

The Laws of King Alfred, 871-901 A.D.

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The Lord spoke these words to Moses, and thus said: "I am the Lord your God. I led you out of the land of the Egyptians, and of their bondage."

Of oaths and of *weds*

1. At the first we teach, that it is most needful that every man warily keep his oath and his wed. If any one be constrained to either of these wrongfully, either to treason against his lord, or to any unlawful aid; then it is juster to belie than to fulfil. But if he pledge himself to that which it is lawful to fulfil, and in that belie himself, let him submissively deliver up his weapon and his goods to the keeping of his friends, and be in prison forty days in a king's *tun*; let him there suffer whatever the bishop may prescribe to him; and let his kinsmen feed him, if he himself have no food. If he have no kinsmen, or have no food, let the king's reeve feed him. If he must be forced to this, and he otherwise will not, if they bind him, let him forfeit his weapons and his property. If he be slain, let him lie uncompensated. If he flee thereout before the time, and he be taken, let him be in prison forty days, as he should before have been. But if he escape, let him be held a fugitive, and be excommunicate of all Christ's churches. If, however, there be another man's *borh*, let him make *bot* for the *borhbryce*, as the law may direct him, and the *wedbryce*, as his confessor may prescribe to him.

Of *churchsocns*

2. If any one, for whatever crime, seek any of the *mynsterhams* to which the king's *feorm* is incident, or other freehired which is worthy of reverence, let him have a space of three days to protect himself, unless he be willing to come to terms. If during this space, any one harm him by blow, or by bond, or wound him, let him make *bot* for each of these according to regular usage, as well with *wer* as with *wite*: and to the brotherhood one hundred and twenty shillings, as *bot* for the churchfrith: and let him not have *forlongen* his own.

Of *borhbryce*

3. If any one break the king's *borh*, let him make *bot* for the plaint, as the law shall direct him; and for the *borhbryce* with five pounds of *maerra* pence. For an archbishop's *borhbryce*, or his *mundbyrd*, let him make *bot* with three pounds: for any other bishop's or an earldorman's *borhbryce*, or *mundbyrd*, let him make *bot* with two pounds.

Of plotting against a lord

4. If any one plot against the king's life, of himself, or by harbouring of exiles, or of his men; let him be liable with his life and in all that he has; or let him prove himself according to his lord's *wer*.

Of churchfryth

5. We also ordain to every church which has been hallowed by a bishop, this *fryth*: if a *fahman* flee to or reach one, that for seven days no one drag him out. But if anyone do so, let him be liable in the king's *mundbyrd* and the *churchfryth*; more if he there commit more wrong, if, despite of hunger, he can live; unless he fight his way out. If the brethren have further need of their church, let them keep him in another house, and let not that have more doors than the church. Let the *churchealdor* take care that during this term no one give him food. If he himself be willing to deliver up his weapons to his foes, let them keep him thirty days, and then let them give notice of him to his kinsmen. It is also *churchfryth*: if any man seek a church for any of those offences, which had not been before revealed, and there confess himself ill God's name, be it half forgiven. He who steals on Sunday, or at Yule, or at Easter, or on Holy Thursday, and on Rogation days; for each of these we will that the *bot* be twofold, as during Lent-fast.

Of stealing in a church

6. If any one thief aught in a church, let him pay the *angylde*, and the *wite*, such as shall belong to the *angylde*; and let the hand be struck off with which he did it. If he will redeem the hand, and that be allowed him, let him pay as may belong to his *wer*.

In case a man fight in the king's hall

7. If any one fight in the king's hall, or draw his weapon, and he be taken; be it in the king's doom, either death, or life, as he may be willing to grant him. If he escape, and be taken again, let him pay for himself according to his *wergeld*, and make *bot* for the offence, as well *wer* as *wite*, according as he may have wrought.

Of fornication with a nun

8. If any one carry off a nun from a minster, without the king's or the bishop's leave, let him pay a hundred and twenty shillings, half to the king, half to the bishop and to the church-*hlaford* who owns the nun. If she live longer than he who carried her off, let her not have aught of his property. If she bear a child, let not that have of the property more than the mother. If any one slay her child, let him pay to the king the maternal kindred's share; to the paternal kindred let their share be given. . . .

Of those men who lend their weapons for man-slaying

19. If any one lend his weapon to another that he may kill some one therewith, they may join together if they will in the *wer*. If they will not join together, let him who lent the weapon pay of the *wer* a third part, and of the *wite* a third part. If he be willing to justify

himself, that he knew of no ill-design in the loan; that he may do. If a sword-polisher receive another man's weapon to furbish, or a smith a man's material, let them both return it sound as either of them may have before received it: unless either of them had before agreed that he should not hold it *angylde*. . . .

Of confession of debt

22. If any one at the folk-mote make declaration of a debt, and afterwards wish to withdraw it, let him charge it on a righter person, if he can; if he cannot, let him forfeit his *angylde* [and take possession of the *wite*.] . . .

Of kinless men

27. If a man, kinless of paternal relatives, fight, and slay a man, and then if he have maternal relatives, let them pay a third of the *wer*; his guild-brethren a third part; for a third let him flee. If he have no maternal relatives, let his guild-brethren pay half, for half let him flee.

Of slaying a man thus circumstanced

28. If a man kill a man thus circumstanced, if he have no relatives, let half be paid to the king; half to his guild-brethren.

Of *hloth*-slaying of a *twy-hynde* man

29. If any one with a *hloth* slay an unoffending *twy-hynde* man, let him who acknowledges the death-blow pay *wer* and *wite*; and let every one who was of the party pay thirty shillings as *hloth-bot*.

Of a *six-hynde* man

30. If it be a *six-hynde* man, let every man pay sixty shillings as *hloth-bot*; and the slayer, *wer* and full *wite*.

Of a *twelve-hynde* man

31. If he be a *twelve-hynde* man, let each of them pay one hundred and twenty shillings; and the slayer, *wer* and *wite*. If a *hloth* do this, and afterwards will deny it on oath, let them all be accused, and let them then all pay the *wer* in common; and all, one *wite*, such as shall belong to the *wer*.

Of those who commit folk-leasing

32. If a man commit folk-leasing, and it be fixed upon him, with no lighter thing let him make *bot* than that his tongue be cut out; which must not be redeemed at any cheaper rate than it is estimated at according to his *wer*. . . .

Of a *holdgetael*

37. If a man from one *holdgetael* wish to seek a lord in another *holdgetael*, let him do it with the knowledge of the ealdorman whom he before followed in his shire. If he do it without his knowledge, let him who entertains him as his man pay 120 shillings as *wite*; let him, however, deal the half to the king in the shire where he before followed, half in that into which he comes. If he has done anything wrong where he before was, let him make *bot* for it who has their received him as his man; and to the king 120 shillings as *wite*.

In case a man fight before an ealdorman in the *gemot*

38. If a man fight before a king's ealdorman in the *gemot*, let him make *bot* with *wer* and *wite* as it may be right; and before this 120 shillings to the ealdorman as *wite*. If he disturb the *folkmete* by drawing his weapon, one hundred and twenty shillings to the ealdorman as *wite*. If aught of this happen before a king's ealdorman's junior, or a king's priest, thirty shillings as *wite*.

Of fighting in a ceorlish man's *flet*

39. If any one fight in a ceorlish man's *flet*, with six shillings let him make *bot* to the ceorl. If he draw his weapon and fight not, let it be half of that. If, however, either of these happen to a six-hynde man, let it increase threefoldly, according to the ceorlish *bot* to a twelve-hynde man, twofoldly, according to the six-hynde's *bot*.

Of *burh-bryce*

40. The king's *burh-bryce* shall be 120 shillings. An archbishop's, ninety shillings. Any other bishop's, and an ealdorman's, sixty shillings. A twelve-hynde man's, thirty shillings. A six-hynde man's, fifteen shillings. A ceorl's *edorbryce*, five shillings. If aught of this happen when the *fyrð* is out, or in Lent fast, let the *bot* be twofold. If any one in Lent put down holy law among the people without leave, let him make *bot* with 120 shillings.

Of *boc*-lands

41. The man who has *boc*-land, and which his kindred left him, then ordain we that he must not give it from his *maeg-burg*, if there be writing or witness that it was forbidden by those men who at first acquired it, and by those who gave it to him, that he should do so; and then let that be declared in the presence of the king and of the bishop, before his kinsmen.

Of feuds

42. We also command: that the man who knows his foe be homesitting fight not before he demand justice of him. If he have such power that he can beset his foe, and besiege

him within, let him keep him within for seven days, and attack him not, if he will remain within. And, then, after seven days, if he will surrender, and deliver up his weapons, let him be kept safe for thirty days, and let notice of him be given to his kinsmen and his friends. If, however, he flee to a church, then let it be according to the sanctity of the church; as we have before said above. But if he have not sufficient power to besiege him within, let him ride to the ealdorman, and beg aid of him. If he will not aid him, let him ride to the king before he fights. In like manner also, if a man come upon his foe, and he did not before know him to be homestaying; if he be willing to deliver up his weapons, let him be kept for thirty days, and let notice of him be given to his friends; if he will not deliver up his weapons, then he may attack him. If he be willing to surrender, and to deliver up his weapons, and any one after that attack him, let him pay as well *wer* as wound, as he may do, and *wite*, and let him have forfeited his *maegship*. We also declare, that with his lord a man may fight *orwige*, if any one attack the lord: thus may the lord fight for his man. After the same wise, a man may fight with his born kinsman, if a man attack him wrongfully, except against his lord; that we do not allow. And a man may fight *orwige*, if he find another with his lawful wife, within closed doors, or under one covering, or with his lawfully-born daughter, or with his lawfully-born sister, or with his mother, who was given to his father as his lawful wife.

Of the celebration of mass-days

43. To all freemen let these days be given, but not to *theow*-men and *esne*-workmen: twelve days at Yule, and the day on which Christ overcame the devil, and the commemoration day of St. Gregory, and seven days before Easter and seven days after, and one day at St. Peter's tide and St. Paul's, and in harvest the whole week before St. Mary-mass, and one day at the celebration of All-Hallows and the four Wednesdays in the four ember weeks. To all *theow*-men be given, to those whom it may be most desirable to give, whatever any man shall give them in God's name, or they at any of their moments may deserve.

Glossary:

<i>angylde</i>	compensation payment
<i>boc</i> -lands	lands for which charters were held
<i>borh</i>	pledge, security, debt
<i>borhbryce</i>	breach of surety
<i>bot</i>	remedy, relief, compensation
<i>burh</i>	dwelling
<i>burh-bryce</i>	breach of a dwelling (i.e., "breaking and entering")
<i>ceorl</i>	freeman (of the lowest class)
<i>ceorlish</i>	<i>ceorl</i> -like (note that "churlish" in modern English has a much more pejorative tone than <i>ceorlisc</i>)
<i>churchealdor</i>	Church-elder
church- <i>frith</i>	sanctuary, a special protection under ecclesiastical auspices
church- <i>hlaford</i>	lord of a church
<i>churchsocons</i>	ecclesiastical jurisdiction, sanctuary

ealdorman	noble ruler of a county (and that sweeps under the rug one of the most bitterly contested questions in AS history -- relative power of king and ealdorman.)
<i>edorbryce</i>	house-breaking
<i>eorl</i>	borrow-word from Old Norse jarl, often used in place of ealdorman in documents from Cnut's reign forward.
<i>esne</i>	slave, servant, retainer
<i>esne-workmen</i>	hirelings, mercenaries, day-laborers
<i>fahman</i>	foeman, usually the object of a blood-feud
<i>feorm</i>	provisions, foodstuffs, a grant of land in exchange for partial usufruct
<i>flet</i>	dwelling, hall
<i>folk-leasing</i>	shouldn't this be " <i>folcleasung</i> " = slander?
<i>folkmote</i>	folkmoot, meeting of a district (usually a hundred) for legal actions and to hear royal writs
<i>forlongen</i>	ancient, long ago
<i>fryth</i>	peace, restoration of rights, amnesty
<i>fyrð</i>	military expedition, royal levy (this is another complicated issue)
<i>gemot</i>	meeting
<i>hloth</i>	troop, band, gang (e.g., of thieves or robbers)
<i>hloth-bot</i>	penalty for being a member of a band or gang
<i>hold</i>	faithful, loyal; holder of an allod
<i>maeg-burg</i>	family, kinship group
<i>maegship</i>	kinship
<i>maerra</i>	is this " <i>maerac</i> " = boundary-oak, or " <i>maere</i> " = pure, sterling, well-known?
<i>mundbyrd</i>	protection, patronage
<i>mynsterham</i>	monastery
<i>orwige</i>	cowardly, unwarlike, free of liability for homicide
<i>six-hynde</i>	pertaining to the class the <i>wergeld</i> of which was 600 shillings
<i>theow-men</i>	servants
<i>tun</i>	farm, manor, dwelling, village
<i>twy-hynde</i>	having a <i>wergeld</i> of 200 shillings
<i>wed</i>	pledge, security, dowry
<i>wedbryce</i>	treachery
<i>wer</i>	man, money value of a man's life
<i>wer-borh</i>	pledge for the payment of <i>wergeld</i>
<i>wergeld</i>	money value of a man's life
<i>wite</i>	punishment, penalty, contribution to the king