At the end of the ninth century, Alfred was acknowledged as leader of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. His heirs led a counterattack against the Vikings of eastern England, and by 927 his grandson Æthelstan (924–39) had extended English authority as far north as York and the borders of the emerging kingdom of Alba (Scotland). Æthelstan’s successors in turn had to fight off renewed viking attacks, beginning with the famous ‘Brunanburh’ campaign of 937.

After Æthelstan’s death Vikings from Dublin seized York and the midlands, and power over these lands went back and forth until the English retook York for the last time in 954. The stability which ensued allowed English kings to refine and develop the infrastructure of their kingdom. This was put to the test by a new wave of viking attacks in the reign of Æthelred II ‘the Unready’ (978–1016) which culminated in the conquest of England by the Danes. Cnut (1016–35), the new Danish king, emulated his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, even going so far as to marry the widow of Æthelred II. But Cnut’s sons proved short lived, and in 1042 Æthelred’s son Edward the Confessor (1042–66) returned from exile in Normandy: his reign saw stronger contacts with Normandy and Lorraine, and the rise of earls who would play a leading part in the famous events of 1066.

In this lecture, we will look at how people reacted to the radical political and institutional changes of this period. The rising status of the kings of the West Saxon dynasty prompted re-examination of their relationship with other rulers in Britain. On a more local level, we will consider in detail how new governmental policies exerted more influence over people’s lives through coinage, legal structures and royal agents. Understanding of all these developments relies on a range of sources, including charters, laws and coins as well as narrative texts, and also on how historians conceptualize states and kingdoms. Key questions we will consider include:

- What was the nature of the relationship between the English kings and their neighbors in other parts of Britain?
- Why were Edward the Elder and Æthelstan able to seize viking territory so quickly?
- Why did consolidation of the administrative system of England emerge so long after initial takeover of territory?
- How can charters, law-codes and coins contribute to knowledge of the English kingdom and its workings at this time?
- To what extent was Æthelred II responsible for the eventual defeat and conquest of his kingdom?
- In what respects did Cnut maintain or modify the power structures he inherited in England?
- How effectively did Edward the Confessor manage the relationship with the leading noblemen of his reign?

Lecture Notes:

- Key Sources include narratives- the heart of the narrative still lies with the Anglo-Saxon chronicle
  - Focuses on deaths, births and battles
  - Comings and goings of kings
- Institutional charters tend to be concentrated around large monasteries