

religion was Paganism; their occupation was piracy. In pursuit of it, they ravaged France from side to side; made descents on the coasts of Spain and Portugal, and penetrated into the Mediterranean as far as the mouth of the Rhone. At this time they seem to have formed the project of conquering England, and making it a basis of operations against the neighboring countries. Accordingly, about the end of 867, a formidable army led by the chiefs Hingwar and Hubba landed in the Wash. By the beginning of the following year they had conquered York, and become masters of the lands between the Tyne and the Humber. Having gained this base of operations, they invaded Mercia, and seized Nottingham city. The Mercians, in despair, sent to Wessex to entreat aid against the common enemy. They were not long in receiving it. Ethelred immediately assembled his forces, and with Alfred, then nineteen years of age, at his side, marched to their help. On reaching Nottingham, the Saxons were generally desirous of an instant assault. But calmer counsels prevailed. An agreement was entered into, whereby the Danes were allowed to retire northwards, and Alfred and his brother returned home with their troops.

The Danes retired with a heavy booty, but only to enjoy it, and then return for more. In the following year they entered Lincolnshire, on a new raid. "Language," it has been well said, "cannot describe their devastations. It can only repeat the words—plunder, murder, rape, famine, and distress. It can only enumerate towns, villages, churches and monasteries, harvests and libraries ransacked and burned." A brave stand was made by the Saxons at Kesteven. During the whole day they repulsed the Northern hordes, but towards evening the Danes, by means of a feigned retreat, led them to break their ranks, and then turning on the disordered crowd, cut them down to the last man. East Anglia was next invaded and conquered, and a Danish king placed on the throne. Thence they pushed on to attack Wessex, for their experience had rightly led them to believe that whilst Wessex would surely come to the aid of Mercia, the latter kingdom was

likely to leave Wessex unaided, and that it once conquered, England would lie at their feet.

Again embarking on their ships a portion of the Danes entered the Thames. Having made themselves masters of Reading, situated at the spot where the little river Kennet debouches into the Thames, they took it for their base of operations, and sent forth a party to plunder and slay. The Ealderman of the district gathered his forces, attacked the ravagers, and after a desperate conflict put the whole party to flight. Four days after, Ethelred and Alfred joined him with such troops as they had been able hastily to collect, and advanced before Reading. Here they began to encamp on the plain outside the town. Whilst so doing, they were surprised by the Danes, who rushed on them like a horde of wolves. A furious combat ensued, which ended in the retreat of the Saxons.

Warned, by this defeat, of the character of the foe, the brothers collected a more formidable array, and, four days after, met the enemy at Ashton. The victory remained with the Saxons, and to Alfred's courage and decision it was due. Left in command of one wing of the army, he was attacked whilst his brother remained in his tent hearing mass, and steadfastly refused to leave for the field until it was finished. Alfred waited long for him; but finding matters were becoming hazardous, disregarded "Red-tape" considerations, and rushed to meet the foe. The shock of battle was terrible; and when the king arrived and led on his own division, it became still more so. But the Saxons well knew that they were fighting for life, property, kindred, faith, and fatherland, and so pressed on the heathen that, at last, they were utterly routed, and chased to the gates of Reading, with the loss of many thousands of men, their king and several noble youths. At Reading, however, they remained firmly ensconced. Fresh troops crossed the Thames to reinforce them; and within a fortnight they inflicted a repulse on the brothers at Basing. Shortly after, a fresh horde arrived from the north. Thus re-united, they were enabled to defeat the Saxons at Merton, in a battle in which Ethelred seems to have