

The Laws of Alfred

Translated by Frederick Attenborough

Now I, King Alfred, have collected these laws, and have given orders for copies to be made of many of those which our predecessors observed and which I myself approved of. But many of those I did not approve of I have annulled, by the advice of my councillors, while [in other cases] I have ordered changes to be introduced. For I have not dared to presume to set down in writing many of my own, for I cannot tell what [innovations of mine] will meet with the approval of our successors. But those which were the most just of the laws I found-whether they dated from the time of Ine my kinsman, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Æthelberht, who was the first [king] to be baptised in England-these I have collected while rejecting the others.

I, then, Alfred, King of the West Saxons, have shown these to all my councillors, and they have declared that it met with the approval of all, that they should be observed.

1. In the first place we enjoin you, as a matter of supreme importance, that every man shall abide carefully by his oath and his pledge.

§ 1. If anyone is wrongfully constrained to promise either of these: to betray his lord or to render aid in an unlawful undertaking, then it is better to be false [to the promise] than to perform it.

§ 2. If, however, he pledges himself to something which it is lawful to carry out and proves false to his pledge, he shall humbly give his weapons and possessions to his friends to keep, and remain 40 days in prison at a royal manor, and undergo there whatever [sentence] the bishop prescribes for him; and his relatives shall feed him if he himself has no food.

§3. If he has no relatives, and [if he] has not the [necessary] food, the king's reeve shall provide him with it.

§4. If he will not submit unless force is used against him, if he has to be bound, he shall forfeit his weapons and his property.

§ 5. If he is slain, no wergeld shall be paid for him.

§ 6. If he runs away before the term [of imprisonment is completed] and is recaptured, he shall remain in prison 40 days, as he ought to have done at first.

§ 7. If he succeeds in making his escape, he shall be banished, and excommunicated from all the churches of Christ.

§ 8. If, however, other men stand surety for him, he shall pay the compensation [due to them] for violation of bail, as the law directs him, and the compensation for breach of faith, as his confessor prescribes for him.

2. If a man flees, for any manner of offence, to any monastery which is entitled to receive the king's food rent, or to any other free community which is endowed, for the space of three days he shall have right of asylum, unless he is willing to come to terms [with his enemy].

§ 1. If, during that time, anyone injures him by a [mortal] blow, [by putting him in] fetters, or by wounding him, he shall pay compensation for each of these offences in the regular way, both with wergeld and fine, and he shall pay 120 shillings to the community as compensation for violation of the sanctuary of the Church, and he [himself] shall not have the payment due to him from the fugitive.

3. If anyone violates the king's protection, he shall pay compensation for the crime [to the injured person], as the law directs him, and 5 pounds of pure silver pennies for violation of the king's protection; for violation of the archbishop's protection or guardianship 3 pounds must be

paid as compensation; for violation of the protection or the guardianship of any other bishop or of an ealdorman 2 pounds must be paid as compensation.

4. If anyone plots against the life of the king, either on his own account, or by harbouring outlaws, or men belonging to [the king] himself, he shall forfeit his life and all he possesses.

§ 1. If he wishes to clear himself [from such a charge], he shall do it by an oath equal to the king's wergeld.

§2. And likewise with regard to all classes, both commoners and nobles, we ordain: he who plots against the life of his lord shall forfeit his life to him, and all he possesses, or he shall clear himself by [an oath equal to] his lord's wergeld.

5. Further, we grant to every church consecrated by a bishop this right of sanctuary: if a man, attacked by enemies, reaches it either on foot or on horseback, he shall not be dragged out for seven days, if he can live despite hunger, and unless he [himself comes] out [and] fights. If, however, anyone does try to drag him out, he shall forfeit the amount due for violation of the king's guardianship and the fine for violating the sanctuary of the church-and a greater amount if he seizes more than one person in such a place.

§1. If the community have so great need of their church [that it cannot be used as an asylum], he [the fugitive] shall be kept in another building, and this shall not have more doors than the church.

§2. The chief authority of the church shall see to it, that during this time no food is given to him.

§3. If he himself is willing to hand over his weapons to his enemies, they shall hold him in their power for thirty days; and they shall send formal notice of his position to his kinsmen.

§ 4. The privilege of sanctuary belonging to a church includes also the following: if anyone takes refuge in a church, because of any offence which up to that time had been kept secret, and there confesses his sin in God's name, half the punishment shall be remitted him.

§ 5. We decree that he who steals on Sunday, or during Christmas or Easter, or on Holy Thursday, at Rogation Days, shall pay in each case double compensation, just as he must [if he steals] during Lent.

6. If anyone steals anything from a church, he shall pay the value of the article and the fine which is appropriate to the value in question, and the hand shall be struck off which committed the theft.

§ 1. If he wishes to redeem his hand, and if it is decided to give him permission to do so, he shall pay [such fine] as is appropriate to his wergeld.

7. If anyone fights or draws his weapon in the king's hall, and [if he] is arrested, it shall be for the king to decide whether he shall be put to death, or permitted to live, in case the king is willing to forgive him.

§1. If he escapes and is subsequently arrested, he shall pay for himself by his wergeld in every case; and he shall pay compensation for the offence-both wergeld and fine according to the nature of the outrage he has perpetrated.

8. If anyone takes a nun from a nunnery without the permission of the king or bishop, he shall pay 120 shillings, half to the king, and half to the bishop and the lord of the church, under whose charge the nun is.

§1. If she lives longer than he who abducted her, she shall inherit nothing of his property.

§ 2. If she bears a child, it shall inherit no more of the property than its mother.

§3. If her child is slain, the share of the wergeld due to the mother's kindred shall be paid to the king, but the father's kindred shall be paid the share due to them.

9. If anyone slays a woman with child, while the child is in her womb, he shall pay the full wergeld for the woman, and half the wergeld for the child, [which shall be] in accordance with the wergeld of the father's kindred.

§1. Until the value amounts to 30 shillings, the fine shall be 60 shillings in every case.

When the [said] value amounts to this sum, the fine shall be 120 shillings.

§ 2. Formerly the fines to be paid by those who stole gold and horses and bees, and many other fines, were greater than the rest. Now all fines, with the exception of that for stealing men, are alike—120 shillings.

10. If anyone lies with the wife of a man whose wergeld is 1200 shillings, he shall pay 120 shillings compensation to the husband; to a husband whose wergeld is 600 shillings, he shall pay 100 shillings compensation; to a commoner he shall pay 40 shillings compensation [for a similar offence].

11. If anyone seizes by the breast a young woman belonging to the commons, he shall pay her 5 shillings compensation.

§1. If he throws her down but does not lie with her, he shall pay [her] 10 shillings compensation.

§ 2. If he lies with her, he shall pay [her] 60 shillings compensation.

§3. If another man has previously lain with her, then the compensation shall be half this [amount].

§ 4. If she is accused [of having previously lain with a man], she shall clear herself by [an oath of] 60 hides, or lose half the compensation due to her.

§ 5. If this [outrage] is done to a woman of higher birth, the compensation to be paid shall increase according to the wergeld.

12. If one man burns or fells the trees of another, without permission [to do so], he shall pay 5 shillings for each big tree, and 5 pence for each of the rest, however many there may be; and [he shall pay] 30 shillings as a fine.

13. If one man kills another unintentionally, [by allowing a tree to fall on him] while they are engaged on a common task, the tree shall be given to the [dead man's] kindred, and they shall remove it within 30 days from the locality. Otherwise, it shall be taken by him who owns the wood.

14. If anyone is born dumb or deaf, so that he can neither deny nor confess his wrongdoings, his father shall pay compensation for his misdeeds.

15. If anyone fights, or draws his weapon in the presence of the archbishop, he shall pay 150 shillings compensation; if this happens in the presence of another bishop or of an ealdorman, he shall pay 100 shillings compensation.

16. If anyone steals a cow or a broodmare, and drives off a foal or a calf, he shall pay for the latter a shilling, and for the mothers according to their value.

17. If anyone entrusts a [child or other] helpless person who is dependent on him to another, and the person accepting the charge causes the death of the person committed to him, he who nurtured him shall clear himself of criminal intention, if anyone prefers such an accusation against him.

18. If anyone lustfully seizes a nun, either by her clothes or by her breast, without her permission, he shall pay as compensation twice the sum we have fixed in the case of a woman belonging to the laity.

§1. If a young woman who is betrothed commits fornication, she shall pay compensation to the amount of 60 shillings to the surety [of the marriage], if she is a commoner. This sum shall be [paid] in livestock, cattle being the property tendered, and no slave shall be given in such a payment.

§ 2. If her wergeld is 600 shillings, she shall pay 100 shillings to the surety [of the marriage].

§3. If her wergeld is 1200 shillings, she shall pay 120 shillings to the surety [of the marriage].

19. If anyone lends a weapon of his to another [man], for the purpose of committing murder with it, they may, if they are willing to, combine to pay the wergeld.

§1. If they do not combine [voluntarily], he who lent the weapon shall pay one-third of the wergeld and one third of the fine.

§ 2. If he wishes to clear himself, [by swearing] he was cognisant of no criminal intention when he made the loan, he may do so.

§3. If a sword-furbisher receives a weapon or a smith receives a tool belonging to another man in order to refurbish it, in either case the article shall be returned in as good condition as that in which it has been received, unless it has been stipulated that there shall be no liability on the part of the said furbisher for damage done to it.

20. If property is entrusted to a monk in the service of another man without the permission of the monk's lord, and he loses it, its former owner shall bear the loss.

21. If a priest slays another man, he and all the share of the monastic property which he has bought for himself shall be given up; and the bishop shall unfrock him when he is ejected from the monastery and given up, unless the lord [of the monastery] is willing to answer for the wergeld [of the slain man].

22. If anyone makes an accusation [against another] at a public meeting, in the presence of the king's reeve, and afterwards wishes to withdraw it, he shall prefer the charge, if he can, against a more likely person. If he cannot he shall lose the value due to him.

23. If a dog tears or bites a man, 6 shillings shall be paid for the first offence. If its owner continues to keep it, 12 shillings shall be paid for the second offence, and 30 shillings for the third.

§1. If the dog disappears after committing any of these offences, this compensation must nevertheless be paid.

§2. If the dog commits more offences and he [its master] still keeps it, he must pay compensation for whatsoever wounds may be inflicted, according to the amount of the [injured man's] full wergeld.

24. If a beast injures a man, [its owner] must hand over the beast [to the injured man], or come to terms [with him].

25. If anyone rapes the slave of a commoner, he shall pay 5 shillings to the commoner, and a fine of 60 shillings.

§1. If a slave rapes a slave, castration shall be required as compensation.

26. If one of a band of marauders slays an unoffending man, whose wergeld is 200 shillings, he who acknowledges the blow shall pay the wergeld and the fine; and everyone engaged in the affair shall pay 30 shillings compensation for belonging to such a band.

27. If the slain man's wergeld is 600 shillings, each man shall pay 60 shillings for belonging to such a band; and the homicide [shall pay] the wergeld and the full fine.

28. If the wergeld of the slain man is 1200 shillings, each of them [shall pay] 120 shillings; and the homicide [shall pay] the wergeld and the fine.

§ 1. If a band of marauders acts thus and afterwards wishes to deny it, they shall all be accused, and then all collectively shall pay the wergeld and one fine- whichever is appropriate to the wergeld.

29. If anyone rapes a girl who is not of age, the same compensation shall be paid to her as is paid to an adult.

30. If anyone who has no paternal relatives fights and kills a man, his maternal relatives, if he has any, shall pay onethird of the wergeld and his associates shall pay one-third. In default of payment of the [remaining] third, he shall be held personally responsible.

§ 1. If he has no maternal relatives, his associates shall pay half [the wergeld], and in default of payment of the [other] half, he shall be held personally responsible.

31. If a man in this position is slain—if he has no relatives half the wergeld shall be paid to the king, and half to his associates.

32. If anyone utters a public slander, and it is proved against him, he shall make amends on no lighter terms than the excision of his tongue, [with the provision that] it shall not be ransomed at a cheaper price than [its value], estimated according to the [man's] wergeld.

33. If one man charges another respecting a solemn pledge given under the sanction of God, and wishes to accuse him of neglecting to perform any [one] of the promises which he has made to him, he shall pronounce the oath [of accusation] in four churches, and the other [the defendant], if he wishes to clear himself, shall do so in twelve churches.

34. Further, with regard to traders, it is decreed: they shall bring before the king's reeve, at a public meeting, the men they are taking with them up into the country, and declare how many of them there are; and they shall take with them [only] such men as they can bring to justice again, at a public meeting. And when they need to have more men with them on their journey, a similar declaration shall always be made to the king's reeve, before the assembled company, as often as need arises.

35. If anyone lays bonds on an unoffending commoner, he shall pay 10 shillings compensation.

§1. If anyone scourges him, he shall pay 20 shillings compensation.

§ 2. If he places him in the stocks, he shall pay 30 shillings compensation.

§3. If he cuts his hair to insult him, in such a way as to spoil his appearance, he shall pay 10 shillings compensation.

§ 4. If he cuts his hair after the fashion of a priest's without binding him, he shall pay 30 shillings compensation.

§ 5. If he cuts off his beard, he shall pay 20 shillings compensation.

§6. If he lays bonds on him, and then cuts his hair after the fashion of a priest's, he shall pay 60 shillings compensation.

36. It is further enacted: if a man has a spear over his shoulder, and anyone is transfixd thereon, he shall pay the wergeld without the fine.

§ 1. If [the man] is transfixd before his eyes, he shall pay the wergeld; and if he is accused of deliberate intention in the act, he shall clear himself with an oath equal to the fine, and thereby dismiss the claim for the fine,

§ 2. supposing the point to be higher than the [other] end of the shaft, by the width of three fingers. If they are both on a level, the point and the [other] end of the shaft, the man with the spear shall not be regarded as responsible for causing danger.

37. If a man wishes [to go] from one district, to seek service in another, he shall do it with the cognisance of the ealdorman, to whose jurisdiction he has previously been subject.

§ 1. If he does so without his cognisance, he who takes him into his employment shall pay a fine of 120 shillings; but he shall divide the payment, [paying] half to the king in the district where the man has been residing, and half in that to which he has come.

§2. If he has committed any manner of offence in the place where he has been [residing], he who now takes him into his employment shall pay compensation for it, and a fine of 120 shillings to the king.

38. If anyone fights at a meeting in the presence of an ealdorman of the king, he shall pay as compensation [such] wergeld and fine as is due, but previous to this [he shall pay] a fine of 120 shillings to the ealdorman.

§1. If he disturbs the meeting by drawing his weapon, he shall pay a fine of 120 shillings to the ealdorman.

§2. If anything of this kind takes place in the presence of an official subordinate to an ealdorman of the king, [or in the presence of] a king's priest, he shall pay a fine of 30 shillings.

39. If anyone fights in the house of a commoner, he shall pay the commoner 6 shillings compensation.

§ 1. If he draws his weapon, but does not fight, the [compensation] shall be half this sum.

§ 2. If either of these [offences] occurs in the house of a man whose wergeld is 600 shillings, the compensation shall be increased to three times that due to a commoner; if in the house of a man whose wergeld is 1200 shillings, [it shall be increased] to twice the compensation due to a man whose wergeld is 600 shillings.

40. The fine for breaking into the fortified premises of the king shall be 120 shillings; into those of an archbishop, 90 shillings; into those of another bishop or of an ealdorman, 60 shillings; into those of a man whose wergeld is 1200 shillings, 30 shillings; into those of a man whose wergeld is 600 shillings, 15 shillings. The fine for breaking through a commoner's fence shall be 5 shillings.

§1. If any of these offences occur while the army is in the field, or during the fast of Lent, the compensation [to be paid] shall be double [the above].

§ 2. If anyone, without permission, publicly disregards the laws of the Church during Lent, he shall pay 120 shillings compensation.

41. We have further established, that a man who holds land by title-deed, which his kinsmen have left him, shall not be allowed to give it out of his kindred, if there is documentary or [other]

evidence that the power to do so is forbidden him by the men who first acquired it, or by those who gave it to him. [And he who contests such an alienation] shall make a declaration to this effect in the presence of his kindred, with the king and bishop as witnesses.

42. Also we enjoin, that a man who knows his adversary to be residing at home, shall not have recourse to violence before demanding justice of him.

§ 1. If he has power enough to surround his adversary and besiege him in his house, he shall keep him therein seven days, but he shall not fight against him if he [his adversary] will consent to remain inside [his residence]. And if, after seven days, he will submit and hand over his weapons, he shall keep him unscathed for thirty days, and send formal notice of his position to his kinsmen and friends.

§ 2. If, however, he flees to a church, the privileges of the church shall be respected, as we have declared above.

§3. If, however, he has not power enough to besiege him in his house, he shall ride to the ealdorman and ask him for help. If he will not help him, he shall ride to the king before having recourse to violence.

§4. And further, if anyone chances on his enemy, not having known him to be at home, and if he will give up his weapons, he shall be detained for thirty days, and his friends shall be informed [of his position]. If he is not willing to give up his weapons, then violence may be used against him. If he is willing to surrender and hand over his weapons, and anyone after that uses violence against him [the pursuer], he shall pay any sum which he incurs, whether wergeld or compensation for wounds, as well as a fine, and his kinsman shall forfeit his claim to protection as a result of his action.

§5. We further declare that a man may fight on behalf of his lord, if his lord is attacked, without becoming liable to vendetta. Under similar conditions a lord may fight on behalf of his man.

§ 6. In the same way a man may fight on behalf of one who is related to him by blood, if he is attacked unjustly, except it be against his lord. This we do not permit.

§7. A man may fight, without becoming liable to vendetta, if he finds another [man] with his wedded wife, within closed doors or under the same blanket; or [if he finds another man] with his legitimate daughter [or sister]; or with his mother, if she has been given in lawful wedlock to his father.

43. The following days shall be granted [as holidays] to all free men, though not to slaves and hired labourers: twelve days at Christmas and the day on which Christ overcame the devil; the anniversary of St Gregory; seven days before Easter and seven days after; one day at the festival of St Peter and St Paul; and in autumn, the full week before St Mary's mass; and one day at the celebration of All Saints. The four Wednesdays in the four Ember weeks shall be granted [as holidays] to all slaves whose chief desire is to sell anything which has been given to them in God's name, or which they are able to acquire by their labour in any portions of time at their disposal.

44. 30 shillings shall be given as compensation for a wound on the head, if both bones are pierced.

§ 1. If the outer bone [only] is pierced, 15 shillings shall be given as compensation.

45. If a wound an inch long is inflicted under the hair, one shilling shall be given as compensation.

§1. If a wound an inch long is inflicted in front of the hair, 2 shillings [shall be paid] as compensation.

46. If either ear is struck off, 30 shillings shall be given as compensation.

§1. If the hearing is stopped, so that he cannot hear, 60 shillings shall be given as compensation.

47. If anyone knocks out a man's eye, he shall give him 66 shillings, 6 pence and the third part of a penny as compensation.

§1. If it remains in the head, but he can see nothing with it, one-third of the compensation shall be withheld.

48. If anyone strikes off another's nose, he shall pay him 60 shillings compensation.

49. If anyone knocks out another's front tooth, he shall pay 8 shillings as compensation for it.

§1. If it is a back tooth [that is knocked out], 4 shillings shall be given as compensation.

§ 2. A man's canine tooth shall be valued at 15 shillings.

50. If anyone strikes another's jaws so violently that they are fractured, he shall pay 15 shillings compensation.

§ 1. If a man's chin-bone is broken in two, 12 shillings shall be given as compensation.

51. If a man's throat is pierced, 12 shillings shall be paid as compensation.

52. If, as the result of another's actions, a man's tongue is torn from his mouth, the compensation [to be paid] shall be the same as that for an eye.

53. If a man is wounded in the shoulder, so that the synovia flows out, 30 shillings shall be paid as compensation.

54. If the arm is fractured above the elbow, 15 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

55. If both bones in the arm are broken, the compensation [to be paid] shall be 30 shillings.

56. If the thumb is struck off, 30 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

§ 1. If the nail is struck off, 5 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

57. If the first finger is struck off, the compensation [to be paid] shall be 15 shillings; for the nail of the same, 32 shillings [compensation shall be paid].

58. If the middle finger is struck off, the compensation [to be paid] shall be 12 shillings; for the nail of the same, 2 shillings compensation shall be paid.

59. If the third finger is struck off, 17 shillings must be paid as compensation for it; and for the nail of the same, 4 shillings [must be paid] as compensation.

60. If the little finger is struck off, 9 shillings must be paid as compensation for it, and one shilling [must be paid as compensation for] the nail of the same, if it is struck off.

61. If a man is wounded in the belly, 30 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

§ 1. If he is pierced right through, 20 shillings [shall be paid as compensation] for each orifice.

62. If a man's thigh is pierced, 30 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

§ 1. If it is fractured, 30 shillings shall also be the compensation [to be paid].

63. If the shin is pierced below the knee, 12 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

§1. If it is fractured below the knee, 30 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

64. If the big toe is struck off, 20 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

§ 1. If it is the second toe [which is struck off], 15 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

§ 2. If the middle toe is struck off, 9 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

§3. If it is the fourth toe [which is struck off], 6 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

§ 4. If the little toe is struck off, 5 shillings shall be given to him [as compensation].

65. If a man is so badly wounded in the testicles that he cannot beget children, 80 shillings shall be paid to him as compensation for it.

66. If a man's arm, with the hand and all below the elbow, is cut off, 80 shillings shall be paid as compensation for it.

§1. For every wound in front of the hair, and below the sleeve and beneath the knee, the compensation shall be doubled.

67. If the loin be maimed, 60 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

§ 1. If it is pierced, 15 shillings shall be given as compensation.

§ 2. If it is pierced right through, then 30 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

68. If a man is wounded in the shoulder, 80 shillings shall be paid as compensation, if he continues to live.

69. If a man maims another's hand outwardly, 20 shillings shall be given to him as compensation, if he can be cured.

§1. If half of it comes off, then 40 shillings must be paid as compensation.

70. If one man breaks another's rib without breaking the skin, 10 shillings shall be given [to him] as compensation.

§1. If the skin is broken and a bone is removed, 15 shillings shall be given [to him] as compensation.

71. If a man's eye is knocked out, or if his hand or foot is struck off, the same compensation shall follow them all-6 pennies, 66 shillings and the third part of a penny.

72. If a man's shin is struck off at the knee, 80 shillings must be paid as compensation for it.

73. If anyone smashes another's shoulder, 20 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

74. If anyone hacks into it [the shoulder], and a bone is removed, 15 shillings shall be given as compensation for it [in addition to the above].

75. If the large sinew is damaged, and if it can be treated medically so as to make it sound, 12 shillings shall be given as compensation.

§ 1. If the man becomes lame as a result of the damage to the sinew, and if he cannot be cured, 30 shillings shall be given [to him] as compensation.

76. If the small sinew [of a man] be damaged, 6 shillings shall be given to him as compensation.

77. If one man damages the tendons in another's neck, and wounds him so severely that he has no control over them, but [if] nevertheless he continues to live so wounded, 100 shillings shall be given to him as compensation, unless the councillors award him a juster and a greater sum.

