The 927 AD conquest of Scandinavian Northumbria by the ascendant Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelstan, seems a straightforward action of military annexation. Yet Æthelstan’s actions, both leading into, and subsequent to, his annexation of York, demonstrate a nuanced strategy of assimilation of which military dominance formed only a part. Examining chronicle accounts of Æthelstan’s reign, alongside a key royal diploma, numismatics, and archaeology, this paper argues that the Anglo-Saxon king’s intent was not to establish hegemony over Viking York through force and subsequent occupation alone. Rather, Æthelstan wielded a combination of military power and strategies of social integration to bring the Scandinavian north into his developing English kingdom as a functionally homogenised territory.

In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky, and Sihtric died, and King Æthelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians; and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island. – Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC) D 927.1

In 927, upon the death of the Danish King of York, Sihtric (921 – 927), Æthelstan, King of the Anglo-Saxons (924 – 939), took control of the Viking Kingdom of York. Northumbria had been the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom to fall to the invading Scandinavians of the late ninth century, and from 866 York had been under Scandinavian rule. The 927 entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes clear the importance of York for control of the varied polities of northern Britain. Equating Æthelstan’s succession to York with the acquisition of all

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1 References to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC) are cited by manuscript and year. Manuscript D, likely maintained at York during the reign of Æthelstan, has the strongest northern emphasis and, as such, is central to this paper. References to the D-text of the ASC are drawn from G.P. Cubbin, ed., The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Collaborative Edition. Volume 6: MS D (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996). Where relevant, references to other texts of the ASC are to the evergreen Charles Plummer, ed., Two of the Saxons Chronicles Parallel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892). Of the numerous English translations of the ASC, the most faithful (in my opinion) remains Dorothy Whitelock, ed., The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965); this epigraph is drawn from her translation.
Northumbria, the *Chronicle* further implies that the event was the pinnacle of conquests that had seen Æthelstan become not only the first king of all Anglo-Saxons, but over-king of all Britain. Upon Æthelstan’s death in 939, the vikings retook York. The importance of York to the viking leaders, and to Æthelstan, related directly to its strategic location, sitting on an axis between Ireland and Scandinavia. Viking control of York facilitated movement between disparate Scandinavian colonies and upheld the pre-eminence of Danish settlements in the area of Northern England known as the Danelaw. As such, conquest of York was key not only to the Anglo-Saxon reclamation of their historic borders, but the very security of those borders. Æthelstan’s military and social strategies display a recognition that the rule of the predominantly Scandinavian city was the key to Anglo-Saxon dominance of the north. It is on Æthelstan’s strategies in establishing hegemony over York that this article will focus, undertaking to establish the intent behind Æthelstan’s underlying methodologies, and arguing that the Anglo-Saxon king’s desire was for integration, not military occupation. If Æthelstan is understood to have approached hegemony in the north with a focus on assimilation, as opposed to annexation, this meant that, in York, he could not rely on a purely military strategy, but rather required varied tools to bring his influence to bear. The judicious application of force was augmented by marriage alliance, land grants, patronage, fosterage, and the issuing of coinage as Æthelstan sought to manipulate and deputise regional authority in pursuit of York’s assimilation into his new English Kingdom.

Little explicit scholarly attention has been paid to Æthelstan’s relationship with the city of York. In part, this is because Æthelstan’s reign has remained, until recently, relatively ill-studied. Contemporary records for his kingship are sparse, and historians have traditionally subordinated his reign to those of better-attested Anglo-Saxon kings such as Alfred (‘the Great,’ 871 – 899) and Æthelred (‘the Unready,’ 978 – 1016). While this situation has undergone a process of correction over recent decades as the pivotal place of Æthelstan’s kingship in the development of a centralised English kingdom has become more widely recognised, York has remained a peripheral topic within this narrative. David Dumville’s 1992 essay examining the sources for the reign of the Anglo-Saxon king is emblematic of York’s marginalisation in scholarship of Æthelstan’s reign. In its own time one of the most extensive reflections on Æthelstan’s kingship yet undertaken, Dumville’s study barely touches on the annexation and assimilation of York. What discussion he includes focuses

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2 ASC D 927.
upon the military activity of 927 and, while acknowledging this began twelve years of Anglo-Saxon control, Dumville does not seek to explore how Æthelstan effected his assimilation of the city, declaring that the sparseness of the historical record forbids such a pursuit. While the record is indeed sparse, Dumville not only fails to account for non-narrative sources but, by focusing upon military events within narrative sources, ignores passages that show evidence of Æthelstan’s desire to integrate York as a functionally homogenised partner in his kingdom.

In her biography of Æthelstan, Sarah Foot gives some consideration to York’s importance to the king, as it related to his broader conquest of the north. Certainly awareness of the city’s role in the process of Anglo-Saxon expansion provides valuable context for understanding Æthelstan’s attitude to York: control of York was key to Æthelstan’s ambitions toward a wider northern hegemony. Yet at no point does Foot consider how Æthelstan maintained that control, characterising the annexation as a ‘military takeover’ and the city as little more than a forward base for further military action in the north. Like Dumville, Foot presents the relationship between Æthelstan and York as primarily military, ignoring the logistical improbability of the Anglo-Saxon king maintaining an occupation for thirteen years. While admittedly neither Dumville nor Foot suggest such an occupation, there is little attempt to understand how Æthelstan may otherwise have sought to assimilate York into his Anglo-Saxon kingdom. For his modern biographers, York only intrudes into the narrative where it augments their enthusiasm for Æthelstan’s unprecedented military ascendency in the north.

In criticising Æthelstan’s biographers for depicting the king’s strategic relationship with York as peripheral and one dimensional, it must be acknowledged that a similar criticism may be levelled at York’s biographers. Analyses of the Scandinavian kingship in York typically depict Æthelstan as an Anglo-Saxon war-leader bent on military annexation, whose interactions with the city are limited to that context. In his study of Viking York and Dublin, Alfred P. Smyth asserts that not even a treaty between Sihtric and Æthelstan sealed by the Yorkish king’s marriage to Æthelstan’s sister can been viewed as entirely founded in diplomacy and the game of politics, ascribing its success to Sihtric’s

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 20, 162, 167, 170 - 171.
fear of ‘Æthelstan’s obvious military ability.’ In noting this positive assessment of Æthelstan’s martial prowess, it is important to remark that Smyth’s brief discussion of Æthelstan’s activities in York draws heavily upon William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century *Gesta regum Anglorum* which, due to its pro-Æthelstan bias, must be viewed with deep suspicion. More problematically, however, is that by 926, when the marriage was celebrated, contemporary records offer little to imply Æthelstan had had any opportunity to display his military ability to that point in his career. Yet, despite his belief of Æthelstan’s military superiority, Smyth does imply that the dynamic between the two kings was fundamentally one of political equality, an assertion largely supported by Alex Woolf and Clare Downham in their portrayals of the relationship.

Having both written extensively on the Scandinavian kings of northern England, Woolf and Downham often present opposing viewpoints of the political milieu in and around York. Though they agree that Æthelstan dominated the Anglo-Saxon–York relationship from the early years of his reign, Woolf asserts that subsequent to the military annexation of 927 Æthelstan struggled to maintain control, while Downham believes him to have preserved unbroken authority. Unfortunately, as Woolf and Downham focus principally upon the Scandinavian kingship, these are arguments founded in the interplay between kings and their proxies, with little consideration given to Æthelstan’s territorial administration or methodologies of governance. Woolf primarily restricts himself to the Anglo-Saxon king’s military campaigns, and declares that otherwise ‘we know nothing of Æthelstan’s policy for governing the North.’ It is a statement that reflects the paucity of contemporary documentation relating to Æthelstan’s reign, but unfortunately declines to interrogate later histories, numismatic evidence, and administrative documentation for what they may reveal about the king’s relationship with York. Downham is no more illuminating. While she provides an exhaustive and detailed source analysis, her primary concern is unravelling the chronology of events in York in order

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8 Ibid., 3 – 14. See below for critical assessment of William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum*.


to establish the veracity of traditional narratives of Scandinavian kingship. For Downham, Æthelstan is an important figure, yet his rule over York is not central to the region as she seeks to understand it in relation to its Scandinavian character. Accordingly, while Æthelstan features heavily in her analysis, she portrays him more as an interloper than a legitimate king over the Scandinavian city. Like Smyth and Woolf, Downham gives little consideration to Æthelstan’s efforts to integrate York within the social structures of his wider Anglo-Saxon hegemony. While Æthelstan’s disruption of the Scandinavian kingship does mean that his reign is more pivotal to the history of York than York is to the history of Æthelstan, the scholarly focus within this context is upon the continuity of the Scandinavian hegemony, rather than the multi-faceted strategies of the southern king who sought to assimilate it.

Æthelstan’s awareness of the importance of controlling York can be clearly seen in his swift and decisive action following Sihtric’s death. There is little doubt that Æthelstan’s move north constituted an invasion of Danish lands, with English chronicles and Scandinavian sagas alike implying Anglo-Saxon military intervention to prevent a Danish succession. However, there is little evidence that the Anglo-Saxon forces and those of the rival Danish claimant ever met in battle for control of York. Æthelstan’s conquest was a direct response to the power-vacuum in York. It seems likely that military intervention in the Viking Kingdom was an unexpected turn in Æthelstan’s strategy to subsume York within the Kingdom of England, a development which left the Scandinavian elites ill-prepared for conflict. Indeed, prior to Sihtric’s death, Æthelstan had demonstrated a desire to ally with York rather than annex the city and, even after annexation, Æthelstan still seemed inclined toward functional integration rather than military occupation. The chronicles and sagas not only provide evidence of Æthelstan’s military activities in 927, but combined with a key royal diploma offer evidence of non-coercive policies both in his personal presence in York, and his patronage through grants of the city’s church, as

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Æthelstan quickly turned to a program of assimilation and homogenisation. In addition, archaeological findings demonstrate the city’s continued importance as a commercial hub after the conquest, and provide evidence of Æthelstan’s attempts to normalise the city within the wider Anglo-Saxon polity through an extensive coin minting program.

Contemporary narrative sources for Æthelstan’s reign are sparse, with many extant sources originating from the Anglo-Norman historians of the twelfth century. Throughout Æthelstan’s fifteen year reign the Chronicle records are meagre, only directly referencing the king’s activities in the entries for six years, and military campaigning dominates these accounts. It is worth briefly considering the surprising paucity of detail in the Chronicle. In its genesis the Chronicle was a Wessex document, and William of Malmesbury, in his twelfth-century Gesta regum Anglorum (which will require some criticism in its own right) detailed a strained relationship between the elites of Wessex and the Mercia-oriented Æthelstan. The majority of detailed entries for his reign are in the D-text of the Chronicle, thought to have been maintained in York, away from the intrigues of Æthelstan’s southern territories. Understandably, events in the north dominate these records. Here Downham’s argument that the A-C-texts of the Chronicle suffer from ‘political amnesia’ in their redaction, whereas the more detailed D-text provides a chronology of events in and around York that corresponds with external evidence, must be understood to have merit.

Removing the northern oriented D-text from consideration, the Chronicle narrative moves from the campaigns of Æthelstan’s predecessor to those of his successor, Edmund (r.939 – 946), with little attention paid to Æthelstan’s campaigns in the north. It seems possible this was an attempt by Edmund to disguise his own failures in the north in the early years of his reign.

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15 For Æthelstan’s presence in York, see for example: Richer von Saint-Rémi, Historiae ii.2, ed. Hartmut Hoffmann (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani), 98; for his patronage of St Peter’s church, York, see S 407, King’s College London, The Electronic Sawyer: Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters (ES), http://esawyer.org.uk/about/index.html [accessed 16 October 2017]. Two other charters, S 451 (Beverley) and S 456 (Ripon), ostensibly writs from Æthelstan to churches under Yorkish hegemony, are likely later forgeries.


17 ASC A-F 924, 926, 927, 934, 937, 940.

18 Gesta regum Anglorum ii.131, ii.133, ii.139.

19 Whitelock, ASC, p. xv.


21 Ibid.
did indeed promulgate such a policy of silence, he was clearly unable to affect total repression of Æthelstan’s Northumbrian campaigns and, therefore, some detail entered into the D-text in York. It should be noted, however, that the sparse record need not result from Edmund’s intrigues. It may simply be that Æthelstan’s southern territories maintained a relative stability, despite the squabbling of his magnates, that left the southern scribes little to record; while the D-text scribe in York was positioned to record regional campaigns in which Æthelstan both acquired territory in the Danelaw, and forced the submission of the Scottish and British kings beyond the historical borders of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The *Chronicle* does not stand alone as a near-contemporary record of Æthelstan’s activities in York. Of note is Æthelstan’s grant of land at Amounderness to the church of St Peter, York.22 Some doubt has been cast as to the authenticity of the document; however, Dorothy Whitelock notes that the church in York did not claim the granted territories in later times, seeming to remove any motive for forgery.23 The value of this charter is not only in the evidence of Æthelstan’s patronage of the religious institutions of York, but in the additional detail of where he granted the land and to whom he granted it. Indeed, the sheer extent of the lands being granted to the church of St Peter, and thus placed under the control of Archbishop of York, lend the charter further authenticity. As will be discussed below, Æthelstan recognised that exerting direct control over Northumbria was neither practical nor desirable. By placing extensive lands within Northumbria under the administration of the church, Æthelstan gained favour from an alternative power-base to that represented by secular lordship, and in so doing ensured a strategically important region passed to friendly hands.24 Though many of the details that paint this picture are extraneous to the explicit purpose of the charter, such as the declaration that the Archbishop of York held his office by the grace of the king, they are illuminating in their implicit expression of Æthelstan’s strategy to dominate the formerly hostile north. Considered alongside the *Chronicle* this grant of land provides compelling contemporary evidence of Æthelstan’s political program in the north.

Non-contemporary documents shed further light on Æthelstan’s political and military manoeuvres in York, and no survey of the key sources for Æthelstan’s reign can be considered complete without considering William of Malmesbury’s

22 *ES S 407.*
23 *Grant of Amounderness to York,* in Whitelock, *EHD,* 505.
*Gesta regum Anglorum*. Written in the early twelfth century, William’s history shows an interest in Æthelstan believed to extend from the largesse the Anglo-Saxon king showed toward the Abbey of Malmesbury in life, and his interment there in death.\(^{25}\) The *Gesta* offers the most extensive surviving biography of Æthelstan and, in detail, often the only surviving evidence. Among the foremost of the post-conquest Anglo-Norman historians, William claims to work from sources that have not survived into the modern age.\(^ {26}\) It is a claim that has been subjected to significant scholarly scrutiny. While Michael Lapidge and Dumville understand the passages that purport to rely upon this material to be fabricated, Rodney Thomson and Foot both assert that William’s source was near-contemporary with Æthelstan’s reign, adapted by William for a twelfth-century audience.\(^ {27}\) Thomson, in particular, has argued that William’s claim to have substantially reworked an ‘ancient volume’ recounting Æthelstan’s life in order to mute its ‘bombastic’ Latin has a certain verisimilitude and, if understood this way, Lapidge’s conclusion that the language of said passages are twelfth-century in form need not imply that the narrative is twelfth-century in origin.\(^ {28}\) It is likely that William was also working with the local traditions of his abbey and drawing upon existing regional narratives. However, though William does seem to draw on existing sources and traditions, it should be acknowledged that, in his account of Æthelstan’s reign, it is frequently difficult to separate fact and fiction. His narrative, at times, drifts into hagiographical hyperbole that seems to indicate a folkloric element intruding upon tales of a king who had died two centuries earlier.

It must be understood that William sought to eulogise his abbey’s patron. While the *Gesta* does not produce an unquestioning panegyric of the Anglo-Saxon king’s life, William’s declaration that ‘the whole of Europe sang [Æthelstan’s] praises and extolled his merits to the sky,’ leaves little doubt as to the historian’s bias.\(^ {29}\) However, Malmesbury was a southern abbey and, as such, the *Gesta* does not show a concerted interest in the north, except where events in the

\(^ {25}\) Foot, Æthelstan, 40 – 41, 186.

\(^ {26}\) Alongside an ‘ancient volume’ William claims to have found and redacted (*Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.132), he also claims the use of ‘popular songs’ (ii.138.2), and material history (ii.135.1-6) in creating his account of Æthelstan’s life. For a more detailed examination of William’s construction of Æthelstan’s biography, see: Matthew Firth, ‘Constructing a King: William of Malmesbury and the Life of Æthelstan,’ *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 13 (2017), 71 – 94.


\(^ {28}\) *Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.132; Thomson, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 116 - 118.

\(^ {29}\) *Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.135.
Danelaw thrust themselves onto the political conscience of the wider Anglo-Saxon polity. William has little motivation to embellish Æthelstan’s role in the governance of York and, accordingly, his narrative of the northern campaigns closely reflects that of the D-text of the *Chronicle*. While the northern events in the *Gesta* were selected to demonstrate the king’s unprecedented influence, it remains that Æthelstan’s influence in the north was indeed unprecedented.\(^{30}\)

Those activities that William does detail are independently attested in other sources; William’s earliest mention of Æthelstan engaging the Kingdom of York in political discourse is also found in the *Chronicle* entry for 926. It was in that year that Æthelstan and Sihtric agreed their alliance in the Mercian capital of Tamworth, sealing the new relationship with Sihtric’s wedding to Æthelstan’s oldest sister.\(^{31}\) Here, in this marriage alliance, we find Æthelstan’s initial steps in an evolving strategy to subsume York into his English realm.

Æthelstan’s freedom to concern himself with the territories on his northern borders rested upon the strength and cohesion of the hegemony he had inherited. Upon acceding to the throne of Mercia in 924 and of Wessex in 925 – the two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that had come to dominate southern England – Æthelstan found himself in a unique position of political stability and military and territorial power. A mere forty years earlier, viking invaders had occupied Mercia and invaded Wessex, driving Æthelstan’s grand-father, Alfred, the king of Wessex, into exile.\(^{32}\) Earning his sobriquet ‘the Great’, Alfred not only successfully pushed back against the invaders, but by the end of his reign had established a defensive system that put his kingdom in good stead to defend future attacks.\(^{33}\) The political and military stability this afforded Wessex allowed Alfred’s son, and Æthelstan’s father, Edward (‘the Elder,’ r. 899 – 924) to further build the power and influence of Wessex. Edward’s sister Æthelflæd had married the ‘Lord of Mercia’ c. 887 and, upon her husband’s death in 911, and with her brother’s support, Æthelflæd took control of Mercia. From there, the royal siblings pushed back against autonomously-governed regions of Scandinavian settlement in East Anglia and the southern Danelaw up the Humber River.\(^ {34}\) Upon Æthelflæd’s death, Edward simply absorbed Mercia under the Wessex crown.\(^ {35}\) Thus, with the

30 *ASC* D 927; Foot, Æthelstan, 18 – 20; Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, 83 – 84.
31 *Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.126, ii.131, ii.134; *ASC*, D 926.
32 *ASC* A-C 877. As the *Chronicle*’s origin in Alfred’s court should again be note – the formulaic elements of the narrative of Alfred’s fall from grace and rise from ignominy must be viewed with some scepticism.
34 *ASC* A-D 911 – 913, A 915 – 918.
35 *ASC* Mercian Register 919.
foundations laid by his grandfather and father, Æthelstan found himself in charge of a centralised Anglo-Saxon hegemony that spanned most of southern England, granting him both political and military ascendency. Further, his kingdom was an expansionary hegemony, accustomed to territorial growth and dominance over its neighbours. It was in this context that, upon taking control of his inheritance, Æthelstan turned his eyes north of the Humber to the lands of the Scandinavian King in York. Yet in 926 Æthelstan was not ready to turn his military power toward the annexation of York, seeking instead a diplomatic relationship through which political influence could be developed and exercised. Indeed, with the model of his aunt’s marriage into the Mercian court and the subsequent successful addition of that territory to a growing Wessex hegemony before him, it is unsurprising that Æthelstan sought to insinuate his own sister into the court of his rival.

William recounts the marriage alliance between Æthelstan and Sihtric three times. No source reliably recounts the name of the lady, though William notes that she was the sister of Æthelstan, both children of King Edward, and she ‘a noble lady called Ecgwynn.’\(^{36}\) In the first account the Gesta gives no indication of political purpose, however the following records establish that the marriage was part of a ‘lasting peace’ with the King of York.\(^{37}\) Peace with York was evidently of primary concern to both Æthelstan and the chroniclers who recorded his legacy. The Chronicle records that the marriage alliance was Æthelstan’s first act as king; and accounts of the marriage (understood as a significant political overture to his northern neighbour) permeate post-Conquest histories, appearing not only in William’s history, but in those of Simeon of Durham, John of Worcester and Roger of Wendover.\(^{38}\) Roger of Wendover asserts that shortly after Sihtric’s marriage to Æthelstan’s sister he repudiated her and Christianity, returning to paganism and ‘miserably end[ing] his life shortly after his apostasy.’\(^{39}\) Roger is the latest of our sources for this wedding and this religious connotation does not reside in more contemporary accounts of Sihtric’s wedding and death. Though Roger drew upon the Chronicle, William of Malmesbury, Simeon of Durham, and John

\(^{36}\) Gesta regum Anglorum ii.126; While Roger of Wendover does name the sister as Eadgyth, he was writing in the thirteenth century and no contemporary account or earlier Anglo-Norman writer provides this detail, Roger of Wendover, Flores historiarum 925, ed. H.O. Coxe, vol. 1 (London: Sumptibus Societas, 1841), 385 – 386; Smyth, Scandinavian York, 15 (n. 11).

\(^{37}\) Gesta regum Anglorum ii.131, ii.134


\(^{39}\) Roger of Wendover, Flores historiarum 925.
of Worcester in constructing his entries relating to pre-Conquest England, he frequently altered narratives to match the perceptions held of historical figures in his own time and, in this instance, his account is suspect of authorial invention. This is not to say William, Simeon and John do not at times also indulge in invention, or give evidence of independent historical traditions, but in the case of Sihtric’s wedding, their histories show little departure from the account of their common source, the Chronicle. Presented as a purely political pairing in the Chronicle, the wedding is the first instalment of a concerted foreign policy that would see Æthelstan, himself with no children, establish a network of alliances by marrying numerous half-sisters to continental rulers throughout his reign.\(^40\) In this matter Æthelstan had not only the example of his aunt’s successful Mercian marriage before him, but also that of his half-sister Eadgifu to the West Francian king c. 917. Æthelstan pursued this method of alliance-building throughout his reign, marrying a half-sister to the Duke of Frankia in 926, a second half-sister in 929 to the man who would become Otto I, Holy Roman Emperor, and a third that same year to a Burgundian count.\(^41\) Yet the unnamed sister wedded to Sihtric of York was Æthelstan’s eldest sister, his only full sister, and the first sister he married to any foreign ruler. Upon becoming the Anglo-Saxon King, Æthelstan’s focus was clearly on securing his northern border and friendly relations with York.\(^42\)

Perhaps of even more interest than Æthelstan’s willingness to marry his sister to the Danish Kings of York was Sihtric’s willingness to travel to Tamworth to do so. Long considered the capital of Mercia, Tamworth was located deep inside Æthelstan’s territories and distant from both the Kingdom of York and the wider hegemony of the Danelaw. In this event Sheila Sharp, in her study of West Saxon marriage alliances, sees the marriage as ‘cement[ing] an unequal relationship,’ an idea reflected in Alex Woolf’s statement that ‘Sihtric was in some sense recognising Æthelstan’s superiority.’\(^43\) Yet the idea that York was submitting to Wessex finds little support in either modern scholarship or the chronicles of the event; indeed, Woolf himself goes on to state that ‘it is noteworthy that the chronicler does not mention submission.’\(^44\) The language of the Chronicle certainly does not imply subservience of either


\(^41\) Simon MacLean, ‘Cross-Channel Marriage and Royal Succession in the Age of Charles the Simple and Athelstan (c. 916-936),’ Medieval Worlds 2 (2015), 29 – 31, 36.

\(^42\) Foot, Æthelstan, 18 – 20; David Rollason, Northumbria, 500 - 1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 262 – 263.

\(^43\) Sharp, ‘Dynastic Marriage,’ 82; Woolf, From Pictland to Alba, 149.

\(^44\) Woolf, From Pictland to Alba, 149.
party, a reticence that characterises most accounts of the event, though Simeon of Durham’s entry for 925 seems to emphasise a meeting of equals.\footnote{The Chronicle of John of Worcester 925; Roger of Wendover, Flores historiarum 925; Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 925; ASC D 926.}

The able and glorious king of the Angles, Æthelstan, gave his sister in marriage, with great honour and dignity to Sihtric, king of the Northumbrians, born of the Danish race.\footnote{Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 925. Translation from Simeon of Durham, A History of the Kings of England 925, trans. J. Stevenson, facsimile copy (Llanarch Enterprises: Dyfed, 1987 (1858)), 88.}

Simeon, writing in the early twelfth century, based his material relating to Æthelstan’s reign upon non-extant annals that were held in Durham. Generally, Simeon relates his source texts faithfully – later entries draw heavily from John of Worcester with little alteration to that text – so we may assume that, through the Durham annals, Simeon preserves a nuanced contemporary view of the realities of the complex Anglo-Scandinavian power-structures in the north. Within Simeon’s portrayal of the political environment of northern England, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Danish kings operated through the medium of mutually accepted independent sovereignty. Though the implication of the King of York travelling to the stronghold of a foreign power has been understandably read as a sign of his submission, it is not an assertion borne out in the documentary evidence. The simplest explanation for the formalities of alliance and marriage occurring in Tamworth is practical diplomacy on the part of the English king. Were Æthelstan conveyed to York under arms to conduct negotiations, it is difficult to accept that the other leaders of the Danelaw would not have read this as aggression by their southern neighbour. By approaching Tamworth, Sihtric was entering a territory under a strong centralised rule with the permission of its ruler. While this argument must remain hypothetical, it sits on a firmer footing and can be seen as a tangible demonstration of Æthelstan’s pursuit of non-military political strategies on his northern border. Indeed, at this early point in his reign, with Sihtric on the throne of York, Æthelstan likely did not see conquest as a viable strategy and, as Foot and Smyth have asserted, the alliance was fundamentally co-equal in nature.\footnote{Foot, Æthelstan, 18; Smyth, Scandinavian York, 3 - 4.} Moreover, of the two kings, only Æthelstan was providing tangible evidence to his intent for peace in the person of his sister: he would have kin standing by the throne of York, providing for some influence and friendship with the Danish king.
However, Sihtric did not long survive his marriage. His death less than a year after the alliance of York and Æthelstan necessitated that, as Sharp has highlighted, ‘different policies had to be pursued towards the north.’ Foot suggest that this death left Æthelstan’s sister a politically isolated and vulnerable member of Anglo-Saxon royalty in a foreign city, providing Æthelstan with an excuse to invade York. This reading of Æthelstan’s motivations implies a calculated and premeditated program of annexation that finds little support in the extant accounts of the military occupation of York. Rather, it seems that Æthelstan was reacting to events as they unfolded. Sihtric’s death left a power-vacuum in York and those Danes who claimed to be in Sihtric’s line of succession would have no kinship ties to the house of Wessex. Æthelstan’s plan to wield influence in the north through his sister and his policy of alliance through kinship were instantly undone when the King of York died. Æthelstan reacted and quickly filled the power-vacuum by bringing York into his Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

The details of Æthelstan’s annexing of York differ between chronicles. The D-text of the Chronicle provides a pseudo-hagiographical portent of Æthelstan’s rise to power, ‘In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky,’ but then blandly states, ‘Sihtric died, and King Æthelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians.’ The Old English here reflects an uncontested succession. Yet this ostensibly seamless annexation of York in 927 narrated by the most contemporary manuscript of the Chronicle, both in terms of time and location, must be considered in the light of Æthelstan’s domination of that city for the next twelve years. Given the silence of almost all other versions of the chronicle for the year 927, it is difficult to assess what political filters were applied to the narrative of the D-text during the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy in York. Once again, we return to Downham’s theory of ‘political amnesia,’ and in this case the D-text is not entirely exempt, yet the E-text offers a brief passage that defies the silence and even finds company in the chronicles of Simeon of Durham and John of Worcester: ‘In this year King

48 Sharp, ‘Dynastic Marriage,’ 85
49 Foot, Æthelstan, 18.
50 Woolf, From Pictland to Alba, 149 – 151.
51 ASC D 927.
52 The statement Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice reveals notable parallels to the entry in the E-text recording the unopposed succession of Æthelstan’s brother upon the former’s death (ASC E 940). The language is further repeated through most of the subsequent entries recording the succession of a new king and, in this, Foot’s assertion that this is a standard phrase denoting succession becomes self-evident (See for example: ASC E 948, D 954, E 955, C 957, A 958; Foot, Æthelstan, 19.)
Æthelstan drove out Guthfrith.\(^{53}\)

The name Guthfrith will only briefly enter our discussion, being more important to the history of Viking Dublin than Viking York.\(^{54}\) Simeon adds the detail that he was Sihtric’s son and, in an entry almost identical to that of John of Worcester, states that he had acceded the throne at Sihtric’s death.\(^{55}\) William of Malmesbury provides more substantial details, though removing any concept that this ‘driving out’ was an Anglo-Saxon military operation in York. In this version, Guthfrith never took the throne of York, fleeing instead to Scotland upon Sihtric’s death, followed by Æthelstan’s envoys who sought to avoid war by treating with the King of Scots. Realising Scotland was not a safe haven Guthfrith gathered some supporters, attempted to besiege York, fled once more upon the failure of this plan and ultimately attended Æthelstan’s court in order to surrender himself.\(^{56}\) It seems significant that in this narrative the Anglo-Saxon court receives Guthfrith honourably, the heir to York is spared any punishment, perhaps indicating Æthelstan’s desire to project an image of magnanimity and just rule to the subjects of his new city. The *Annals of Ulster* indicate that Guthfrith was not in York at the time of Sihtric’s death; making his bid for the throne of York with an invading fleet from Dublin, Guthfrith ‘returned again within six months.’\(^{57}\) Perhaps the events detailed by William reflect the truth of that six-month campaign; however, ultimately Guthfrith’s actions cannot be known with any certainty. What can be confidently stated is that he was the only named Danish claimant on the throne, and Æthelstan quickly brushed the threat aside to subsume York into his new kingdom of England.

After dismissing the dynasty of the Kings of York, William makes an interesting assertion, not known from contemporary records, that ‘Æthelstan meanwhile levelled with the ground the fortress the Danes had built long ago in York.’\(^{58}\) For the first time, we find direct reference to Æthelstan employing a strategy of military dominance in establishing control of the city. There is an interesting parallel here to a separate event William records in the lands of the West Welsh (i.e. the Cornish), another peripheral territory that Æthelstan sought to assimilate during his reign. In that instance, Æthelstan is purported

\(^{53}\) ASC E 927; *The Chronicle of John of Worcester* 926; Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, 926; Downham ‘Last Scandinavian Kings of York,’ 31.


\(^{55}\) *The Chronicle of John of Worcester* 926; Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 926.

\(^{56}\) *Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.134.

\(^{57}\) Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, eds., *The Annals of Ulster (To AD 1131)* 927.3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 379.

\(^{58}\) *Gesta regum Anglorum* ii.134.
to have attacked Exeter, forcing the Cornish out of the city.\textsuperscript{59} Elsewhere there are no accounts of Æthelstan undertaking direct military confrontation with a regional city, yet William records two such events. Importantly, however, as Charles Insley has highlighted, there is an explicit ethnographical element to William’s record of the attack on Exeter in which Æthelstan ‘purged’ the Cornish, an ‘infected race,’ from the city.\textsuperscript{60} This presents a distinct possibility that William was engaging in social commentary regarding the alterity of the Cornish, contemporary to his own time.\textsuperscript{61} Nonetheless, if the attack on Exeter (when stripped of William’s hyperbole) and the levelling of the fortress in York are understood to have a core element of truth, the two campaigns display an overt concern on the part of the king to assert control over the primary cities of his newly acquired territories.

That Æthelstan identified the importance of controlling regional urban power-bases to the creation of stable territorial hegemonies does not imply a static approach to establishing Anglo-Saxon dominance over such cities. In York, it is important to note that William is not speaking of a systematic relocation of native inhabitants, or even the dismantling of the city’s external fortifications, but rather the destruction of a smaller fortification within the city walls.\textsuperscript{62} While the Gesta provides the only record of the event, the strategic logic behind the move lends the account a certain veracity. The destruction of enemy fortresses after conquest was a common strategy to avoid leaving defensive structures to be occupied in case of rebellion, and within the Gesta the razing of the Danish fortification is immediately preceded by Guthfrith’s siege.\textsuperscript{63} The most obvious implication of this decision is that Æthelstan did not trust in the loyalty of his new Northumbrian subjects. It also seems to indicate that Æthelstan did not anticipate residing in the city or providing a strong military presence. If this fortress represented a defensible position for a resident Anglo-Saxon garrison in a potentially hostile city it seems unlikely that it would have been destroyed. Similarly, if the fortress was a fortified royal residence and Æthelstan had expected to be in York frequently, it would not

\textsuperscript{59} Gesta regum Anglorum i.216. William further states that Æthelstan set the border of Cornwall on the River Tamar, the boundary of modern Cornwall. Prior to this event, and in the context of this discussion, ‘Cornwall’ and the ‘Cornish’ must be understood to incorporate the lands and Britons of Devon.

\textsuperscript{60} Gesta regum Anglorum i.216; Charles Insley, ‘Athelstan, Charters and the English in Cornwall,’ in Charters and Charter Scholarship in Britain and Ireland, ed. Marie Therese Flannigan and Judith A. Green (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16 – 17.

\textsuperscript{61} Insley, ‘Athelstan, Charters and the English in Cornwall,’16 – 17.


\textsuperscript{63} Gesta regum Anglorum ii.134; Foot, Æthelstan, 19.
have been dismantled. The confused nature of the overlapping Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian archaeological sites in York have meant that, while some plausible suggestions have been put forward, the location and nature of the building remains elusive. Nonetheless, it seems the destruction of this fortification was a demonstration of military power and conquest intended in its own right to discourage rebellion while leaving the city to resume normal economic and social life under an altered political structure.

It is worth noting that Æthelstan led two additional military campaigns in the north. In 934 Æthelstan invaded Scotland to force the subjugation of the King of Scots, and in 937 he fought and won the Battle of Brunanburh against a coalition of viking, Scottish and Briton forces led by Guthfrith’s son Olaf Guthfrithson. Though Olaf undoubtedly saw York as a prize to be claimed at Brunanburh, from the English perspective neither campaign was directed at the city of York, rather representing proactive defensive strategies designed to keep Æthelstan’s enemies away from his newly acquired lands. As such, the offensives of 934 and 937 do not warrant extensive consideration here, beyond noting that it is likely, though unconfirmed, that Æthelstan visited York on both occasions.

It can be difficult to place Æthelstan’s presence in York. R.I. Page suggests that Æthelstan was ‘several times in the north, and for a period occupied the city,’ an optimistic assessment, given our sources, of Æthelstan’s personal relationship with York. Speaking more generally of records for events in York at this time, Smyth highlights their paucity and selectivity, noting that ‘Northumbrian and West Saxon writers of the period were well aware that the outcome of the struggle between Wessex and Scandinavian York would, in the end, decide who was to be ruler of England.’ Yet, as we have seen, it may never have been Æthelstan’s intention to establish dominance of York through either military subjugation or personal presence. Indeed, beyond his 927 campaign recorded in the Chronicle, when the king clearly led the annexation of York, our key

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65 ASC A 933, B – F 934, A – D 937. The 934 campaign is corroborated by John of Worcester and Simeon of Durham, The Chronicle of John of Worcester 934; Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 926. The A – D-text Chronicle accounts for Brunanburh are in verse and the battle is attested with varying degrees of hyperbole in English and Scandinavian sources. See for example: Egil’s Saga 52 – 55; Roger of Wendover, Flores historiarum 937; Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia 937.
66 Foot, Æthelstan, 55, 90.
68 Smyth, Scandinavian York, 98.
sources are either outside the English corpus or written centuries later.

Let us return to William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century history. In detailing the renown of the Anglo-Saxon king, William lists the envoys and gifts sent by continental rulers, recording the following event:

A certain Harold, king of the Norwegians [872 – 930], sent [Æthelstan] a ship with a gilded beak and a scarlet sail ... The names of the envoys were Helgrim and Osfrith, and after a royal reception in the city of York they wiped off the sweat of their journey with suitable rewards.\(^{69}\)

William’s analysis of this gift is simplistic; lacking in political nuance and providing little chronological context, placing the envoy in York at an indeterminate date between the conquest of 927 and Brunanburh in 937.\(^{70}\) Harald’s motivation would not have been, as William seems to suggest, simply to honour the Anglo-Saxon king, but rather to display his own power and wealth and establish a basis for diplomatic relations. Here Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth century Heimskringla may shed some needed light, recording the life of King Harald’s son, known as Håkon Æðisteins fóstri (Hákon, Æthelstan’s foster son).\(^{71}\) According to Snorri, Æthelstan and Harald provided reciprocal gifts in what appears to be a competitive demonstration of power and largesse, with Harald ultimately tricking the Anglo-Saxon king into fostering his son.\(^{72}\)

It must be emphasised that Snorri’s narrative displays a Norwegian bias commensurate with William’s English bias. What we appear to be seeing here is a political alliance, an extension of Æthelstan’s earlier policy of establishing kinship bonds with Scandinavian royalty.\(^{73}\) The kings had common cause in York. Harald’s consolidation of power over Norway had triggered a Norse diaspora, and the Scandinavian settlements of Britain were close and had potential to become a base for these dissenters to build power.\(^{74}\) Neither king desired a strong Scandinavian Kingdom of York. So long as the city remained a part of the Anglo-Saxon hegemony, it formed a buffer between the vikings of Northern Britain and Ireland, and the English and Norwegian heartlands.

\(^{69}\) Gesta regum Anglorum ii.135.
\(^{74}\) Page, ‘The Audience of Beowulf,’ 116.
The fostering of the sons of foreign rulers sits alongside Æthelstan’s program of marriage alliances to demonstrate a proactive foreign relations policy that sought to establish a wide diplomatic and social network. As such, Hákon was not the only son of a foreign ruler at the Anglo-Saxon court. Louis, Æthelstan’s nephew and son of the Duke of the Franks, had come to the Anglo-Saxon court seeking refuge from political turmoil in Francia, and it was in York that the Frankish envoys found Æthelstan and Louis in 936. The continental historian, Richer of Rheims, indicates that not only was the king in York ‘attending to the business of the realm with his men,’ but that the Frankish envoys expected to find him there, perhaps reflecting a period of extended residence. King Harald had died in 932 and therefore the envoys of the Franks cannot have arrived in the same period of residence as those of Harald. Foot speculates that we should see Æthelstan’s presence between the 934 and 937 northern campaigns as a precursor to Brunanburh, with the king keenly aware of his faltering northern alliances, and seeking to strengthen them.

However, as discussed above, Æthelstan’s strategy in York seems not to have been reliant on personal presence. If William of Malmesbury’s claims that Æthelstan had destroyed an internal fortress are taken to be true, Æthelstan was seeking to demonstrate dominance through direct intervention, not occupation. Indeed, with the exception of a spurious reference in Egils saga to a royal palace in York during the reign of Eiríkr blóðøx, there is little historical or archaeological evidence of a permanent royal residence in the city. Rather, Æthelstan’s longest lasting influence on York is seen not in his military prowess or royal presence, but in his strategy of integration.

The garrulous charter of 934, granting land at Amounderness to the church of St Peter in York, in its excessive detail provides some insight into these social strategies of integration. Amounderness was a territory that had been under the hegemony of Viking York and lay on the west coast immediately north of Æthelstan’s Mercian lands. Granting this land to the church of St. Peter in York was a subtle political move that requires detailed examination of the location of the grant and the people involved. The region shared a border with Mercia and boasted a shoreline facing Ireland. As such, control of the

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75 Richer of Saint-Rémi, Historiae, ii.2.
76 Ibid.
77 Foot, Æthelstan, 90.
78 Egil’s Saga 59; Rollason, ‘Anglo-Scandinavian York,’ 311; Rollason, Northumbria, 500 – 1100, 218 – 219. In detail the narrative of Egil’s Saga is suspect, conflating the reigns of Eiríkr and Æthelstan though Eiríkr reigned a decade after the Anglo-Saxon king’s death; for textual analysis of this passage, see Downham, ‘Last Scandinavian Kings of York,’ 27 - 28.
region both protected the Anglo-Saxon heartlands from northern polities and broke the Dublin-York axis of Scandinavian movement. Yet Æthelstan did not directly challenge the traditional hegemony of York, though he now ruled the city. Rather, he removed the region from secular control and granted it to the archbishop of York ‘that the bishop may hold it without the yoke of hateful servitude.’ Further, Æthelstan makes mention that ‘I constituted Wulfstan [York’s] bishop,’ presumably indicating that this strategic land was not only being freed from the factionalism of secular rule but placed into the hands of one of Æthelstan’s trusted advisors. This claim requires some qualification since, throughout his tenure as the Archbishop of York, Wulfstan’s loyalty to the Anglo-Saxon kings often wavered. Upon Æthelstan’s death, York had quickly returned to Danish rule and the D-text of the *Chronicle* places Wulfstan among the northern forces who stood in opposition to the new Anglo-Saxon King, Edmund. The *Chronicle* further recounts that, in 947, Wulfstan proved false to his oath of loyalty to Edmund’s successor, Eadred (r. 946 – 955), who would go on to imprison the traitorous archbishop in 952.

Despite this chequered career and Wulfstan’s evident support for Scandinavian rule of Northumbria, there is little indication of disloyalty manifesting during Æthelstan’s reign. From his appointment in 931 until 936 Wulfstan appears regularly as a witness to royal charters, with his absence in the last three years of Æthelstan’s kingship providing the only evidence to support a rejection of Anglo-Saxon rule. What this means can only be conjectured. With Æthelstan’s presence in York unverifiable at any time after 937, had Wulfstan declined to travel south, preferring to oversee the ecclesiastical administration of Northumbria, the archbishop’s absence from royal diplomas may simply have been a matter of logistics. Certainly there is no direct evidence of his involvement with the anti-Æthelstan coalition at Brunanburh, nor of overt support for a Danish claimant to the throne during Æthelstan’s lifetime, necessitating ostracism from, or a rejection of, the Anglo-Saxon court. If Wulfstan’s later defections are understood as political realignments with whoever held ascendancy in Northumbria, it seems unlikely he would have stood in opposition to the victor of Brunanburh, the king who had

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81 *ES* S 407; Whitelock, *Grant of Amounderness*, 506.
83 *ASC D* 943.
84 *ASC D* 947, 952.
sanctioned his elevation to Archbishop of York, and who had placed the lands at Amounderness under his control. Though Wulfstan’s role in the push for Northumbrian independence after Æthelstan’s reign is demonstrable, disloyalty to Æthelstan himself is not.

Both the appointment of the archbishop and the grant of Amounderness were strategies of political intent; it would be anachronistic to remove the church from the secular power structures of tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England. Æthelstan did not retain control of York and its surrounds for over a decade by arbitrarily reassigning lands and, in areas of the Danelaw not under the hegemony of York, the king was known to empower the existing Danish aristocracy as representatives of his government. 87 Indeed, within the broader context of Æthelstan’s territorial ambitions, his readiness to rely on local authority appears to have been a foundational element in his strategy to subsume his neighbours. Looking once more to parallels in Cornwall, a grant from a native Cornish lord to St Heldenus, made c. 937 and containing a confirmation of the grant by Æthelstan, displays just such a regional power-sharing arrangement. 88 Æthelstan’s ratification of the document shows that he held both overlordship and a right to adjudication, yet regional lords nonetheless retained a degree of functional autonomy and authority. 89 However, as seen in Æthelstan’s appointment of Wulfstan to the bishopric of York, effective control of ecclesiastical power was also a key element in the king’s strategies of social assimilation. Here too we see a parallel between Æthelstan’s approaches to regional governance in York and Cornwall: just as he had done in York, Æthelstan exerted the right to appoint the bishop of his newly acquired territory, reputedly installing Cornwall’s first bishop, Conan. 90 Despite a willingness to work with regional aristocracy, it is clear that Æthelstan saw the church as an alternate power-base to the lordship of local land-holders. In the case of the grant to St Peter’s, the removal of Amounderness from provincial secular control was strategically important to reconstituting the Kingdom of York as an English polity. Theoretically, the church was a united, inter-cultural polity, nominally loyal to the king and aloof from Anglo-Scandinavian cultural and political tensions of the north. The grant represents the broader strategy of assimilation: Æthelstan was controlling the institutions of York, appointing his own men to positions of power and extending that power through the

87 Foot, Æthelstan, 129.
89 Insley, ‘Athelstan, Charters and the English in Cornwall,’ 20, though the possibility that this confirmation was a later adendum must be considered, in all respects the charter seems genuine.
former Danish territories. Yet maintaining the traditional power structures and territorial jurisdictions of York allowed Æthelstan to maintain a veneer of local authority and continue his program to align the north with his other English territories.

This assessment of Æthelstan’s nuanced policies is borne out in numismatic evidence of minting activities in York during Æthelstan’s reign. The famous archaeological exploration undertaken in the late 1970s at 16 – 22 Coppergate, York, provides compelling physical evidence of minting activities in the city during Æthelstan’s reign. Three trial pieces used to test-strike coin imprints were unearthed in the dig, two of which were used to test dies for pennies minted under Æthelstan. Of more interest to numismatists, however, was the uncovering of a complete coin die, an entirely unique discovery that provides insights into technical aspects of minting in the tenth century. More importantly for this discussion, it was a die for a coin type issued in York only from c. 920 – 927, reflecting that York was home to a mint prior to Æthelstan’s annexation of the city. In fact, numerous coins types survive that predate Anglo-Saxon rule over the Danelaw. Their dating is inherently complex, however they seem to evidence that the archbishops were the key minters in York before 927, and perhaps some influence was already attributable to the Anglo-Saxon kings. It is unsurprising that York, the dominant Scandinavian city in England, would have minted its own coins, it is perhaps rather more surprising at first glance that Æthelstan allowed minting to continue once he gained ascendancy in the city. Yet here too Æthelstan’s desire to assimilate York into his Anglo-Saxon Kingdom is evident. Æthelstan may have maintained York’s right to mint coins, but these were no longer Anglo-Scandinavian coins. The coins bore designs different from those previously produced, the name of the mint in York that had appeared in Latin (EBORACE) was replaced with Old English (EFORPIC), and the weight standard of the coins was converted to adhere to Anglo-Saxon specifications. York was thus allowed to retain the

93 Ibid., 61 – 62.
political status and functional economic capacities associated with the right to mint coins, yet the coinage was clearly English and designed to preference trade within Æthelstan’s hegemony.

Similar strategies are implicit in the grant of Amounderness: Æthelstan allowed power to reside with local authority with a particular emphasis on the archbishop of York. Yet while Æthelstan may have encouraged a certain level of autonomy by allowing York to mint its own coins, the goal was still integration into his English kingdom. As Æthelstan’s rule strengthened and his hegemony widened, he began establishing some standardisation of coinage throughout his territories and, alongside Wessex and Mercia, the coins being minted in York declared Æthelstan as Rex totius Britanniae: King of all Britain. This brings to mind the declaration in the Chronicle which began our consideration of Æthelstan’s rule of York: that upon his ascension to the Northumbrian throne ‘he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island.’ Though utilising nuanced strategies of social and political assimilation through coins, grants, patronage and marriage, it cannot be forgotten that Æthelstan was a conquering king who would use military force when required.

The Anglo-Saxon dominance of York ended with Æthelstan’s death, though the city was ultimately fated to become English. Æthelstan’s effective use of military power and social assimilation had given him control of the city for over a decade with little internal resistance. Yet the paucity of contemporary documentation relating to Æthelstan’s reign as a whole, and specifically in York, only allows us glimpses into how this was achieved. What sources we do have – chronicle accounts of Æthelstan’s reign, his grant to the church of St. Peter, and the extant numismatic and archaeological evidence – paint a picture of a multi-faceted strategy of assimilation, rather than one of outright annexation and occupation. The Anglo-Saxon armies only marched on York once and, with Æthelstan’s military dominance established, they did not do so again. The Anglo-Saxon king augmented a judicious application of force with marriage alliance, land grants, patronage and fosterage, and the issuing of coinage as he attempted to ensure that York was a fully assimilated and functional partner in his new English Kingdom. Æthelstan, it seems, recognised that the predominantly Scandinavian city offered the key to Anglo-Saxon dominance of the north, and thus had little desire to engender resistance to his kingship by enacting significant change to economic or local political structures. Æthelstan allowed York to retain its rights as a minting centre and commercial hub and,

98 ASC D 927.
seemingly rarely in the city himself, demonstrated a willingness for local elites of his choosing to represent him. The resultant veneer of local autonomy allowed him to continue his program to align the north with his other English territories. It was thus through social and cultural integration that Æthelstan sought to assimilate York into his new English Kingdom.