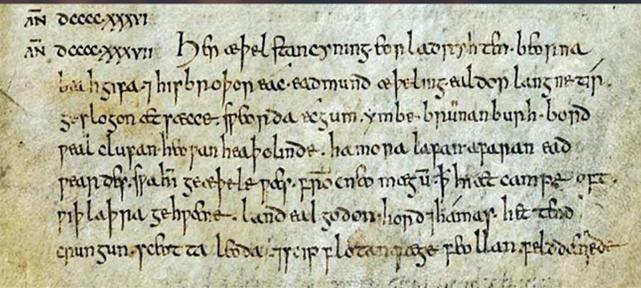


# Netflix and Chronicle

EXPLORING THE TENSION BETWEEN HISTORY  
AND HISTORICAL FICTION IN THE TV SERIES THE LAST KINGDOM



Anglo Saxon Chronicle, Entry for the year 937 CE in ASC A.

As historians, we aim to tell how things were, but as writers, we get to explore how things might have been. By reimagining the past, fiction allows writers and readers to explore emotional truths and lived experiences that may not be fully captured by historical methodology. Even when the approach differs from that of academic history, reimagining the past can deepen our understanding of it, revealing not just what happened, but how it might have felt to live through it and why those feelings continue to shape the present.

A key distinction in this discussion is between accuracy and authenticity. Accuracy is often treated as the primary measure of historical value, yet it is not synonymous with authenticity. Accuracy refers to fidelity to verifiable facts, dates, and events, while authenticity describes the sense that a representation convincingly “captures the past,” even when the evidence is incomplete or ambiguous. Because the past can only be accessed through mediated, fragmentary sources, authenticity often fills the gaps that accuracy alone cannot address. The television series *The Last Kingdom* does not present itself as a documentary, and many of its details are not entirely historically provable. However, the series, adapted by Bernard Cornwell’s novels, succeeds because it creates a world that feels authentic by engaging with primary sources such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, *Asser’s Life of Alfred*, and law records. It does this by grounding its drama in belief systems, social structures, and everyday practices that reflect how early medieval people likely understood their world, even when specific details are exaggerated or simplified for storytelling.

Alfred’s insistence on written words—“When a man dies, if nothing is written, he is soon forgotten”—reflects a genuine early medieval anxiety about memory and legacy. In the show, Danish king Guthrum is baptized after losing to Alfred at the Battle of Edington. This moment is poignant as, in history, Alfred and Guthrum signed a treaty that established territorial boundaries that created Danelaw.

Religion is another area where emotional truth outweighs strict accuracy. Christianity is shown as part of law, power, and structure: debts owed to the Church, trials governed by religious authority, and kings anointed before God. Paganism, meanwhile, is connected to destiny and fate, the three Norns, sacrifices, and animism. References to Valhalla and phrases such as “meet you in Valhalla” highlight how deeply pagan beliefs shaped Viking identity. Characters wrestle with belief rather than simply embodying it. Alfred questions God’s will, Elswyth fears divine punishment, and others slowly accept that pagans are not inherently evil. This internal struggle reflects how faith functioned as an explanation for suffering, loss, and political change, even if the show dramatizes it through figures like sorceresses or prophetic rituals.

Law and order are portrayed with similar care. Wergild, trials, oaths before the Witan, and the rule that an ealdorman must own land all reinforce a society governed by custom rather than abstract justice. The line “that’s my law” after the killing of a thief demonstrates how personal and localized law could be. Battles are sometimes about starvation rather than heroics; armies wield farming tools like reaping hooks; water is drunk alongside ale; and travel by horse is slow and exhausting. The depiction of Vikings as cleaner and more groomed than Saxons reflects contemporary accounts and reinforces cultural contrast. Political meetings, negotiations, betrayals, and uneasy alliances dominate the narrative, emphasizing that England’s birth was as much about discussion and compromise as warfare.

However, historical fiction also carries risks, particularly when consumed uncritically. Compelling narratives can be mistaken for historical reality, reinforcing myths rather than encouraging reflection. These misreadings can have serious political consequences as medieval narratives have repeatedly been appropriated by modern extremist movements to legitimize exclusionary ideologies.

Ultimately, *The Last Kingdom* may bend facts, but it captures the emotional reality of a fragmented land becoming “one kingdom under one God.” Its characters are not saints or monsters but people driven by fear, loyalty, revenge, and hope. That human complexity is what makes the series feel historically authentic, even when it is not entirely true.



Alfred “The Great” King of Wessex.  
Portrayed by David Dawson.

## FIGURES

Alfred, King of Wessex  
849-899 CE

Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians  
870-918 CE

Lady Ealhswith  
852-902 CE

Edward the Elder, King of Wessex  
874-924 CE

King Aethelred I, King of Wessex  
845/848-871 CE

Aethelwold the Aethling  
869-902 CE

Aelfwynn  
888CE-Unknown

Aethelred, Lord of the Mercians  
Unknown-911 CE

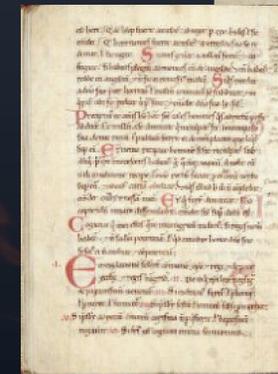
Aethelstan, First King of England  
894-939 CE

Guthrum, King of East Anglia  
835-889 CE

Ubba  
Unknown-878 CE



14th century miniature of King Æthelstan and Alfred-Guthrum appendix



Uhtred, Son of Uhtred, sometimes called Uhtred Ragnarson, or Uhtred the Godless.  
Portrayed by Alexander Dreymon.

## MY RESEARCH

My interest is in female leadership during the Anglo-Saxon period. In my approach, I seek to demonstrate that queens and noblewomen exerted influence not merely as isolated exceptions, but as integral participants in the political and cultural systems of early medieval England. By re-situating women such as Æthelflæd of Mercia, Emma of Normandy, and Edith of Wessex within the broader framework of rulership, my research contends that their authority stemmed not from an anomalous “female experience” but from their participation in the dynastic systems that shaped all early medieval governance.

The methodological approach centers on comparative analysis of contemporary literary texts, as well as charters and legal texts. In the sources, I will examine language, tone, and context to trace immediate reactions and long-term portrayals. These sources include, but are not limited to, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, the Irish and Welsh chronicles, and *Vita Ædwardi Regis*.

In *The Last Kingdom*, Aethelflæd is a strong character. Though there are problematic aspects to her story here, the overall portrayal of how she dedicated much of her life to leading Mercia is extremely authentic. Aethelflæd built burhs, planned battles, and significantly kept the Vikings off the borders of Mercia, East Anglia, and Wessex. She is so important that she is recorded in Irish chronicles as being highly strategic with northern lords, forming alliances, and even her death was recorded as a significant passing. My research was inspired by how her memory has been preserved in our time. Fans of the show identify with her “female power,” yet I wanted to understand what we identify with and how this is affecting our understanding of the real Aethelflæd and who she was.



Æthelflæd, Lady of Mercia.  
Portrayed by Millie Brady.

## EVENTS

Arrival of the “Great Viking Army”, 866 CE.

King Edmond of East Angles  
Killed By The Great Army, 869 CE.

Alfred Made King of Wessex, 865 CE.

Battle of Cynuit, 878 CE.

Guthrum Attacks Wessex  
Alfred Escapes to Somerset, 878 CE.

Battle of Edington, 878 CE.  
Treaty of Guthrum and Alfred, 878 CE.

Alfred Dies, and Edward the Elder  
Made King of Wessex, 899 CE.

Battle of Tenntenhall, 910 CE.

Æthelflæd Rules as Lady of Mercia  
After Death of Her Husband Æthelred, 911 CE.

King Edward of Wessex dies,  
son King Æthelstan ascends as  
First King of England, 924 CE

The Battle of Bruanburh, 937 CE.

## THE HERO

Uhtred is the ultimate blend of what is real and what is not. There was a real Uhtred who lived a couple of hundred years later as the lord of Bamburgh; however, this particular version is mostly fictitious. In the series, he is born a Saxon into nobility and named Osbert. When the Danes attacked their lands, they brought his father the head of his eldest son, Uhtred. This made Osbert the next heir, and his father re-baptized him as Uhtred. Through a series of events, Uhtred is raised by the Danes as their son. When Uhtred becomes a man, his family is attacked by other Danes, and rumours spread that Uhtred is responsible. Forced to take safety amongst the Saxons in Wessex, he offers his insights into the Danes so that Wessex can win a battle. Alfred becomes King, and Uhtred makes an oath to him, torn between the Saxons and the Danes. Uhtred represents a synthesis of the two cultures. His heart always puts him between what is right, what is true, and what is the path towards reclaiming his lands. “Destiny is all!”

