles the king as *rex anglorum per omnipatrantis dexteram totius Britannie regni solio sublimatus* and is almost certainly a forgery based on a charter by Æthelstan of 933, see Miller, Sean (ed.): *Charters of the New Minster, Winchester*. (Anglo-Saxon Charters 9). Oxford University Press: Oxford 2001, no. 8. Harald Kleinschmidt goes as far as saying that *rex angulsaxonum* and *rex saxonum et anglorum* were the only titles in use during the reign of Edward the Elder and subsequently that every deviation from this norm indicates a forgery. Kleinschmidt, Harald: “Die Titulaturen englischer Könige im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert”. In: Wolfram, Herwig / Scharer, Anton (eds.): *Intitulatio III. Lateinische Herrschertitel und Herrschertitulaturen vom 7. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*. (Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung. Ergänzungsband 29). Böhlau: Vienna 1988, pp. 75–130, p. 99.

7 The first clearly datable charter with that denomination is S 395 from 925.

8 Foot, pp. 11–12 and 34–39. William of Malmesbury is the main source for Æthelstan’s youth, see William of Malmesbury: *Gesta Regum Anglorum I.* -

Christian Scholl, Torben R. Gebhardt and Jan Clauß - 9783631662199

Downloaded from PubFactory at 02/25/2021 11:29:05AM

via free access

Æthelstan's mind further to the Anglian parts of the realm. Especially, since he still had three more brothers of whom two were to become king after him. Another factor might have been Bede's famous "Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum", which has enjoyed wide circulation in England and on the continent and was even translated into Old English, probably during the reign of Alfred the Great.<sup>9</sup> It is very likely that Æthelstan, a royal prince and later king, knew about one, if not the most important work of Anglo-Saxon history.<sup>10</sup> Especially when we consider that his grandfather, Alfred the Great, took a special interest in his descendant during the last years of his reign.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, Æthelstan's change in title might have been influenced by Bede's description of England, whose people the 8<sup>th</sup> century monk, under his subjective Northumbrian view, often subsumed as *Angli*. Additionally, Bede stressed that after the Angles immigrated to Britain, their homeland was said "to have remained deserted from that day to this."<sup>12</sup> Thus, in contrast to the Saxons who were not only perceivably present on the continent, but also supplied the ruling dynasty of the East-Frankish-German realm during

---

(Oxford Medieval Texts). Mynors, Roger A. B. et al. (eds. and trans.), Clarendon: Oxford 1998, ii.6, pp. 210–211.

- 9 The Old English Bede is not a straight translation from the original Latin, but rather an abridged version. See the constitutive work by Dorothy Whitelock for a more detailed analysis, especially concerning the authorship: Whitelock, Dorothy: "The Old English Bede". *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48, 1962, pp. 57–90. Whitelock draws the conclusion that a member of Alfred's circle might have been the author of the Old English "Historia", but that it is impossible to prove (p. 77). For a recent article on the topic see Molyneux, George: "The Old English Bede: English Ideology or Christian Instruction?". *The English Historical Review* 124, 2009, pp. 1289–1323, esp. 1292–1295.
- 10 The fact that parts of the "Historia" were included in the manuscript of Bede's "Life of St Cuthbert" (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 183) that Æthelstan gave to Chester-Le-Street, makes Æthelstan's knowledge of Bede's historiography almost a certainty. See Karkov, Catherine E.: *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England*. (Anglo-Saxon Studies 3). The Boydell Press: Woodbridge et al. 2004, pp. 63–68.
- 11 That is, if the chronologically distant William of Malmesbury is to be believed. See William of Malmesbury, ii.6, p. 210.
- 12 *Ab eo tempore usque hodie manere desertus*. Beda Venerabilis: *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. (Oxford Medieval Texts). Colgrave, Bertram / Mynors, Roger A. B. (eds.). Clarendon: Oxford 1969, I.15, pp. 50–51.

Christian Schöll, Torben R. Gebhardt and Jan Clauß - 9783631662199

Downloaded from PubFactory at 02/25/2021 11:29:05AM

via free access

Æthelstan's reign,<sup>13</sup> the Angles were nowhere to be found but in England. By dropping the Saxon aspect of his title the English king stressed his independence from his continental counterpart. The kingdom could, subsequently, not be taken as part of a Saxon empire, but stood as a unique entity. Admittedly, there is little evidence to support this view, but the fact that Æthelstan dropped the Saxon *gens* from his denomination shortly after a Saxon dynasty rose to power on the continent as well as the connection to Bede does lend it credibility.

All in all it should not surprise us that the title *rex anglorum* almost completely replaces the ethnically diverse denomination of his subjects in a time when Saxons already ruled a large part of the continent. Furthermore, Æthelstan successfully incorporated Northumbria with its Danish kingdom into his English realm in 927 at Eamont, pushing his border further north than any of his predecessors had done. While this development itself only hints at an imperial understanding of his rule, it definitely conveyed a sense of unity, similar to what Æthelstan's coronation ordo must have expressed which, as Janet Nelson compellingly argued, repeatedly refers to the unity of two people under Æthelstan's rulership.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the ordo changed the coronation ritual by crowning the king not with a helmet, as was the custom before, but with a crown, clearly stating that Æthelstan's reign differed substantially from the kings before him.<sup>15</sup> Æthelstan's later years encompassed an even more apparent connection to an imperial concept of rule. A decisive event seems to have happened in Eamont in the already mentioned year 927. The "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle D" tells us the following:

This year fiery lights appeared in the north part of the heavens. And Sihtric perished: and king Æthelstan obtained the kingdom of the Northumbrians. And he ruled all the kings who were in this island: first, Howel king of the West-Welsh; and Constantine king of the Scots; and Owen king of the Monmouth people; and

13 See for an overview of the Ottonian Dynasty in the East-Frankish German realm Althoff, Gerd: *Die Ottonen. Königsherrschaft ohne Staat*. (Urban-Taschenbücher 473). Kohlhammer: Stuttgart <sup>3</sup>2012, for their rise to power p. 29.

14 Nelson, Janet L.: "The First Use of the Second Anglo-Saxon Ordo". In: Barrow, Julia S. / Wareham, Andrew (eds.): *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters. Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks*. Ashgate: Aldershot et al. 2008, pp. 117–126, pp. 124–126.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Aldred, son of Ealdulf, of Bambrough: and they confirmed the peace by pledge, and by oaths, at the place which is called Eamont, on the 4th before the Ides of July; and they renounced all idolatry, and after that submitted to him in peace.<sup>16</sup>

Sihtric was king of York and married to one of Æthelstan's sisters. His death meant the end of a treaty between the two, which included the promise to refrain from any attacks. Æthelstan might have been alarmed by the demise of his ally and attacked Northumbria as a pre-emptive strike before the attention of Sihtric's successor could turn south. He might just as well simply have seized the opportunity to finally conquer what, in his opinion, by ancestral right was already his, an idea he might have obtained from Bede, as was mentioned before. It is, however, not only Sihtric's former kingdom that is the subject of the entry in the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle". Æthelstan also managed to establish himself as an overlord over the adjacent kingdoms, forcing them to accept his rule. While previous Anglo-Saxon rulers sometimes held dominion over other kingdoms, they never united all the English kingdoms under direct sovereignty and received the submission of northern and western kings.<sup>17</sup> In the following years, Æthelstan's presentation of himself changed to reflect a ruler who is above the status of a normal king.

Let us return to Æthelstan's intitulations before we discuss other aspects of his rule. From the 930s onwards up to the death of Æthelstan, the vast majority of his charters adopted an imperial style, calling him *rex Anglorum per omnipatrantis dexteram totius Bryttaniæ regni solio sublimatus*<sup>18</sup>

---

16 *Her oðeowdon fyrena leoman on norðdæle þære lyfte. 7 Sihtric acwæl, 7 Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice. 7 ealle þa cyngas þe on þysson iglande wæron he gewylde, ærest Huwal Westwala cyning, 7 Cosstantin Scotta cyning, 7 Uwen Wenta cyning, 7 Ealdred Ealdulfing from Bebbanbyrig, 7 mid wedde 7 mid aþum fryþ gefæstnodon on þære stowe þe genemmed is æt Eamotum on .iiii. Idus Iulii, 7 ælc deofolgeld tocwædon, 7 syþþam mid sibbe tocyrdon.* All Old English quotes from the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" are taken from: Dumville, David N. et al. (eds.): *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition.* 9 vols. Boydell & Brewer: Cambridge 1983–2004, here vol. 6, p. 41.

17 Foot, pp. 18–20.

18 *King of the Angles, by the right hand of God elevated to the throne of the whole of Britain.* The charters that use this phrasing are: S 403 (with parentheses), S 405 (with parentheses), S 407 (spurious), S 412, S 413, S 416, S 417, S 418, S 418a, S 421, S 423 (spurious), S 425, S 426, S 434, S 435 (spurious), S 436 (spurious), S 458.

with some variations. The title *rex totius Britanniae* is also used on a large part of his later coinage.<sup>19</sup> However, he is also styled *basileus* in some of the documents,<sup>20</sup> linking his rule to the Byzantine world and especially its monarch. The first question we need to address is whether the king actually had any influence on the intitulation of his charters and, in close connection, whether he had a royal chancery at his disposal. Harald Kleinschmidt, for instance, is of the opinion that proving the existence of a royal chancery would equally resolve the problem of defining the intitulations as either self-imposed or externally determined.<sup>21</sup> This issue has been the focus of an elaborate discussion for a long time.<sup>22</sup> Lately, however, it seems to be generally accepted that during Æthelstan reign at the latest a royal chancery was in existence.<sup>23</sup> Charters were powerful means of communication

---

19 Blunt, Christopher Evelyn: "The Coinage of Athelstan, King of England 924–39". *British Numismatic Journal* 42, 1974, pp. 35–160, pp. 47–48. Especially the cross type shows the title in variously abbreviated form.

20 These are: S 409 (spurious), S 429, S 430, S 431, S 438, S 441, S 442, S 446, S 448.

21 "Die Frage, ob die englischen Herrschertitulaturen des 10. und 11. Jahrhunderts Fremd- oder Selbstbezeichnungen der titulierten Könige darstellen ist gleichbedeutend mit der Frage nach der Existenz einer königlichen Kanzlei." Kleinschmidt, p. 79.

22 Against an existing chancery: Kleinschmidt, pp. 79–84; Chaplais, Pierre: "The Royal Anglo-Saxon 'Chancery' of the Tenth Century Revisited". In: Mayr-Harting, Henry / Moore, Robert Ian (eds.): *Studies in Medieval History. Presented to R. H. C. Davis*. Bloomsbury Academic: London 1985, pp. 41–51; Barlow, Frank: *The English Church 1000–1066. A History of the Late Anglo-Saxon Church*, Longmans: London / New York 1979, pp. 121–123. Also inclined towards rejecting a chancery: Harmer, Florence Elizabeth: *Anglo-Saxon Writs*. (The Ward Bequest 10). Manchester University Press: Manchester, pp. 57–61. Arguing in favour of an Anglo-Saxon Chancery is first and foremost Keynes, Simon: "Regenbald the Chancellor (sic)". *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10, 1988, pp. 185–222, for King Æthelstan pp. 185–187; already in Id.: *The Diplomas of King Æthelred "the Unready" 978–1016. A Study in their Use as Historical Evidence*. (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Series 3, 13). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1980, pp. 134–153. A similar verdict can be found in Bates, David: *William the Conqueror*, Repr. Hamlyn: London 1989, Tempus Publishing: Stroud 2004, p. 220.

23 "In short, it is no longer possible to construct a viable, effective and credible argument against the existence of a centralised, royal writing office during Æthel-

and as such it seems unlikely that kings would disregard their potential by leaving their composition to others. Furthermore, due to their status as an attestation to legal transactions, they had a relatively high chance of survival and were present in most parts of the realm. Charters were highly valued and most carefully preserved by the recipients because they were still valid even after a king died. Additionally, in order to profit from them, the recipient had to accept the charter as it stood, with all the intitulations and statements it contained, otherwise the whole document, including the grant, would have been rendered void. Subsequently, they represented an ideal means of establishing claims for kings.<sup>24</sup> But what are we to make of the imperial concepts Æthelstan conveyed in his intitulations? Did he see himself as an emperor? And if he did, did he assume the position of the western emperorship which Charlemagne held in the ninth century? Interestingly enough, the last western emperor Berengar had just died in 924, leaving the position vacant for almost forty years.<sup>25</sup>

When we speak of emperors in the Middle Ages, the subject is most of the time related to either the Byzantine Basileus or the Roman Emperor in the west. However, there were other realms that adopted an imperial style in the Middle Ages. In León the title of *imperator* was frequently used from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards and in 1135 Alfonso VII even had himself crowned emperor of all Spain.<sup>26</sup> Something similar can be seen in medieval Bulgaria. In 913 Symeon of Bulgaria was able to force the Byzantine patri-

---

stan's reign." Snook, Ben: *The Anglo-Saxon Chancery. The History, Language and Production of Anglo-Saxon Charters from Alfred to Edgar*. (Anglo-Saxon Studies 28). The Boydell Press: Woodbridge 2015, p. 59; see also Harvey, Sally: *Domesday. Book of Judgement*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014, pp. 19–21.

- 24 Eric John calls charters “the nearest thing to a medium for propaganda purposes”, cf. John, Eric: “The Age of Edgar”. In: Campbell, James (ed.): *The Anglo-Saxons*. Repr. Phaidon: Oxford 1982, Penguin Books: London et al. 1991, pp. 160–191, p. 176, and Ben Shook is of the opinion that through them the king “spoke in his own voice” (p. 49). See also Keynes 1980, p. 80.
- 25 For an evaluation of Berengar's rule by means of his social networks see Rosenwein, Barbara H. “The Family Politics of Berengar I, King of Italy (888–924)”. *Speculum* 71, 1996, pp. 247–289.
- 26 Drews, Wolfram: “Imperiale Herrschaft an der Peripherie? Hegemonialstreben und politische Konkurrenz zwischen christlichen und islamischen Herrschern

arch to crown him *basileus*. While Symeon understood this to extend his rule far into the west, making him *basileus Boulgaron kai Rhomaion*, the Byzantine side only granted him the title of a *basileus Boulgaron*, thereby limiting his rule to the same kingdom he held before and by no means elevating his status to that of the Byzantine ruler.<sup>27</sup> This is not the place to discuss the reason why it was especially the early 10<sup>th</sup> century which seems to have produced a variety of emperors across western Christianity,<sup>28</sup> but we should keep in mind that Æthelstan's adoption of such a concept must not have been too alien for his times and that the title of emperor was not yet tied to the Frankish, later holy Roman, empire.

The example of the Bulgarian Basileus has already shown that the title was not necessarily limited to a single person, most likely the monarch of Byzantium. There could be more than one *basileus* and also Charlemagne was addressed by the Byzantine emperor by this title, although only several years after his coronation in Rome.<sup>29</sup> While for Charlemagne this probably meant that he was regarded as an equal by the Byzantine ruler, in the case of the Bulgarians we can clearly make out gradations within the title. Not every *basileus* seems to have been an *imperator* and this also rings true for Æthelstan. The title *basileus* was not meant to render the king equal to either the western or eastern emperors, but was limited to his kingdom, which is why Æthelstan in his intitulations never extended his rule over the Romans, as Symeon did, or used it without geographical restrictions. Congruously, Æthelstan is never called *imperator* or a variant of this word in his charters. Furthermore, in the rare instances that we have of English translations of the term *basileus*, it is always translated as *rex* or *cyning*,

---

im früh- und hochmittelalterlichen 'Westen' ". *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 46, 2012, pp. 1–39, pp. 1–14.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

28 This phenomenon can even be observed in the Muslim controlled parts of Spain, where a Spanish Caliphate emerged in the first half of the tenth century. See *ibid.*, pp. 14–16.

29 The peace treaty of Aachen from 812 between Charlemagne and Michael I calls the western ruler *basileus* in its Greek version, thereby accepting the existence of a second emperor, even though the Byzantine ruler was the only one to be allowed to refer to himself as emperor of the Romans. Classen, Peter: *Karl der Große, das Papsttum und Byzanz. Die Begründung des karolingischen Kaisertums. Erw. Sonderausgabe aus Karl der Grosse, Band 1*. Schwann: Düsseldorf 1968, p. 94.

Christian Scholl, Torben R. Gebhardt and Jan Clauß - 9783631662199

Downloaded from PubFactory at 02/25/2021 11:29:05AM

via free access

obviously severing every connection to the highest of worldly offices, the emperorship.<sup>30</sup> Should we therefore simply ignore it and take it as a mere grecism? Steven Fanning in his article on imperial rule in Bede and thereafter concluded that “every imperium was a regnum, but not every regnum was an imperium”.<sup>31</sup> What he meant was that *imperia* were often also called *regna*, but never the other way round. An *imperium* incorporated several other kingdoms, a regnum did not and while the first was sometimes called by the name of the second their meaning was never interchangeable. Glossing *basileus* as *cyning* does therefore not exclude it from possessing an imperial connotation that elevates it above the office of a regular king. The example of Bulgaria supports this assumption: restricting Simeon’s rule to Bulgaria while still calling him *basileus* was acceptable to the Byzantine realm. Rendering him an equal by granting his title a wider claim was not.

Æthelstan, like his predecessors, took his legitimation from Christ or God. Yet, in his case the emphasis seems to have been stronger. Depictions of Christ wearing a crown become common during the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This was a tradition that might have started during Æthelstan’s reign and that further emphasises his connection to Christ as the legitimising basis of his rule,<sup>32</sup> especially when we take into account the already mentioned altered coronation ordo with regard to the new role of the crown for the king. Jesus’ denomination as King of Kings, *Basileus tôn Basileôn*, in the Bible implicates that the title “King” could incorporate more than one concept, just as in the case of Salomon and David who were both called *basileus* in the Septuagint. This biblical reference could also be the origin of the English *basileus*-title.<sup>33</sup> Æthelstan styling himself *Basileus anglorum* expressed a wish to present himself as more than an ordinary king, but without assuming the office of THE emperor, of whose title he steered clear. Considering that there was very little contact between Byzantium and England in the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup> the question of Greek in-

---

30 For instance a charter by Edgar (S 806) has in its Old English translation *cyning* for *basileus*. See furthermore, Drögereit, pp. 57–58.

31 Fanning, p. 14.

32 Foot, p. 219.

33 Drögereit, pp. 57–58.

34 Michael Lapidge speaks of “sporadic contact”: Lapidge, Michael: “Byzantium, Rome and England in the Early Middle Ages”. In: *Roma fra Oriente e Occi-*

fluence arises. For an answer we most likely have to turn to clerics that possessed knowledge of Greek. Two examples come to mind, first Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus who was of Greek descent<sup>35</sup> and second a scholar by the name of Israel the Grammarian who is attested at Æthelstan's court.<sup>36</sup> Although knowledge from the time of Theodore (7<sup>th</sup> century), whose influence on the English Church was immense, might have stood the test of time, the latter possibility is far more probable, particularly because Harald Kleinschmidt in his study of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>-century intitulations in England sees the origin of the *basileus*-tradition in Abingdon and Winchester during Æthelstan's reign.<sup>37</sup> Besides, the bishop of Winchester, Ælfheah, frequently attended the king's court and undoubtedly met Israel there. That this would make Ælfheah or even Israel the person behind the intitulation does not mean that "we should not [...] assume that any particular political idea lay behind each use of a word like imperator or basileus" and that this rather has to be attributed to a "displaying of knowledge of a grecism" than to anything else, as George Molyneux suggested in a recent article.<sup>38</sup>

---

*dente*. 19–24 aprile 2001. (Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'alto Medioevo 49). Presso la Sede del Centro: Spoleto 2002, pp. 363–400, pp. 377–399.

- 35 Theodore came to England in the seventh century by the order of Pope Vitalian. See for a more detailed description Lapidge, Michael: "The Career of Archbishop Theodore". In: Id.: *Archbishop Theodore. Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*. (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 11). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1995, pp. 1–29. Also Lapidge 2002, pp. 366–373.
- 36 Israel's presence at Æthelstan's court is only attested in sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, we have to keep in mind some restraint when we argue his influence. For a more detailed analysis of Israel the Grammarian see Lapidge, Michael: "Israel the Grammarian in Anglo-Saxon England". In: Id.: *Anglo-Latin Literature, vol. 2. 900–1066*. Hambledon Press: London 1993, pp. 87–103, p. 89; also Wood, Michael: "A Carolingian Scholar in the court of King Æthelstan". In: Leyser, Conrad et al.: *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century: Studies in Honour of Wilhelm Levison (1876–1947)*. (Studies in the Early Middle Ages 37). Brepols: Turnhout 2010, pp. 135–162, p. 139 for Wood's argument that Israel came from Trier, which is not supported by the sources.
- 37 Kleinschmidt, pp. 91–94.
- 38 Molyneux 2011, p. 63. Ben Snook is of a similar opinion, when he says that titles like *basileus*, *gubernator* or *curagulus* in Æthelstan's charters were merely used to show the exalted nature of the king's office and that they would send every translator "hurrying to his glossary." (Snook, p. 76) Yet, especially the

It has already been addressed that intitulations were modes of representation for the Anglo-Saxon ruler and no mere wordplay by court attendees. The sheer closeness to political events disproves this point further. Only after Eamont did Æthelstan start to label himself king of the Angles and, what is more important, ruler of the whole of Britain. Furthermore, only after Æthelstan successfully subdued the Scots again in 934 did the title of *basileus* feature more prominently in his charters, becoming a constant after the Battle of Brunanburh, which established Æthelstan as the undisputed ruler of Scots and Danes alike.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, Welsh kings attended Æthelstan's court regularly and witnessed charters as *subreguli*.<sup>40</sup> Bede's influence becomes reminiscent once more when we take into account the geographical unit to which Æthelstan lays claim. From 930 onwards we find his rulership associated with *Britannia* and, less common, *Albion*, both of which feature prominently in Bede's "Ecclesiastical History".<sup>41</sup> For Bede, *Britannia* was a political and religious unity, representing the natural habitat of the English people. Subsequently, it had to be every ruler's aim to unite the English people living in this entity. Although Bede wrote in the eighth century, his work was so influential that it doubtlessly remained one of the most read works in the tenth century.<sup>42</sup> Æthelstan's styling of himself as ruler of *Britannia* would have invoked an immediate connection to that pivotal work of Anglo-Saxon literature and elevated his kingship above that of his predecessors. After all, not even Alfred the Great achieved the unification of *Britannia* under his rule. Accordingly, the king chose an elaborate title that expressed his status of a monarch, ruling over the whole land of the English as Bede had envisioned it. Of course, this could still

---

term *gubernator* features prominently in charters of Charlemagne after he received the imperial crown in the form of *gubernans imperium* (MGH DD Kar. 1 no. 197–218, pp. 265–291), indicating that the term could have imperial connotation and might even link Æthelstan to the famous Carolingian. In S 437 it occurs in a similar context as in Charlemagne's charters. Æthelstan is named *totius Albionis gubernator*, connecting the position to his 'imperial' realm.

39 For the significance of the Battle of Brunanburh see Foot, pp. 169–183.

40 S 400, S 413, S 418a, S 420 (spurious), S 425, S 434 (spurious), S 435 (spurious), S 436 (spurious) all mention *subreguli* in their witness lists.

41 Bede, I.1, p. 14. *Britannia* is the first word of Bede's work, *Albion* is the sixth.

42 Snook, pp. 76–77.

mean that the responsible scribe saw it necessary to act according to the political events and knew Bede.

Yet, also Æthelstan's coinage styled him as king of all Britain,<sup>43</sup> thereby implying hegemony over several kingdoms and it is highly unlikely that the king had no say in their design,<sup>44</sup> especially since his laws name several places where he wished minters to be active on his behalf. These are foremost in the southern region of England, but the laws additionally state that in every burgh a minter should be active, extending the reach of Æthelstan's coins further north.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough the coins that name Æthelstan *rex totius Britanniae* also mark the regular appearance of mint-names on the king's currency.<sup>46</sup> Should we still intend to deny any influence on the title by Æthelstan himself, we would have to find an explanation why minters as well as scribes used the same intitulation for the king.

Æthelstan's coins show further connections to imperial models. The reverse side changed from the early 930s. The traditional design was a cross in its centre, but now it bore the king's crowned bust. The depiction itself is reminiscent of earlier Roman coinage, but more importantly, might follow an example set by Charlemagne. Coins of the early Carolingian period were similar to their Anglo-Saxon counterpart in that they did not depict persons. After Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome in 800 and especially after he was recognised by the Byzantine ruler in 812, this changed. Coins with the king's bust became common, conveying an imperial concept elevating the Carolingian above his former status. A similar ideology might have been on Æthelstan's mind when his coins started to bear his likeness. However, Sarah Foot pointed out that the style of Æthelstan's coins is

---

43 Foot, pp. 155–157; Blunt, pp. 47–48.

44 Blunt calls Æthelstan's control of his coinage a “firm grip” (p. 116), which is especially reflected in the introduction of mint-names on the coins. See also Karkov, pp. 79–80.

45 Liebermann, Felix (ed.): *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*. Max Niemeyer: Halle (Saale) 1903, vol. 1, II As 14,2, p. 158–159. “In Canterbury are to be seven minters: four of the king and two of the bishop, one of the abbot; in Rochester: two of the king and one of the bishop; in London eight; in Winchester six; in Lewes two; in Hastings one; another in Chichester; in Southampton two; in Wareham two; in Dorchester one; in Exeter two; in Shaftesbury two; otherwise in the other burghs one.”

46 Blunt, pp. 47–48.

decisively different from the Carolingian precedent, especially with regard to the headgear. While the English king is depicted with a crown, unique in style, the Carolingian coins present the rulers with laurel wreaths.<sup>47</sup> Yet, while there is no arguing about the difference in style, the fact that Æthelstan adopted a portrait of his crowned bust roughly at the same time when his charters started to use the *basileus*-title is too unlikely to be a coincident. It rather shows that the English king wanted to convey his elevated status above that of a king, while not assuming the title of the *Roman* (emphasis T.G.) emperor, as the Carolingians did and as it is expressed in the laurel wreath on their coinage.

However, Æthelstan did not only show imperial implications in his intitulations in charters and coinage, but also in his overall monarchic behaviour. Æthelstan tried to extend his influence a good deal further than his predecessors. The best known example for this is the marriage between his sister Eadgyth and the German heir to the throne, Otto, in 929,<sup>48</sup> which has been the focus of scholarship for years.<sup>49</sup> The most common view is that Æthelstan and Henry I forged an alliance against the lingering Viking threat. However, in 929 the Viking menace had already subsided and there is no coordinated attack or defence in the wake of the wedding which might strengthen this point.<sup>50</sup> A more likely explanation why Æthelstan was open

---

47 Foot, pp. 216–223, as well as for the changes in coinage under Charlemagne.

48 For a reconstruction of the events see Bihrer, Andreas: *Begegnungen zwischen dem ostfränkisch-deutschen Reich und England (850–1100). Kontakte – Konstellationen – Funktionalisierungen – Wirkungen*. (Mittelalter-Forschungen 39). Thorbecke: Ostfildern 2012, pp. 298–300.

49 Föbel, Amalie: *Die Königin im mittelalterlichen Reich. Herrschaftsausübung, Herrschaftsrechte, Handlungsspielräume*. (Mittelalter-Forschungen 4). Thorbecke: Stuttgart 2000, p. 65. For an overview of the research see Müller-Wiegand, Daniela: *Vermitteln – beraten – erinnern. Funktionen und Aufgabenfelder von Frauen in der ottonischen Herrscherfamilie (919–1024)*. Kassel University Press: Kassel 2005, pp. 50–59.

50 The opinion of an alliance driven by fear of a Viking invasion is shared by Georgi, Wolfgang: “Bischof Keonwald von Worcester und die Heirat Ottos I. mit Edgitha im Jahre 929”. *Historisches Jahrbuch* 115, 1995, pp. 1–40, pp. 20–21; Müller-Wiegand, p. 56; more cautious: Leyser, Karl Joseph: “Die Ottonen und Wessex”. *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 17, 1983, pp. 73–97, p. 87. Offering alternative explanations is for instance Körntgen, Ludger: “Gandersheim und die Ottonen”. In: Marth, Regine (ed.): *Das Gandersheimer Runenkästchen:*

for the idea to marry his sister off to Germany is twofold. First, by taking her of the English market he prevented other nobles to acquire a strong claim to the throne. After all, Æthelstan never married and subsequently did not produce an heir, a factor he might have had already decided on by 929. Second, Æthelstan's main aim behind the marriage was probably to establish a network between royal houses,<sup>51</sup> in this instance an affiliation of the House of Wessex and the East-Frankish-German ruling dynasty. Bishop Coenwald of Worcester was sent by the king to accompany his sister to the continent for the wedding, but had an additional assignment that further underlines the English king's intention of a lasting network. The confraternity book of St Gall tells us that Coenwald was to travel through the kingdom and visit every monastery to ask the monks to pray for Æthelstan and his close relatives.<sup>52</sup> The bishop was probably supplied with enough silver to ensure that the request was not denied.<sup>53</sup> Although confraternisation was not uncommon for Anglo-Saxon kings before Æthelstan, he was the first to have an envoy pursue this agenda systematically. Coenwald was to visit *every* monastery in *all* of Germany [emphasis T.G.],<sup>54</sup> stressing the countrywide objective of the undertaking twice. The confraternisation did not predominantly serve a

---

*Internationales Kolloquium Braunschweig, 24.-26. März 1999.* (Kolloquiums-bände des Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museums 1). Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum: Braunschweig 2000, pp. 121–138, pp. 132–133; also Nelson, Janet L.: "England and the Continent in the Anglo-Saxon Period". In: Saul, Nigel (ed.): *England in Europe. 1066–1453.* (A History Today Book). Palgrave Macmillan: London 1994, pp. 21–35, p. 28, and Bihrer pp. 296–298. Stenton is of the opinion that Henry the Fowler sought an alliance with Æthelstan to support his occupation of Lotharingia. See Stenton, Frank: *Anglo-Saxon England*, repr. Oxford University Press: Oxford 1989, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2001, p. 346.

51 Bihrer, p. 296.

52 See Piper, Paul (ed.): *Libri Confraternitatum Sancti Galli, Augiensis, Fabariensis.* (MGH. Antiquitates. Necrologia Germaniae, Suppl. Vol. 1). Weidmann: Berlin 1884, pp. 136–137. Coenwald was supposed to visit *omnibus monasteriis per totam Germaniam*. Later on in the entry it is revealed that he was sent by the *rege Anglorum*. The use of this title further strengthens the entry's credibility, since it is in Æthelstan's reign that it becomes more common, although most of the times with a further qualifier. See Kleinschmidt, pp. 103–110.

53 For a more detailed analysis of Coenwald's mission and subsequent life see Georgi, esp. pp. 29–35, and Bihrer, pp. 236–239.

54 *Omnibus monasteriis per totam Germaniam*, Piper, p. 136.

liturgical purpose to assure the salvation of Æthelstan's soul.<sup>55</sup> It bound the two dynasties together and established an obvious and constant link, thanks to the commemorative role of confraternity entries, between the monarchs of two of the most powerful realms.<sup>56</sup>

Æthelstan married more of his sisters off to foreign rulers, yet this does not seem to have had a lasting effect on his reign or his prestige. For instance, the bond between Edith and the king of Burgundy was already forgotten only 50 years later.<sup>57</sup> Andreas Bihrer's view that marriages represented potential connections that had to be renewed and called to mind to remain in effect seems valid in this context and would render the importance of Coenwald's mission to establish a longer lasting bond between the two kingdoms even clearer, especially since the connection did not end there, but was repeatedly renewed by both parties for a long time to come.<sup>58</sup> Of crucial importance is in this respect that this network is not congruent with an Ottonian-Wessexian alliance.<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, while England experienced several military incidents, the most severe being the Battle of Brunanburh,<sup>60</sup> no East-Frankish-German troops were present to assist and vice versa.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between the kings was not meant

---

55 This is not to say that Körntgen was wrong to conclude that Æthelstan was interested in a liturgical assurance for salvation (Körntgen, pp. 132–133), simply that there are more aspects to it, which might have been even more important.

56 Bihrer, pp. 282–284.

57 Stenton, p. 346.

58 For Bihrer's opinion and the passing of Edith's and Louis' marriage into oblivion see Bihrer, pp. 294–295. For the continuous connection of the two dynasties see *ibid.*, p. 300.

59 Foremost Leyser (p. 96) is an advocate of this interpretation of the relationship.

60 Fought in 937 between the English kings and an alliance of the kings of Dublin, Scotland and Strathclyde it ended with a decisive victory for Æthelstan that resulted in the confirmation of the constituent parts as a unified realm. See Foot, pp. 169–183.

61 Actually, in 939 Æthelstan interfered on behalf of the West-Frankish king against Flanders and thereby indirectly against Otto, although with little effect. See Stenton, p. 347, who might have overestimated the significance of Æthelstan's part in the campaign. Similarly Cronenwett, Philip N.: *Basileos anglo-rum'. A Study of the Life and Reign of King Athelstan of England, 924–939*. (Dissertation) University of Massachusetts: Amherst 1974, p. 104. See also Foot, pp. 183–184, who also deems the expedition rather unsuccessful. Bihrer argues

to lend military help in times of distress, but rather to lift their respective prestige within their realms. In the case of Æthelstan, a connection to the old realm of the Carolingians as well as the other foreign ties he established were meant to elevate him above the kings that came before him in England and those that he faced as direct, dangerous neighbours, just as his titles were supposed to do.

Æthelstan extended his influence also further to the east to the court of the Norwegian king. Hakon, the son of king Harald, is also known by the name of Athalesteins fostri, for he actually was fostered by Æthelstan. While this in itself does not imply an imperial claim to Æthelstan's rule, and Æthelstan definitely did not lay claim to the Norwegian kingdom, it is interesting that Harald let his successor be fostered at a Christian court. The consequences must have been clear to Harald, and Hakon was indeed baptized while he was in Æthelstan's care and later tried to convert Norway to Christianity, albeit without success. The whole episode evokes the impression that Hakon was more hostage than foster child and Norwegian historiography seems to have felt the need to rehabilitate their kings, Harald as well as Hakon. Two vernacular texts, the "Fagrskinna" and the "Heimskringla", from around 1200 and the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, respectively, relate the episode as a victory for the Norwegian side. At first, Harald is tricked by Æthelstan when he unwittingly becomes the English king's vassal by unsheathing a sword that was masked as a gift. In return, Harald sends his son Hakon to Æthelstan's court to repay him in kindness. The young prince is welcomed and places himself on the English king's lap, thereby turning him into a vassal of the Norwegian kingdom.<sup>62</sup> Giving children as hostages into the care of a foreign sovereign was quite common and besides his Norwegian foster child, Æthelstan, following the events of 934, also fostered children from the Scottish royal court.

It seems that the English royal court was a busy place during Æthelstan's reign. Apart from Norwegian and Scottish foster children and Welsh kings there seem to have been a variety of German clerics in the king's presence. The latter probably were attracted by the impressive amount of books

---

that the raiding of the Flemish coast might have been exactly what was expected from the English fleet. See Bihrer, pp. 334–335.

62 Foot, pp. 52–55.

and relics that Æthelstan is said to have collected during his reign.<sup>63</sup> His fondness for such treasures is best documented by the marriage agreement between Æthelstan's sister Eadhild and Hugh, Duke of the Franks. Hugh successfully convinced Æthelstan to give him the hand of one of his sisters by sending him a large amount of relics.<sup>64</sup> According to William of Malmesbury these included the sword of Constantine with a piece of the Cross incorporated into the sheath as well as the holy lance which, according to William, formerly belonged to Charlemagne.<sup>65</sup> William is, however, too remote from Æthelstan's times to be accepted as a reliable source, especially since a connection between Charlemagne and the Holy Lance is not attested before 1100. Nevertheless, the fact that Henry the Fowler claimed to have bought the lance from the king of Burgundy only a few years earlier and the appearance of the first image of Christ showing his pierced side in western Christendom in the Æthelstan psalter are interesting coincidences and might grant some credibility to William's report after all.<sup>66</sup> Whether a lance that was said to be the relic that pierced Christ was actually given to Æthelstan or not, the exchange of relics for an Anglo-Saxon bride is most probably true and attests for the English king's interest in them. Relics were no mere trophies in the Middle Ages. They could be used as instruments for royal

---

63 Brett's theory of a systematic acquisition of relics through envoys of Æthelstan might take it a bit too far. At least there is no concrete evidence for it in the sources. Brett, Caroline: "A Breton Pilgrim in England in the Reign of King Æthelstan". In: Jondorf, Gillian / Dumville, David N. (eds.): *France and the British Isles in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Essays by Members of Girton College, Cambridge, in Memory of Ruth Morgan*. Boydell & Brewer: Woodbridge 1991, pp. 43–70, pp. 45–47. See also for this topic Keynes, Simon: "King Æthelstan's Books". In: Lapidge, Michael / Gneuss, Helmut (eds.): *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England. Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1985, pp. 143–201, pp. 143–144.

64 Bihrer, pp. 267–269.

65 William of Malmesbury, ii.135, pp. 218–221.

66 For the veracity of William's account see Foot, pp. 192–198. Also, with a short overview on the scholarship regarding the passage in William's *Gesta*: Rollason, David W.: "Relic-Cults as an Instrument of Royal Policy c. 900-c. 1050". *Anglo-Saxon England* 15, 1987, pp. 91–103, p. 93 n. 11.

policies, above all representation.<sup>67</sup> Æthelstan's interest in collecting relics was reason enough for some scholars to postulate that the Anglo-Saxon king wanted to place himself in competition to the East Frankish-German King Henry the Fowler for the association with the Carolingian imperial legacy.<sup>68</sup> While this would explain the emergence of a Holy Lance in England shortly after Henry supposedly acquired one, it should not be ignored that especially Constantine and Charlemagne were models to be emulated, even without a conjunction to the East Frankish-German realm.

Furthermore, the donations of relics to domestic monastic institutions mostly made them means for domestic demonstrations of rank.<sup>69</sup> There is no reason, however, why these should not have imperial connotations, rendering the king above other rulers who were not in the possession of such illustrate artefacts. Instead of a competition between the two Houses it might be more accurate to speak of an affiliation. This was already manifest in Æthelstan's systematic confraternisation with German monasteries as well as in the marriage between Eadgyth and Otto I and becomes even more apparent when an exchange of two gospel books between the English king and the Ottonian ruler is considered. The books contain reciprocal entries naming the respective king and his mother in both cases.<sup>70</sup> Each book was an older, Carolingian gospel, linking both

---

67 Ibid., p. 91; also Bihrer, p. 269, who says that via relics "der eigene Rang demonstriert oder gar erhöht werden konnte."

68 Rollason, David W.: *Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England*. Blackwell: Oxford 1989, p. 161–162 speaks of a challenge by Æthelstan and Wood, Michael: "The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire. An English Charlemagne?" In: Wormald, Patrick et al. (eds.): *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*. Blackwell: Oxford 1983, pp. 250–272, p. 267 goes as far as interpreting the donation of relics as a *translatio imperii*, making Æthelstan the most prestigious ruler of Western Europe.

69 Bihrer, pp. 268–269.

70 + *ODDA REX + MIHTHILD MATER REGIS* and + *eadgifu regina æPelstan rex angulsaxonum et mercianorum*, respectively. For a description of London, British Library Cotton MS Tiberius A II fol. 24r and Coburg, Landesbibliothek, Ms. 1 168r see Keynes 1985, pp. 147–153 and 189–193, respectively. The intitulation is uncommon for Æthelstan, it seems that the scribe was unfamiliar with contemporary conventions. See *ibid.*, p. 190. The title would have been more common for the time of Edward the Elder and might indicate that, since it is an Anglo-Saxon hand, the scribe left England for the continent before Edward

kings once more to the illustrious dynasty and emphasising the prestigious status of the gifts. The names had further, commemorative functions which would have been called to mind in liturgical contexts, reciting the connection between the two houses repeatedly and, thereby, renewing it in the religious houses to which the kings gave the gospels, Christ Church in Canterbury and Gandersheim Abbey, both of which were of particular importance to the ruling dynasties.<sup>71</sup> The connections of both kings to the imperial Carolingian family and to each other further strengthen Æthelstan's intention to elevate his status over that of a 'common' *rex* and is reminiscent of Coenwald's mission in 929.

Æthelstan's court was also the place where the first steps towards an English Benedictine reform were taken that was to develop its full force during Edgar's reign in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Bishop Ælfheah, frequently attested at Æthelstan's court, seems to have been the driving force in this regard and his influence on Dunstan, a relative of his, and Æthelwold, who later followed him in the bishopric of Winchester, must have been significant. Oda of Canterbury, another confidant of Æthelstan, is also often cited as one of the most influential figures behind the initial steps of

---

died in 924. Subsequently, the names would have been added after the gift was given to Otto at his court. Yet, even in Edward's time there is no evidence for the use of *mercianorum* as a royal title. See Kleinschmidt, pp. 99–100. For the discussion when, where and by whom the names were added see Bihrer, p. 271, and Keynes 1985, pp. 147 and 190, respectively.

71 For Otto's gospel in Gandersheim see Körntgen, p. 131–132. Before Æthelstan donated the book to Christ Church, he had the codex pompously rebound and embellished, commemorating the refinement with a short note and a poem which celebrates the king's fame throughout the world. Scholars concluded from this that Otto's gift was of inferior quality, see especially Hoffmann, Hartmut: *Buchkunst und Königtum im ottonischen und frühsalischen Reich*. (MGH Schriften 10). Hiersemann: Stuttgart 1986, p. 10. The Carolingian connection alone renders this conclusion doubtful. Bihrer's point that the refinements were done to honour the receiving church seems more likely (p. 272). The commemorative entries in the gospels prolonged the effect of the gift exchange, which was otherwise momentary in nature and demonstrated the status of the giving and receiving party in that very instance only. How transient the connection between gift and giver was is shown in the numerous instances where gifts were given away again or were simply forgotten. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–280.

the reform.<sup>72</sup> The appearance of an East-Frankish-German monk by the name of Gottschalk, who was supposedly made abbot of Abingdon by Æthelstan, gave rise to the idea of a ‘German connection’ which supplied the English realm with clerics from the continent, further emphasising Æthelstan’s role in the Benedictine reform.<sup>73</sup> Susan E. Kelly, however, showed that the charters that scholars built their theory on, were late 10<sup>th</sup>-century forgeries.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxon king involved himself in religious matters, an association which should not be underestimated when it comes to the concept of imperial rule. Emperors are not only rulers of several kingdoms. They are also defenders of the Christian faith and Æthelstan acted accordingly when he forced the kings at Eamont in 927 to renounce all idolatry and when he baptized Hakon of Norway. The pivotal model for an emperor as a defender of faith is Charlemagne and it is not surprising that William of Malmesbury sought to connect the two in his account of Æthelstan’s collection of relics.

A panegyric poem called “*Carta dirige gressus*”, probably composed close after 927, represents an additional link to the Carolingian period. It seems to have been based on a poem that was written by *Hibernicus Exul* and represents for Michael Lapidge the missing link to Æthelstan’s mature ideology in his later reign.<sup>75</sup> While this does not prove an intentional connection to the first Carolingian emperor, it at least attests for Carolingian literature circulating at Æthelstan’s court, further demonstrating the high standard of learning that seems to have attracted foreign scholars like the aforementioned Israel. Furthermore, panegyrics were an imperial prerogative in late antiquity. While they lost that status

---

72 For the significance of Oda and Æthelstan’s court in general with regard to the Benedictine reform see Gretsich, Mechthild: *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform*. (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 25). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1999, pp. 387 and 427.

73 The quote is taken from Wood 2010, p. 137. See also Stenton, p. 444 and Dumville 1992, p. 159 for a discussion on the topic.

74 Kelly, Susan (ed.): *Charters of Abingdon Abbey Part 1*. (Anglo-Saxon Charters 7). British Academy: London 2000, pp. lxxi, ccix and ccxii–xxciii. The two charters in question are S 409 and S 410.

75 Lapidge, Michael: “Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan”. *Anglo-Saxon England* 9, 1981, pp. 61–98, pp. 83–93.

during the early Middle Ages, they still meant to elevate the ruler above other kings. There are additional connections to the Carolingian royal dynasty in products of Æthelstan's court. Especially some contemporary illuminations of codices are influenced by Carolingian predecessors.<sup>76</sup> Even though the majority was still dominated by the insular style, it shows the presence of Æthelstan's former continental counterparts at his court and hints further at his wish to affiliate with the imperial nature of their rule. One of these codices is worth a closer look. Æthelstan frequently gave books to monasteries and in the case of Chester-le-street, which he probably visited during the return from his campaign in 934, we know of a copy of Bede's "Life of Cuthbert", who is said to have been buried there, that the king donated to the saint among other things.<sup>77</sup> An illustration that was added to the manuscript in Æthelstan's time shows the king standing before the saint, a depiction that is modelled once more on Carolingian prototypes (cf. figure 1).<sup>78</sup> His head is bowed over an open book that he seems to read, as David Rollason convincingly argued.<sup>79</sup> Opposite to him stands Cuthbert carrying a closed book in his left hand and supposedly blessing the king with his right. The figures are in separate spaces but the saint enters Æthelstan's space with his blessing giving hand. The whole image appears to praise Æthelstan's devotion to the saint,<sup>80</sup> who was after all one of the pivotal saints of the Anglo-Saxon period and had a special relationship to Northumbria as his place of origin, of which Æthelstan had just secured control to unite all English subjects under his 'British' rule.<sup>81</sup>

So far, I have tried to convey the picture of a king seeing himself as the imperial ruler of Britain and outwardly communicating this understanding in imagery and behaviour. While this kind of rulership definitely differed from Æthelstan's predecessor Edward, it has to be kept in mind

---

76 For Carolingian influences on books in Æthelstan's sphere see Wood 1983, pp. 268–269.

77 Corpus Christi College MS 183, fol. 1v.

78 Karkov, pp. 55–58.

79 Rollason 1989, p. 150. For a different opinion see Karkov, pp. 59–60.

80 Foot, p. 120–121.

81 Another important saint in this regard was Oswald and Æthelstan sought affiliation with him as well, see Karkov, pp. 73–79.

that concepts of hegemonic rule are not new to the Anglo-Saxon world. In Bede's "Historia" we encounter a list of seven kings who held imperial rule,<sup>82</sup> most of them over the kingdoms south of the Humber, but the last three, Northumbrian, kings were also able to extend their dominion over the lands in the north. The "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" dubbed these rulers *Bret-* or *Brytenwalda*, spawning a massive debate over whether such a title actually existed and what it meant. Among others, Patrick Wormald and Stephen Fanning came to the conclusion that while there were several kings holding hegemony over large parts of Britain before the time of Æthelstan, an official *Bretwalda*-title never existed.<sup>83</sup> However, this does not mean that Bede's list of exceptional rulers did not inspire imitation or transported the idea of Britain as a political unity into later centuries, especially since two of Bede's kings were such paramount examples of rulership that they later were venerated as saints. Oswald of Northumbria in particular inspired a long lasting and influential cult that Æthelstan specifically promoted.<sup>84</sup> The addition of Ecgbert of Wessex to the list of imperial rulers by the author of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" already suggests that the concept still existed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>85</sup> Æthelstan's knowledge of Bede's writings was already discussed and the suggestion that he tried to emulate these hegemonic rulers of Britain would explain to some extent the intitulations and his imperial ideology. One of the few charters of Æthelstan that survived in English even calls him *God gyuing*

---

82 Bede, II. 5, pp. 148–150.

83 Wormald, Patrick: "Bede, the Bretwaldas and the origins of the gens Anglo-rum". In: Id. et al. (eds.): *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, Blackwell: Oxford 1983, pp. 99–129, pp. 118–127; Fanning, esp. 23–26. While Wormald later somewhat qualifies his statement by admitting that the status probably did exist (p. 128), Fanning draws the conclusion that the "entire concept ought to be abandoned" (p. 26).

84 Foot pp. 204–208. See also note 81.

85 The term is not limited to one version. See for instance in Version B of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": *7 he wæs eahtoða cyning Æ brytenwalda wæs*. Dumville 1983–2004, vol. 4, p. 30: "And he was the eighth king who was *Bretwalda*."

*kyng welding eal Brytone*,<sup>86</sup> using a phrasing that is suspiciously close to the term *Bretwalda*. Yet, Bede did not promote the idea of an English empire under one emperor, but of a geographical as well as an ethnical unit called “Britain” which incorporated several kingdoms of the *gentis anglorum*.<sup>87</sup> Æthelstan’s frequent connections to Bede’s work and especially the titles referring to his realm as *Britannia* or *Albion* show that the English king embraced this vision. Æthelstan saw the unification of Bede’s Britain under his rule as only few had accomplished it before, and none to the same, complete extent.

It is the connection to this older hegemonic concept which sheds further light on Æthelstan’s decisive victory over an army consisting of the retinue of the kings of Dublin, Scotland and Strathclyde in 937 which ended all efforts of autonomy by these rulers in Æthelstan’s reign. It saw the death of five petty kings, a number of jarls and also the son of king Constantine of Scotland. This devastating blow cemented Æthelstan’s status as king of all Britain, although that would not last long after he died. The importance of the battle was already apparent to the contemporaries and the longest poem that can be found in the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicle”, written in alliterative verse, is in praise of it. More importantly it also sets it into a wider, historical context when it says:

---

86 S 391. The charter is somewhat spurious, however, as it gives 843 as the date of creation. The correct date seems to be 934. See Abrams 1996, pp. 187–188, 235.

87 Even though Bede uses the term *imperium*, all of the ruler he associates with it are called *rex*. (II. 5, pp. 148–150) See Drögereit, pp. 36–46. For Bede, the decisive element for an *imperium* seems to have been exercising rule over other people or kingdoms. Subsequently, there could be several *imperia* in Britain that included only parts of the geographical unit he described in the beginning. See Fanning, pp. 19–20, who also points out that Bede was not completely consistent in presenting the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as an English unity. Yet, he as well has to admit that “It cannot be doubted that at times Bede included all of the various groups of the English in the term *gens Anglorum* or that his ‘Ecclesiastical History’ can be read in such a way as to establish the *Angli* as a distinct and self-aware people” (p. 20). See also Wormald, pp. 119–127 on this topic.

Never was there more slaughter on this island, never yet as many people killed before this with sword's edge: never according to those who tell us from books, old wisemen, since from the east Angles and Saxons came up over the broad sea, Britain they sought, proud war-smiths who overcame the Welsh, glorious warriors they took hold of the land.<sup>88</sup>

Not only is the battle set apart as being the most vicious one in British history, the victors, foremost king Æthelstan, also surpass the kings of old who sought Britain, for Æthelstan has obtained their object of desire. The word "Britain" as well as the reference to the arrival of the Angles and Saxons call Bede to mind once more. The eighth-century monk's account of the landing of the continental tribes probably inspired the comparison of the achievement at Brunanburh to that of the warriors of old, finally bringing the English campaign full circle in the hegemony of Æthelstan.<sup>89</sup>

In conclusion, Æthelstan's reign marks a decisive turning point in British history. Not only were the territories that were later to become the kingdom of England united under one rule for the first time, Britain as a political unity also came into being, an aspect that became very prominent with high medieval historians like Geoffrey of Monmouth or William of Malmesbury. Æthelstan's numerous imperial titles convey exactly this message. Neither *basileus* nor *imperator* or *imperare* are meant to set claim to the old Roman emperors, but they intended to set him apart from ordinary kings who were his *subreguli*. The same can be said about his monarchical behaviour. Æthelstan associated himself with other powerful rulers in Western Christendom, even with the Carolingians of past days, thereby enlarging his view across the channel. However, he did not seek to elevate himself above these, but to affiliate with them as an equal. His increased interest in relics, the connections via marriages and his systematic confraternisation with monastic institutions on the continent intended to do exactly that. Behind all stood the influence of Bede, who gave Æthelstan

---

88 *Ne wearð wæl mare on þys iglande æfre gyta folces gefylled beforan þyssum swurdes ecgum, þæs ðe us secgað bec, ealde uþwitan, siððan eastan hider Engle 7 Sexe upp becomon, ofer brade brimu Bretene sohton, wlance wigsmiðas, Wealas ofercomon, eorlas arhwate eard begeaton.* Dumville 1983–2004, vol. 6, p. 43.

89 For Bede's role in the imperial concept of Æthelstan see Foot, pp. 223–225.

the framing for his imperial claim that raised him above his Wessexian predecessors. Æthelstan wanted to be associated with the illustrious group of the paramount kings of old who held hegemony over the English lands. Even more, he built on the concept of Britain as an ethnic unity that Bede promoted. As the monarch of this united realm, he was more than a king, he was a king of kings. In this regard the term *basileus* has to be translated as “king” and not “emperor”, but it still does not carry the same meaning as *rex*, rather *superrex* in the lexical sense. This shows that medieval titles like *rex* or *imperator* were much more nuanced in meaning than we often take them to be. Æthelstan’s adopted imperial concept of rule was similar to that of the most known emperors of East and West, but not congruent. He expressed his rule to be more than that of a mere *rex anglorum*, without laying claim to be an *imperator anglorum*.

Figure 1: *Æthelstan presenting a book to Saint Cuthbert*. Illuminated manuscript from Bede's "Life of St Cuthbert", c. 930. 29.2 x 20 cm (11 1/2 x 7 7/8"). Originally from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, URL: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Æthelstan.jpg> (Wikimedia Commons).



