

MUNEA'26



# Study Guide HCC

Agenda Item: The Witan of Wessex

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## Letter from Secretary General

Esteemed Participants;

My name is Mustafa Gürmeriç and I am serving as the Secretary General of MUNEA'26. It is a great honour to welcome you all to the 2nd edition of Ankara Erman Ilıcak Science High School's Model United Nations Conference, MUNEA'26.

This conference means a lot to me, not just because I helped organize it, but because I began my MUN career in 9th grade with MUNER'24, our school's mock MUN. Since then, I've continued to participate in conferences, and I've finally come back to where I started but this time not as a delegate, but as someone organizing it. This entire process has not only taught me a great deal but has also been a significant experience that has shaped who I am today.

As the MUNEA'26 community, we have dedicated ourselves fully to this process and worked tirelessly to bring you one of the best conferences possible. And I cannot conclude without thanking the entire academic community and the organizing team, especially my colleagues on the executive team for their contributions to this process.

And finally, dear delegates, I would like to thank you for joining us on this journey; it would not be complete without you. I hope you come to your committees well prepared and enjoy three days that are as academic and fun as possible. I look forward to seeing you all at our school from May 22–24. Debate. Collaborate. Make a Change.

Sincerely,

Mustafa Gürmeriç

Secretary General of MUNEA'26

## Letter from Co Under Secretary General

Highly Distinguished Delegates,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to MUNEA'26. My name is Derin Demirman, I'm currently studying at Zeki Müren Fine Arts High School. It is an honor to serve as your Under Secretary General with my Co-Under Secretary General, İlhan Yaman who's one of the best people you can meet with.

Before moving forward, I would like to thank the Executive Team of MUNEA'26 for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this conference.

Throughout this committee, We will focus on witan of wessex please read this study guide that we have prepared for you carefully to have a memorable committee experience throughout these three days. We encourage each of you to explore your roles in depth, understand your allocations thoroughly, and actively participate in every stage of the committee.

Here is my contact information; please do not hesitate to reach out and ask questions about the committee.

Derin Demirman

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## Letter from Co Under Secretary General

Dear Participants,

Greetings. I'm Ilhan Yaman. I currently study Law at the University of York and have been doing Model United Nation conferences since late 2021. I will serve as your Under Secretary General with my beloved sister Derin Derinman.

This committee will focus on the Witan of Wessex under King Alfred The Great and your main priority will be to prevent and expel the Viking invasion from England. We have allocated many roles in many different areas that will have to address the populace, military, clergy and many more to make this committee more interactive.

For the study guide, we've especially focused on the historical context of the situation to give a crystal clear understanding of the situation delegates will be facing during this crisis.

I hope that this committee will exceed your expectations. I also urge you to come to me during the conferences if you have any problems, feedback or questions as I believe delivering the best experience for everyone is this way.

I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Executive Team for giving us a chance to prepare and deliver this committee.

If you have any questions, feel free to send an email or text and I will be more than glad to help.

Sincerest regards, Ilhan Yaman Under Secretary General

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# **I. Introduction to the Committee**

## **1. The Nature and Authority of the Witan**

The Witan, also known as the Witenagemot, was the royal council of Anglo-Saxon England and one of the most important political institutions within the kingdom. The term “Witan” comes from “the wise men,” reflecting the role of experienced nobles, bishops, military leaders, and royal advisors who gathered to guide the king in matters concerning the realm. Unlike later centralized monarchies, Anglo Saxon kings did not rule entirely alone or with absolute authority. Instead, the king depended greatly on the cooperation and approval of the kingdom’s most influential figures, all of whom were represented within the Witan.

The members of the Witan generally included Ealdormen, powerful regional governors who controlled large territories; Thegns, landholding warriors who provided military service to the crown; bishops and abbots representing the Church; as well as royal officials and advisors close to the king. The composition of the Witan could vary depending on the issue being discussed and the political situation of the kingdom. During times of peace, the Witan mainly functioned as a governing and advisory body, while in periods of war and instability it became a center of emergency leadership and military coordination.

The Witan held influence over nearly every major aspect of governance within Anglo Saxon England. Its responsibilities included advising the king on military campaigns, foreign diplomacy, taxation, administration of justice, and lawmaking. The council also played an important role in approving royal decrees and ensuring cooperation between the crown and regional leaders. One of its most significant powers was its influence over royal succession. Although kingship was hereditary to an extent, the Witan possessed the authority to recognize and legitimize a new ruler. This meant that a king needed not only royal blood, but also the support of the kingdom’s political and religious elites in order to effectively govern.

The authority of the Witan depended heavily on the strength and prestige of the reigning monarch. Under a successful and respected king, the Witan often served primarily as a supportive institution. However, under weak rulers or during moments of national crisis, the council could become far more powerful and independent. Because Anglo-Saxon England lacked a highly centralized bureaucracy, kings relied heavily on local nobles and church officials to enforce royal authority throughout the kingdom. Without the cooperation of these leaders, maintaining order and defending the realm became extremely difficult.

During the Viking invasions of the 9th century, the importance of the Witan increased dramatically. Viking raids and invasions devastated many Anglo Saxon kingdoms, weakening political unity and threatening the survival of Christian England itself. In these dangerous circumstances, the king relied on the Witan not only for political support but also for military organization, economic stability, and maintaining morale among the population. The council became responsible for coordinating defenses, gathering armies, organizing supplies, and ensuring loyalty among regional leaders.

By 878, after the catastrophic fall of Chippenham to the forces of Guthrum, the role of the Witan had transformed significantly. The kingdom of Wessex stood on the brink of collapse, while King Alfred had been forced into hiding within the marshes of Athelney. In this desperate situation, the Witan no longer acted merely as an advisory council. Instead, it became an emergency leadership body struggling to preserve the survival of Anglo Saxon rule. The loyalty of the nobles, clergy, and military leaders within the Witan would determine whether Wessex could recover or whether England would fall completely under Danish domination.

The Witan therefore represented far more than a political assembly. It symbolized the balance between royal authority, noble power, military leadership, and religious influence within Anglo-Saxon society. In times of crisis, its decisions could determine the future of the kingdom itself.

## **2. Political Structure of England**

During the late 9th century, England was not yet a unified nation under a single ruler. Instead, the island was divided among several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that constantly competed, allied, and fought with one another for dominance. The most important of these kingdoms were Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia. Together, these kingdoms formed the political foundation of Anglo Saxon England. However, their rivalries and lack of central unity often made coordinated defense against external threats extremely difficult.

Before the Viking invasions intensified, Mercia and Wessex were generally considered the strongest Anglo-Saxon powers. Mercia had dominated much of England during the 8th century, exercising influence over neighboring kingdoms and controlling important trade routes. Northumbria, located in the north, was culturally and religiously significant, containing influential monasteries and wealthy settlements. East Anglia, though smaller, remained economically valuable due to its fertile land and access to maritime trade. Despite their strengths, the kingdoms often focused more on regional power struggles than long term unity.

The arrival of Viking raiders dramatically changed the political landscape of England. Beginning with coastal raids during the late 8th century, the Scandinavian threat evolved into full scale invasions by the mid 9th century. The formation of the Great Heathen Army marked a turning point, as Viking forces no longer came only to raid monasteries and villages but to conquer and permanently settle Anglo-Saxon lands. The invasions shattered the balance of power across England and destabilized nearly every kingdom on the island.

By 878, the political situation in England had become catastrophic for the Anglo Saxons. Northumbria had already fallen under Danish control after the capture of York, while East Anglia was conquered and absorbed into Viking territory. Mercia, once the dominant kingdom of England, had been severely weakened through military defeats, internal

instability, and Danish occupation. Parts of Mercia remained under Anglo-Saxon rule, but its authority was fragmented and unreliable. As a result, Wessex became the final major Anglo Saxon kingdom capable of resisting Viking domination.

Under the leadership of King Alfred, Wessex stood as the last organized center of Anglo Saxon resistance. Alfred's kingdom became both a military stronghold and a symbol of survival for Christian England. However, even Wessex faced enormous challenges. Continuous Viking attacks weakened royal authority, devastated settlements, and strained the kingdom's economy and military resources. Alfred depended heavily on the loyalty of nobles, local leaders, and the Church to maintain order throughout the kingdom.

The political structure of Wessex itself was organized through a hierarchical system based on land ownership, military service, and loyalty to the crown. The kingdom was divided into administrative regions known as shires, each governed by an Ealdorman. Ealdormen were among the most powerful figures in Anglo Saxon society and acted as representatives of the king within their territories. Their responsibilities included collecting taxes, overseeing local courts, organizing defenses, enforcing royal law, and commanding regional military forces during times of war. In many ways, the effectiveness of royal rule depended on the competence and loyalty of these regional governors.

Below the Ealdormen stood the Thegns, landholding nobles and warriors who formed the backbone of Anglo Saxon military society. Thegns received land and privileges from the king or powerful lords in exchange for military service and loyalty. They commanded local retainers and warbands, provided soldiers during military campaigns, and helped maintain order within their communities. Because Anglo Saxon armies were heavily dependent on local recruitment, the support of the Thegns was essential for defending the kingdom against Viking invasions.

The political system also relied heavily on the Fyrd, the local militia system composed of ordinary freemen called into military service during emergencies. While the Fyrd provided manpower, it often struggled against the more experienced and professional Viking armies. This weakness exposed the limitations of the Anglo-Saxon political and military structure during prolonged warfare.

The Church held immense influence within Anglo Saxon England and functioned as both a spiritual and political institution. Bishops, abbots, and senior clergy advised kings directly and often participated in royal councils such as the Witan. Monasteries served not only as religious centers but also as places of learning, administration, and economic activity. Since literacy was largely controlled by the clergy, the Church played a key role in preserving laws, records, and political communication.

Religion also reinforced political legitimacy. Anglo Saxon kings were viewed as rulers chosen under Christian authority, and the Church often portrayed resistance against the pagan Vikings as a sacred duty. This close relationship between religion and governance meant that attacks against monasteries and churches were seen not only as acts of war, but also as

assaults against Christian civilization itself the political structure of England in 878 was fragile.

### **3. The Role of the Witan under King Alfred**

Under the rule of King Alfred, the Witan served as both a political and military council that played a central role in the survival and administration of the kingdom of Wessex. Alfred's reign occurred during one of the most dangerous periods in Anglo-Saxon history, as Viking invasions threatened not only the independence of Wessex but also the existence of Christian Anglo Saxon rule across England. In such unstable circumstances, Alfred could not govern alone. The support, loyalty, and cooperation of the Witan became essential for maintaining stability within the kingdom and organizing resistance against the Danish invaders.

The Witan under Alfred was composed of influential nobles, Ealdormen, Thegns, bishops, abbots, military leaders, and royal officials. These figures represented the political, military, and religious leadership of Wessex. Through regular councils and assemblies, the Witan advised Alfred on important matters affecting the kingdom, including military campaigns, taxation, diplomacy, trade, lawmaking, and succession. The council also acted as a bridge between the king and the regional authorities, ensuring that royal decisions could be enforced throughout the kingdom.

One of the most important responsibilities of the Witan during Alfred's reign was coordinating the defense of Wessex against Viking invasions. The Viking threat was constant and unpredictable, forcing Alfred and his advisors to focus heavily on military preparedness. The Witan assisted the king in gathering troops from the Fyrd, organizing regional defenses, maintaining fortifications, and distributing military responsibilities among local leaders. Since Anglo-Saxon armies depended largely on regional support, the loyalty of the nobles and military commanders within the Witan directly affected the kingdom's ability to resist invasion.

The council also played an important role in maintaining unity among the nobles of Wessex. Viking victories had created fear and uncertainty across England, leading some Anglo-Saxon leaders to surrender, flee, or cooperate with the Danes for their own survival. Alfred relied on the Witan to prevent fragmentation within his kingdom and to ensure that regional leaders continued supporting the crown rather than pursuing their own interests independently. Without the support of the Witan, Alfred's authority could have collapsed entirely during moments of crisis.

Beyond military matters, the Witan also helped Alfred preserve political legitimacy. Anglo-Saxon kingship depended not only on royal blood but also on recognition from the kingdom's leading nobles and church officials. By supporting Alfred publicly, the Witan reinforced his legitimacy as king even during periods of defeat and instability. The council

therefore became essential in preserving confidence among both the nobility and the general population.

After Alfred's devastating defeat at Chippenham in 878 by the forces of Guthrum, the role of the Witan became even more critical. The sudden Viking attack forced Alfred to flee into the marshes of Athelney, while much of Wessex fell into chaos. At this point, many nobles questioned whether continued resistance against the Vikings was still possible. Some leaders considered surrendering to Danish authority in order to protect their lands and families, while others feared the complete collapse of Anglo-Saxon rule.

In response to this crisis, the Witan transformed from a traditional advisory body into an emergency leadership council responsible for the survival of the kingdom itself. Its members worked to maintain political order, gather loyal supporters, and prevent the total fragmentation of Wessex. The council helped coordinate resistance efforts, restore morale among the population, and organize military recovery despite overwhelming circumstances.

The Witan also played a crucial role in maintaining the support of the Church during this period. Religious leaders within the council portrayed Alfred's struggle against the Vikings as both a political and spiritual battle. This religious support strengthened public morale and encouraged continued loyalty to the king even when victory seemed unlikely.

Ultimately, the role of the Witan under King Alfred extended far beyond simple advice. During one of the darkest periods in English history, it became the foundation of political survival, military organization, and national unity within Wessex. The cooperation between Alfred and the Witan allowed the kingdom to endure the Viking crisis and laid the groundwork for the eventual recovery and unification of England under Anglo-Saxon rule.

#### **4. Role of Religion in Anglo-Saxon England**

Religion played a central role in Anglo-Saxon society and influenced nearly every aspect of political, social, and cultural life. By the 9th century, Christianity had become firmly established across most Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, shaping the laws, traditions, education systems, and political legitimacy of rulers. The Church was not only a religious institution, but also one of the most powerful political and economic forces within England. Kings relied heavily on the support of the clergy, while ordinary people viewed religion as an essential part of daily life and survival.

The Christian Church possessed vast amounts of land, wealth, and influence. Monasteries and churches served as religious centers, but they were also places of education, administration, and economic activity. Since literacy was largely limited to members of the clergy, monks and priests were responsible for preserving written records, copying manuscripts, maintaining laws, and documenting important historical events. Religious institutions therefore became essential for governance and communication throughout Anglo Saxon England.

High ranking church officials such as bishops, abbots, and archbishops held considerable authority and frequently advised kings directly. These religious leaders often participated in royal councils such as the Witan, helping shape decisions regarding law, diplomacy, taxation, and military affairs. The Church also strengthened royal legitimacy by presenting kingship as part of God's divine order. A ruler who possessed the support of the Church was viewed as a legitimate Christian king chosen to protect his people and uphold religious order.

Religion also heavily influenced Anglo Saxon law and morality. Many legal codes were based on Christian teachings, and crimes against the Church were often punished severely. Monasteries acted as centers of charity and shelter, while priests guided local communities spiritually and socially. Religious festivals, ceremonies, and traditions structured much of everyday life for ordinary people.

The Viking invasions of the 9th century transformed religion into an even more important political issue. The Scandinavian Vikings were primarily pagan during this period and worshipped Norse gods such as Odin and Thor. As Viking raids intensified, many Anglo Saxons viewed the invasions not only as military attacks, but also as religious threats against Christian civilization itself. Viking armies frequently targeted monasteries and churches because they were wealthy, poorly defended, and symbolically important. Famous religious centers were looted, burned, and destroyed, resulting in the loss of valuable manuscripts, treasures, and sacred relics.

These attacks created widespread fear throughout Christian England. Many believed that the Viking invasions were a punishment from God or a direct assault against Christianity. Religious leaders used this fear to encourage unity and resistance among the Anglo Saxon kingdoms. Clergymen preached that defending the kingdom against the pagan Danes was both a political duty and a sacred responsibility.

Under the leadership of King Alfred, the Church became one of the strongest supporters of resistance against the Vikings. Alfred maintained close relations with bishops and religious scholars, understanding that the Church's support was essential for maintaining public morale and political legitimacy. Clergy encouraged loyalty to Alfred and portrayed his struggle as a righteous defense of Christian England against pagan invaders.

Even during periods of military defeat, the Church helped preserve unity within Wessex. Religious figures spread messages of hope, encouraged cooperation among nobles, and strengthened the morale of both soldiers and civilians. The Church also continued preserving literacy and education despite the destruction caused by Viking raids. Monks copied religious and historical texts, maintained administrative records, and protected Anglo Saxon cultural identity during a time of crisis.

The alliance between the Church and King Alfred played a major role in preserving the kingdom of Wessex and ensuring the continuation of Christian rule in England.

## **II. Historical Background**

The late ninth century was one of the most disastrous, and formative, times in the history of Anglo-Saxon England. The political system that had ruled the island for centuries, broke down under the pressure of Scandinavian invasions within only a few decades. Ancient kingdoms that once dominated the political landscape vanished or were reduced to puppet states. Originally seasonal, Viking raids grew into campaigns of conquest, settlement and domination. By 878, the Danes had taken over most of England and the Kingdom of Wessex was the only major Anglo-Saxon kingdom which still held out against conquest.

The basis of the Witan of Wessex committee is the Viking expansion, the creation of the Great Heathen Army, the destruction of Northumbria and East Anglia, the fall of Mercia, and the struggles of King Alfred. Delegates should be aware of not only the military events of this time, but the political, social, religious and economic events that followed.

The Battle of Cynwit briefly revived hope for the Anglo-Saxon resistance, but the Viking seizure of Chippenham and Alfred's subsequent flight to the Somerset marshes nearly destroyed the West Saxon kingdom altogether. These events created a period of great uncertainty. The Witan, the council of nobles, bishops and military leaders, had to face the possibility that Wessex itself might cease to exist.

It is important that the delegates understand the sequence of events which led to Alfred's flight into the marshes. The result of this crisis would determine whether Anglo-Saxon England survived or was swept away under Scandinavian rule.

### **1. The Start of Viking Raids on England**

The Viking Age in England is generally considered to have begun in 793 with the notorious raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne off the northeastern coast of Northumbria. The attack sent shockwaves through Christian Europe. In the past the monastery had been a sacred place under divine protection, but Scandinavian raiders plundered churches, slaughtered monks, enslaved captives, and took the treasures with little or no resistance.

The raid seemed apocalyptic. Anglo-Saxon chroniclers observed ominous portents in the sky and interpreted the attack as divine punishment for the sins of the English kingdoms. But the Vikings were not driven by savagery or religious hatred alone. Their expansion was due to a combination of political ambition, economic opportunity, population pressure, and military innovation.

The eighth and ninth centuries were a time of great change in the Scandinavian world. Regional kings and chieftains fought fiercely for power, and warriors sought wealth and prestige through raiding abroad. The Vikings also enjoyed huge advantages in the technology of Scandinavian shipbuilding. Their longships were fast, light and could

sail the deep seas and shallow rivers. This allowed Viking armies to attack unexpectedly along the coast and inland waterways.

Viking activity in England was at first predominantly seasonal raiding. They were rich, but lacked military protection, and small warbands attacked monasteries and isolated settlements. In the early ninth century, Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia were repeatedly attacked.

But in the middle of the ninth century the character of Viking warfare altered drastically. Raids became organised invasions. Scandinavian leaders were no longer just looking to plunder, but to conquer land, set up settlements and rule kingdoms for good.

The success of the Viking expansion cannot be understood without an examination of the internal weaknesses of Anglo-Saxon England.

At this time England was divided into several competing kingdoms, collectively known as the Heptarchy. The major powers were Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria, East Anglia, Kent, Essex and Sussex. There had been some kingdoms which had come to dominate others, but the political unity had been fragile.

Rivalries among the Anglo-Saxon rulers also divided them, weakening resistance to outside threats. Kings often cared more about their own regional interests than the common defence. Mercia and Wessex had often competed for influence in southern England, whilst Northumbria was wracked by dynastic instability and civil war.

Most armies were based on the fyrd, a levy of free men called up for a period of military service. They were effective at defending local territories, but these forces were difficult to maintain over long periods. In contrast, the Viking armies consisted of professional soldiers experienced in long and sustained warfare.

The Vikings also made use of mobility. It was difficult for Anglo-Saxon rulers to predict where attacks might come. Viking fleets could attack a number of areas quickly, so the defenders had to spread their strength out.

The monasteries and trading centres by rivers and the sea were economically important. This was another big problem. The Vikings' main targets were these wealthy settlements. Repeated raids devastated commerce and undermined royal authority.

By the middle of the ninth century, the Scandinavian threat had moved from sporadic piracy to an existential crisis for the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

## 2. **Expansion of Vikings in England**

Raids by Vikings were increasing. Scandinavian leaders were hearing about England's agricultural wealth and political disunity. They could take territory directly, rather than only stealing resources.

Some Viking groups started to overwinter in England instead of returning to Scandinavia after summer campaigns. Fortified camps were set up which meant armies could maintain the pressure throughout the year.

The arrival of larger armies changed the balance of power radically. Viking leaders planned campaigns over several kingdoms, showing a level of strategic planning far beyond previous raiding expeditions.

It also illustrated the prevailing political culture of Scandinavia. A successful war leader attracted followers through the sharing of property and lands. England presented the perfect opportunity to such aspiring leaders who wished to carve out a name and reputation.

In the 860, the scene was all set for the greatest assault that ever struck England: that of the Great Heathen Army.

## 3. **Formation of the Great Heathen Army**

In 865, the huge number of Vikings arrived at the territory of East Anglia. They were called by Anglo-Saxon sources the "Great Heathen Army" owing to the army's size and religious views.

This raid differed significantly from the previous Viking expeditions, being not only a short campaign. This army was formed by many Scandinavian warbands under the command of influential leaders, and the warriors belonged not only to Scandinavians but to Danish, Norwegian, Irish, and Frankish Vikings.

The commanders of the Great Heathen Army are usually identified with Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan Ragnarsson, and Ubba Ragnarsson, who, according to medieval sources, were sons of the heroic Viking, Ragnar Lothbrok.

All Viking warriors used heavy weapons like spears, axes, and swords. Some soldiers had mail armor, whereas others used bows as their only defensive weapon.

Siege warfare, mobility, and navigation were some of the most advanced skills of Vikings. Due to their proficiency in river navigation, the Vikings penetrated deep into England's territory.

In addition to physical power, Vikings employed psychological warfare to terrorize people and break enemy spirit.

The Great Heathen Army initially landed in East Anglia in 865. Rather than engaging in battles straight away, the Vikings first got hold of necessary supplies.

It was more profitable for East Anglian rulers to buy peace and not get destroyed by Vikings. In this way, the Vikings were able to prepare for their next campaign.

#### **4. The Fall of Northumbria and East Anglia**

Northumbria was not in a strong position when the Great Heathen Army advanced to the north in 866. There was much dissension and rivalry in the kingdom. Rivalry over the right of succession and conflicts between the nobility weakened the kingdom.

At that period of time, two people were fighting over succession in Northumbria King Ælla and Osberht. Civil war was another factor that adversely affected the kingdom's military capacity.

For example, in 866 the Great Heathen Army conquered the wealthy and strategically located city of York. The importance of the city cannot be overstated. York controlled communications, economy, and politics in northern Britain. The capture of the city demonstrated Viking military superiority since its defences proved ineffective against a determined assault.

Being confronted with the situation, Ælla and Osberht stopped warring and united their armies for the assault of York.

However, this campaign failed as the joint army of Anglo-Saxons suffered a defeat in 867. Both kings perished, and Viking dominance in the region was ensured. The demise of Northumbria meant the end of the kingdom as an independent state. The remaining rulers were mere figureheads who continued ruling the area under supervision by the Viking overlords.

As a result of this invasion, York became the center of Viking politics in England. In addition, York became the largest Scandinavian settlement in England.

The collapse of Northumbria alarmed other kingdoms. One of the powerful Anglo-Saxon states fell entirely before Scandinavians. The next target of the Great Heathen Army was East Anglia. Unfortunately for the king, the kingdom lacked sufficient military force. King Edmund tried to resist the enemy but the efforts failed. He was captured and executed in 869.

When Edmund died, East Anglia practically fell down as a separate kingdom. People and land were thrown about a lot all over East Anglia by the Vikings. I believe that East Anglia

was a very important point of Viking operations in the future. After Northumbria and East Anglia were defeated, Mercia and Wessex were the only major Anglo-Saxon powers left. Now the Vikings had a great advantage. That is what happened to the balance of power in England.

## **5. Fall of Mercia**

Before the Vikings brought their invasions, Mercia was the leading kingdom in England. Under the kings like Offa, Mercia reached its peak of power and influence, where Mercian rulers managed the trade, diplomacy, and military activities on a large scale.

Unfortunately, by the end of the ninth century, Mercian strength was on the decline.

Several factors such as internal conflicts, economic difficulties, and continuing Viking raids greatly weakened the king's power. In the late 860s, the Great Heathen Army came into Mercia.

At first, the Mercian defense was more firm than those of Northumbria or East Anglia. In fact, the Mercians had large supplies and well-protected forts. King Burgred of Mercia turned to Wessex for help. King Æthelred, the elder brother of Alfred, and Alfred came together with the Mercian army to oppose the Vikings.

The Vikings' pace of invasion was only briefly held by this cooperation.

Peace gave a brief break in fighting but the Vikings started their raids all over Mercia again.

Each time they came, they wrecked farming, trade, and running the country. King Burgred of Mercia not being able to get rid of the Vikings and even allowing them to build up their strength inside his kingdom led to his loss of popularity and support among the people. In 874, Viking soldiers chased Burgred to hide.

The Vikings gave the throne to Ceolwulf II who was a "puppet king" controlled by the Scandinavians.

Mercia's political freedom was finished. Some parts of western Mercia were still ruled by the local kings while the Vikings took over most of the eastern parts. The downfall of Mercia caused a huge change in English politics. Mercia had been the leading power among the Anglo-Saxons for a long time. Its disappearance made Wessex a lone player.

## **6. The Victory at the Battle of Cynwit**

When the Vikings had conquered most of England, they started to concentrate the attacks on Wessex. King Æthelred and his younger brother Alfred had to fight against the Viking troops several times through the early 870s. Sometimes the West Saxons gave the Vikings a good fight, but at other times they even lost considerably.

Basically, it turned into a tough war that continued over a long period. Wessex, in fact, was different from the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as they didn't give up easily. Wessex leaders went beyond showing military skills but they also stood politically for the first time.

Ubba was the head of a major military force that made a series of attacks on Devon in the late 870s. Like the Vikings in other parts of the country, they intended to weaken Wessex by hitting its outskirts, stealing provisions, and crushing local resistance.

In Cynwit a small band of West Saxons took shelter inside a fortified place. The Vikings surrounded the fort, cut off their supplies and waited for the defenders to surrender. The Anglo-Saxons reached a point where they thought the only decision was death or surrender. They lacked food and to get out was impossible. Thinking that it was the end for them, they did the last thing that anyone would expect: they suddenly attacked the Vikings.

The attack was so unexpected that the Vikings had no time to think about it. The Wessex put a nearly finished fight and made the Vikings lose so much that their leader, Ubba Ragnarsson, was even killed. Vikings during the long years had been seen as almost undefeatable. The death and loss of a high-ranking Viking leader was proof that the Viking armies could be defeated again.

Besides raising the morale of West Saxons, the victory also gave a practical demonstration of how strong resistance can be a factor in winning a battle.

Moreover, after the battle, Alfred's name among capable war leaders had risen.

## **7. Royal Court Convening in Chippenham**

Chippenham was a highly significant place in the Kingdom of Wessex. It was a royal manor and center for local government in Wiltshire. Kings of the Anglo-Saxon period often converted such sites to political and military headquarters. The town was well placed strategically, after all, roads and rivers supplied Chippenham with links to the most important parts of southern England. So, during the time when Alfred was fighting the Vikings, he and his court regarded the town as a major center of activity.

Alfred's brother Æthelred died in 871 and that was when Alfred was crowned the king of Wessex. He became the ruler of a kingdom that was almost crushed under pressure.

During his time as king, Alfred was not only facing repeated Viking attacks but also economic ruin and political disorder. Still, Alfred showed great willpower and intellect.

In some cases, he was able to secure peace agreements with the Vikings; he also restructured the kingdom's military and ensured the continued allegiance of the most important nobles. However, the kingdom was still highly exposed by the 870s.

Normally, winter brings about the relative cessation of medieval military campaigns, numerous factors being weather, and the necessities of agricultural work.

When the defenses of the English were at their weakest a complacency the Scandinavian soldiers took full advantage of, the Vikings would very often run their winter offensives as a surprise. When the Vikings arrived at Chippenham the place was almost defenseless.

Just before the Vikings captured Chippenham, Alfred's court was the only remaining bastion of independent Anglo-Saxon power in England. The royal family was composed of the nobility, the church officials, the military leaders, the government officials, and the members of the household. The Witan, the council of leading figures, was very important in terms of supporting the king and organizing the resistance. At the same time, the Viking commander Guthrum was putting together his plans for a very serious attack on Wessex.

Guthrum understood that only by killing Alfred could he end the Anglo-Saxon resistance in an organized way. The Danes did their best to prepare a sudden strike which, by catching the West Saxons off the guard, would have the effect of neutralizing the West Saxon leader. Chippenham was selected as the point of attack.

## **8. Battle of Chippenham**

During the winter of 878, Guthrum decided to launch a devastating surprise attack against Chippenham. The time of the attack was fatal for the West Saxons. Most probably, a lot of warriors had already been at home for the winter leaving the kingdom weak militarily. The Viking attack came as a surprise to Alfred and his court. The incident was so serious that it almost led to the total destruction of the Kingdom of Wessex.

The fall of Chippenham caused widespread panic around the kingdom. The Danish troops used this opportunity to take control over quite large parts of Wessex. Some people had no choice but to accept the Vikings as the new rulers. Many others left their houses behind.

The military command of the West Saxons was disbanded for a short time. Due to the lack of time for a new mobilization, the local chiefs had difficulties in organizing the resistance. Possibly, some nobles deemed that surrender was the only way out.

For a lot of people, it may have seemed that Wessex had been punished by God, as had Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia. Most of England had come under Viking control. The royal court had been dispersed. The king was now in hiding. The power of the West Saxon monarchy seemed broken.

The Vikings saw Wessex not just as a target for a raid, but a place to be conquered permanently.

After the Battle of Chippenham, Guthrum took over the town and went on to occupy the surrounding area so as to prevent Alfred from managing to reorganize a resistance. There was probably no better way to kill Alfred than to kill the underpinnings of his support.

The successful subjugation of Wessex by the Vikings would have meant their complete domination of Anglo-Saxon England.

## 9. Alfred's Flight to the Somerset Marshes

Following the catastrophe at Chippenham, Alfred escaped to the south-western marshes of Somerset.

He found his safe haven at Athelney, a remote place that was naturally isolated by marshes, rivers, and thick woods. The Somerset marshes had a traditional defense system built-in: The Vikings on horseback and on foot had a hard time moving through the area, while the locals who knew the land could get around quite well.

The human being of Alfred was saved by the withdrawal, but on the other hand, it was the very desperate state of Wessex which it represented.

The very last independent Anglo-Saxon king in England was reduced to hiding in swamps.

Throughout his hardship, Alfred slowly re-established his position.

Carriers were sent to various parts of Wessex to find and gather both courageous fighters and influential people.

It was of great importance that local networks managed to survive.

Alfred was different from the kings of Northumbria or East Anglia; he had enough power and right to rule that he could still motivate his people to keep fighting.

His being a leader in person as well as the fact that Wessex had a stronger political unity were what this showed.

Alfred saw the pointlessness of fighting the Danes at once as it most probably would have meant the end of Wessex.

Finally, after a long time, Alfred appeared from his refuge and summoned the local militia (fyrd) from Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire to get ready. The turnout was so good that it made the king and his men very happy.

Many West Saxons united under the king's banner. This was the day when the course of the war had changed.

Though the Danes had the upper hand for several months, people's faith in Alfred and their desire to oppose the Vikings were still alive.

Even though the withdrawal was forced by adversity, it demonstrated one's capability to stand firm even when the enemy's power is overwhelming.

### **III. The Current Situation**

#### **1. Aftermath of Chippenham**

The Battle of Chippenham in January 878 marked one of the darkest moments in the history of Wessex. The Viking forces under Guthrum launched a surprise attack during the winter, catching Alfred and his forces unprepared. The royal settlement at Chippenham fell quickly, forcing Alfred to flee.

The defeat shattered confidence in West Saxon defenses and created widespread panic throughout the kingdom. Many nobles abandoned their positions, while some communities surrendered to Danish authority in order to survive.

#### **2. Danish Occupation under Guthrum**

Following the victory at Chippenham, Guthrum and the Great Heathen Army gained control over large portions of Wessex and neighboring territories. Danish occupation disrupted trade, taxation, and communication throughout the region.

Many settlements were forced to provide food, tribute, and shelter to Viking forces. Some Anglo Saxon nobles considered cooperating with Guthrum to preserve their own influence and lands. The Danish presence also threatened to permanently weaken Anglo-Saxon rule in England.

#### **3. Decline of Wessex Authority in England**

The authority of Wessex had dramatically weakened following Alfred's retreat. With much of England already under Viking influence, many local leaders questioned whether Alfred could continue ruling effectively.

The decline in royal authority encouraged fragmentation among Ealdormen and Thegns. Some leaders focused on defending only their own territories rather than supporting a united resistance. Without strong leadership, the survival of Wessex became uncertain.

#### **4. Alfred's Flight to Athelney**

After escaping Chippenham, King Alfred fled to the marshes of Athelney in Somerset. The marshlands provided natural protection and allowed Alfred to avoid capture while gathering loyal followers.

Although Alfred remained alive, his situation was extremely fragile. Supplies were limited, morale was low, and many believed the kingdom was close to collapse. However, Alfred's survival also became a symbol of resistance and hope for those still loyal to Wessex.

#### **5. Condition of the General Populace**

The people of Wessex suffered greatly during the Viking invasions. Villages were destroyed, farms were abandoned, and trade routes became unsafe. Food shortages and displacement spread throughout the countryside, especially during the harsh winter months.

Many ordinary people feared both Viking attacks and the collapse of royal protection. Refugees fled from occupied regions, while local militias struggled to maintain order. The instability created growing tension between survival and loyalty to the crown.

## **6. Status of the Church and Religion**

The Church faced severe difficulties during the Viking occupation. Monasteries and churches had been raided repeatedly, resulting in the destruction of religious centers and the loss of valuable manuscripts and treasures.

Despite these hardships, the Church continued to support King Alfred and the survival of Christian rule in England. Religious leaders encouraged unity among the Anglo-Saxons and portrayed resistance against the Danes as both a political and spiritual duty. The survival of Christianity in southern England depended heavily on the outcome of Alfred's resistance.

## **IV. Military Background of the region**

The general military state of Anglo-Saxons served neither as a professional standing army, nor a peasants levy. The military system was a Germanic military mix with its own Anglo-Saxon aspects as there was a standing force that reported to Ealdorms, The King and Nobles, yet Fyrd's were used as the main force within conflicts which later improved due to constant Viking Harassments.

### **1. The Fyrd**

The core of the military system depended on "Fyrd's" A peasants levy of combat ready males that served their lords when the banners were called.

The Fyrd were considered both as a regional and national force within Wessex. Meanwhile the local Fyrd's duty was to defend their lands and fight for their lords, the General Fyrd was called in times of major conflict.

Many servicemen of the Fyrd were made up of people with professions such as farmers, smiths, bakers and such which proved to be a huge setback as long campaigns would lead to a decline in food sources, weaponry and such meanwhile the Vikings were more professional in this matter.

Equipment within the Fyrd completely depended on the soldiers wealth as more wealthy individuals could have swords, spears and armour, meanwhile the poor could only utilize

their farming equipment or anything they find resulting in a weak uniform between the General Fyrd.

## 2. **Thegn Retinues and Loyal Warbands**

Above the Fyrd, both in skill and professionalism were the Thegn. It consisted of the lesser nobles who were the backbone of the kingdom's army. A Thegn was given land and wealth in exchange of their lifelong service to their lord and king, which resulted in a more loyal mercenary-like unit.

Differing from the Fyrd, Thegns and Warbands were much more disciplined and experienced, with far better equipment compared to the Fyrd as they were mostly made up by either professional or semi professional soldiers.

However, the loyalty of the Thegn completely depended on the state of the kingdom, as after Chippenham, many more less pleased to serve their king due to there being no hope and any rewards for this action.

## 3. **Royal Household Troops**

At the center of the King's forces, Royal Household soldiers stood, being recruited from loyal Thegns and professional warriors. Although their number was small they were the most capable unit within the army both serving as bodyguards and fighters on behalf of the king.

Unlike the Fyrd, they were standing battle ready troops capable of deploying quickly. They were considered the best of the best within Wessex and were the most reliable soldiers within the war. However, their numbers were severely low compared to the standing forces of Wessex.

## 4. **Viking Military Organization**

The Viking forces, especially Guthrum's troops, represented professionalism with their training, equipment and general success.

The Great Heathen Army was not the typical Viking raiding party, but rather a standing warfare army, opting for long term success.

Viking troops were known to be equipped with the best swords, axes and spears alongside with the best training and experience a fighting force could offer.

## 5. **Weaknesses of Wessex**

By the time of Chippenham, and the year 878, the military of Wessex was already in a

strategic state that could not challenge the Vikings, as the Fyrd were only able to be mobilized after a conflict compared to the always ready and mobile Viking army.

Coordination between nobles was also one of the huge problems as disorganisation reigned over the Anglo-Saxon forces.

## 6. **Concurrent Military Status**

Despite everything Wessex had a good potential to cover as most of their leadership was unharmed, particularly Alfred the Great, who was the King of Wessex.

Although the Fyrd's were flawed, it still put forward a stable and fed force for the main component of the Anglo-Saxon army, compared to the Vikings who had to recruit from Scandinavia and Pagan regions which were hard to do.

There are also potential allies for King Alfred as he was personally anointed by the Pope, somewhat Christian fanatics could maybe assist him with also local allies such as the Irish tribes, Welsh Warbands and Mercian remnants who despised each other, yet were much more aggressive towards the Vikings.

## 7. **Naval Aspects and Limitations**

Although some nobles had ships ready to fight with men within them, it was much more disorganized and unprofessional compared to the strong navy of the Vikings. This deficiency allowed Viking forces to control the sea and rivers which had led Wessex into a huge disadvantage.

Them not being able to contest the seas meant that even successful land victories could not fully eliminate the Viking threat. As long as their fleets remained intact, they could regroup and return.

## **V. Key Roles within the Witan**

The Witan of Wessex in 878 is rather not an advisory body at the time, but functions as a combination of the surviving nobles, clergy, warlords and many other leadership positions who attempt to solidate their control over the land once again under King Alfred

Each role within the committee represents the leaders of many aspects of the Anglo-Saxon society such as the military, religion, trade, leadership and many more all working in their own fields to ensure the stability of Wessex. However during moments like this, where Wessex faces total destruction and the end of the Anglo-Saxon people, all these characters work together to ensure the survival of the Anglo-Saxons.

## 1. **The King**

At the peak hierarchy of the kingdom, the king is the ruler. However in Anglo-Saxon England a king's power was not absolute and it depended on the ability of the king, stability of the realm and an approval from the Political, Military and Religious leaderships. In theory, the Witan had the power to discuss, advise and even challenge the royals.

By January 878, Alfred's power was at the absolute bottom following the defeat at Chippenham with the king being forced to retreat to the Marshes of Somerset, Athelney. His position is in trouble, with the only legitimate support coming from the Witan who pledge to support Alfred.

## 2. **The Ealdorman**

The Ealdormen are considered as the most powerful figures, only under the authority of the king. Each Ealdorman governs a major region such as Shires.

Their Powers include, semi-autonomous leadership within their region, ability to be lawmakers and law enforcers, military leaders and such.

However, as most regions are under Danish occupation many Ealdormen are under severe pressure, not being able to offer stable rule as the Fyrd's that they command stand little to no chance against the Vikings

## 3. **Thegns and Loyal Warbands**

Just below the Ealdormen the thegns stand, being the backbone of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. Thegns and Loyal Warbands are given land in exchange for their military support for the King.

Thegns are known to be much more effective and realistic against Viking invasions with standing forces up to 60-400.

## 4. **The Church**

The Church stands as one of the most influential institutions within England. With the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishops and Abbots, although not holding military power, are the sole spiritual authority among Christians.

As Christianity is the major religion within West Wessex, and considering the Vikings are Pagans, the invasion also constitutes a religious threat.

The Church can also muster up religious levy, which helps with morale of the army.

## **5. Royal Officials and Military Commanders**

Royal Officials serve as the secular wing of authority within England, serving the Royal Court and working on several fields within their expertise, they are the backbone of royal rule.

Military Commanders, as the name suggests are Military Officials of the King who commands Fyrd's, Levies, Royal Household Troops, Warband and even sometimes royal hosts under the authority of the King.

## **VI. Issues to Address and Current Threats**

By 878, Wessex was on the verge of collapse. Viking raids made their way through Anglo-Saxon England, upending the land and causing the collapse of many of its kingdoms. Northumbria and East Anglia were already gone. Mercia broke up into fragments. From all that, Wessex was the only kingdom standing against the Vikings.

Tough times for Wessex were far from over. Alfred breaking away from the disaster at Chippenham and hiding in the Somerset marshes, meant most of Wessex was as good as lost. It was trouble on every front. The fighting was the least of them. It was a collapse of most structures. The politics was fragmented, the economy was in a collapse, religious unity was strong but in threat of being lost, and the stability of the everyday life was gone. Everything was not right in the kingdom. The citizens were losing faith in their leaders and their futures. It made the task of keeping Wessex together the most difficult.

That is when the Witan, the king's council, met. It was the most fragmented of the council of the king. They understood that this was bigger than losing on the battlefield, for all intents and purposes, even if the Vikings were somehow pushed out, the kingdom would fall. Wessex was on the edge. These were the most serious of the threats to the kingdom and to its rulers at that time.

### **1. Survival of the West Saxon authority**

The most important issue and threat facing Wessex is its own survival. Following the Viking attack at Chippenham in early 878. The authority of Alfred the Great has been critically challenged. Forced to retreat to the marshes of Athelney, Wessex was left publicly without a leader.

The authority of the king in Anglo-Saxon England is tied to visibility, protection, and military success. Alfred, who is hiding, faces the undermining of his rule and doom of Wessex.

The Witan must decide how to legitimize Alfred's legitimacy in the event of prolonged absence or perceived failure.

This issue challenges the order and leadership of Wessex as a whole, without any action being taken locals may try to undermine the central authority.

## **2. Loss of Territorial Integrity and Control**

Rapid loss of territorial control in England is one of the biggest challenges for Wessex.

Until the Viking invasions, Anglo-Saxon kings maintained their control in England through a mix of royal estates, alliances, fortified settlements, local assemblies, and church links. Viking invasions disrupted many of these systems.

Most regions that recognized Anglo-Saxon control no longer do so, and either answer to a Scandinavian Warlord, or are in an almost-anarchic state. The Royal system of taxing is broken, communication has become erratic, and local leaders are forced to rule more and more independently.

Losing control of a region is more than losing that geography. Losing a region to the Vikings, often means that the control of the kingdom is weakened.

Resource productivity decreases. Trade collapses. There are no taxes. Recruitment of soldiers is difficult. People leave for safer places.

It gets harder to maintain the kingdom. By 878, the control of most of England has already shifted to the hands of the Scandinavians.

Northumbria has become a Viking kingdom with the center in York. The Vikings in East Anglia have Settled after their conquest. Most of Mercia has come under total Viking control or puppet control.

These territories have become Viking strongholds to launch offensive military strategies.

The Vikings have stopped being simply invaders. In many places, they have become the local rulers, tax collectors, landowners, and large estate owners.

That makes this a big strategic threat for Wessex.

Wessex is growing more vulnerable, on all fronts.

The disintegration of Mercia is especially concerning.

Mercia used to be a buffer state between Wessex and Viking territories.

Before, Mercia absorbed most of the pressures of northern invasions. Now, the Danish armies can go straight to invading West Saxon lands.

The border regions are the most vulnerable to raiding, pillaging, and occupying forces.

The prospect of attack has caused many villages and towns to be abandoned.

Some local populations may even join Viking forces to avoid attack.

They may also quit military service and tax payment, if they believe the crown cannot protect them.

Territorial collapse also leads to huge displacements.

The inflow of refugees from Viking regions puts a great deal of stress on Wessex.

Monks, nobles, merchants, and peasants abandon their places. Trade centers disappear.

Resources are strained. Housing and food are limited. Competing for resources leads to rising tension among established local communities and refugees. The refugees bring a traumatic legacy of violence inflicted by Vikings, which increases panic, fear, and lowers morale.

The people of Wessex have seen all the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms being destroyed, and have grown fearful that the same will happen to them.

If there is no hope for victory, nobles, clergy, and military leaders may choose to give up and surrender. Maintaining territorial integrity is not just a military struggle, it is a struggle of belief in the endurance of the kingdom.

### **3. Fragmentations among Ealdormens and Thegns**

Wessex's government really depends on the king and the nobles working together.

Ealdormen, for instance, are in charge of big regions and lead the military. Then there are the Thegns, who handle things locally, serve in the army, and have a good amount of political sway.

When times are stable, the king's power keeps everyone connected through land grants, personal promises, military duties, and simply because they all benefit. But if a crisis drags on, it puts huge pressure on these relationships.

One big problem Wessex is facing is that different regions are starting to look out only for themselves. As the Viking attacks get worse, local leaders are increasingly focused on saving their own territories instead of thinking about the kingdom as a whole. An ealdorman whose lands are under attack right now might think twice about sending his troops somewhere else.

A thegn whose estate has been destroyed might not have the resources left to fulfill his military duties. Some nobles might even go so far as to make their own deals with Viking leaders just to keep their lands safe. This kind of behavior really weakens everyone's ability to resist.

This ongoing crisis also opens the door for political rivalries. Ambitious nobles might try to gain more power for themselves while the king's authority seems shaky. Disputes over land, who commands the army, taxes, inheritances, or political appointments can easily get worse

when things are unstable. Some ealdormen might not like Alfred's leadership, or they might disagree with his military plans. Others might compete to have more influence within the Witan itself.

If the nobility starts to split into factions, it could be disastrous. Just look at Northumbria's collapse; it showed how internal division can destroy a kingdom even before an enemy completely takes over. The repeated military failures Wessex has suffered naturally make people question the leadership.

While many still respect Alfred, some nobles might wonder if continuing to resist is even realistic. Others might suggest negotiating with the Danes.

A few might even think about supporting other potential rulers or different political setups if they believe the current monarchy can't last.

Any uncertainty about the king's authority just makes the kingdom weaker during wartime. So, the Witan needs to figure out how to keep everyone together, even though people are tired, scared, and don't always agree.

#### **4. Viking Military Superiority**

One of the biggest problems Wessex faces right now is how incredibly good the Viking armies are at fighting.

These Viking invaders aren't just random groups of farmers coming to raid for a bit. Many of these warriors are highly experienced, professional soldiers who've campaigned all over England, Ireland, Francia, and even further afield.

Our traditional Anglo-Saxon army, on the other hand, relies on something called the fyrd. That's basically when free men are called up to fight during emergencies. While the fyrd can bring a lot of soldiers together, it has some serious drawbacks. For one, most of these fyrdmen are farmers, not career fighters. They can't stay away fighting indefinitely because they have farms and families to get back to. This means long wars are tough; they wear down our army and also mess with our ability to grow food. On top of that, not everyone has the same gear. Our important warriors and nobles might have strong armor and good weapons, but the regular fyrdmen often have very little protection.

The Vikings also get a huge edge from their longships. Their ships can zip along the coast and up rivers really fast, meaning they can attack us with hardly any warning. A Viking army can just suddenly appear hundreds of miles from where they were last seen. This kind of speed makes it incredibly hard for us to defend ourselves. Our forces often have no idea where they'll strike next. They can quickly bring a lot of their fighters together to hit a single, isolated spot before we can even get our defenses organized.

Viking leaders are also really flexible in how they fight. They'll make peace if it helps them, pull back if they need to, and jump on any chance they get very quickly. While some of our Anglo-Saxon leaders stick to old traditions, these Viking groups often care more about simply winning than following strict rules. That flexibility makes them really hard to predict.

Another big thing working for the Vikings is that they're willing to fight even in winter. Our Anglo-Saxon military usually expects things to quiet down when it gets cold. The Viking surprise attack at Chippenham really showed us how dangerous that thinking can be. Fighting in winter lets the Danes hit us when we're not ready and when our soldiers have gone home. So, the Witan needs to rethink how we usually do things in our army.

## **5. Christianity Under Pagan Pressure**

For many people living back then, the Viking invasions weren't just a political fight; they were also a deep spiritual crisis. The Scandinavian invaders were pagan warriors attacking a very Christian society. They burned down monasteries, killed priests and other clergy, stole religious treasures, and ravaged church lands. Many Anglo-Saxons saw these terrible events as God punishing them for their sins. In some areas, it even looked like Christianity itself might not survive.

Monasteries were particularly easy targets. They had a lot of wealth, important books, holy relics, and valuable land. And they often weren't very well-defended. These repeated Viking attacks really messed up religious life all over England. Destroying monasteries had effects that went further than just losing lives and property right away.

In areas the Vikings controlled, their culture and religion kept spreading. While some Vikings slowly became Christian, many others still stuck to their old Norse beliefs. Their pagan customs, rituals, and even their way of running things started to shape life more and more in the lands they'd conquered. This made people afraid of not just a military takeover, but a cultural one too. Some Anglo-Saxons worried that future generations might totally abandon Christian traditions.

Another problem was how incredibly wealthy the Church was. During a crisis, some nobles might argue that the Church's lands and treasures should be used more directly to pay for defense. Others, though, would oppose anyone messing with Church property. Finding a way to balance military needs with the Church's authority was a huge political challenge.

Alfred himself really saw being king as tied to his Christian duty. His survival and continued resistance could be seen as proof that God still favored Wessex. The Witan, therefore, had to think about how religion could boost morale and make their rule seem more legitimate during the war. Christianity was still one of the strongest things that held the kingdom together.

## 6. Economic decline and food shortages

The Viking wars have really messed up England's economy.

Farming is basically the backbone of Anglo-Saxon life, but these constant invasions are making it impossible to plant, harvest, or even manage animals properly. Armies marching through the land burn fields, steal animals, and wreck entire villages. Farmers run away from the raids and just leave their farms. If we can't grow enough food, then a serious famine is a real possibility.

All this fighting puts a huge strain on everything we have. Armies need food, weapons, horses, and supplies. Building forts takes a lot of people and materials. The king has to raise taxes to pay for defenses. But the problem is, just when we need more money for the military, the kingdom's ability to collect those taxes gets weaker. This creates really bad financial stress.

Trade across England has also taken a big hit. Roads and rivers are too dangerous because of raids. Merchants are afraid to travel. Ports might even fall into Viking hands. City markets are shrinking as everyone feels less safe.

And then there are the refugees from conquered areas, which just adds more pressure to our resources. Communities already struggling to find enough food now have to support people who've lost everything. This can lead to more fighting over land and supplies, making local tensions even worse. In the worst cases, we could see widespread starvation and disease. So, the Witan needs to think not just about fighting the war, but about how we're going to survive economically.

Food shortages are one of the biggest long-term threats to Wessex. Even if we don't lose a battle, a famine can completely destroy a kingdom. Hungry people are more likely to revolt, get sick, or just give up. Armies can't fight well if they don't have steady supplies. A long food crisis might even force local leaders to make deals with the Vikings just to stay alive.

The crisis Wessex is facing goes way beyond just the battlefield. The kingdom is dealing with losing land, political chaos, a weaker military, religious uncertainty, and economic disaster all at once. The Vikings aren't just threatening Wessex's independence; they're threatening the very survival of Anglo-Saxon government and culture. But even with all these huge dangers, there's still hope. The loyalty of the nobles who are left, the strength of the Christian church, Alfred's determination, and the people's continued will to fight back all give us a reason to believe. The decisions the Witan makes during this crucial time will decide if Wessex stands as the last stronghold of Anglo-Saxon England or falls like the kingdoms before it.

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