

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

CONTEXTUALIZING THE VIKINGS IN ANGLO-SAXON HISTORY AND LITERATURE

2011

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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

CONTEXTUALIZING THE VIKINGS IN ANGLO-SAXON HISTORY AND LITERATURE

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Anglistika a amerikanistika – norština

Praha, duben 2011

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Praha, 30. 4. 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to Helena Znojemská, my dear friend and teacher, who has shown great patience and support, and without whose guidance, knowledge and insight this thesis would look quite different.

I have no objections to this thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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INTRODUCTION

In 793, on the sixth day before the ides of January, slender ships bearing heathen men came to the isle of Lindisfarne. The uncouth foreigners attacked the church on the island, and, advancing bravely, made slaughter of the monks and sheep protecting the treasures within. This was the first recorded Viking attack in England, and many more were to follow. To begin with, the attacks had the character of raids, undertaken to gain wealth. Soon, however, it became apparent that entire fleets of heathen ships were cruising along the coast, descending on towns, churches and monasteries, plundering and looting at will. The natives found it at times difficult to organize effective resistance and celebrated only partial success in battling the foreigners. It did not take long before the foreigners, no longer content with merely carrying off booty, began to set up winter quarters in the isles of Thanet and Sheppey. If the natives thought that the situation was dire, they had another thing coming. In 866 the character of the heathen attacks changed. While before it appeared that the foreigners were content with pillaging, "selling peace" and enjoying their ill-gotten gains back home in their native Scandinavia, now it seemed that they were bent on invading, conquering and colonizing England. In 866 The Great Heathen Army¹ sailed to England, fixed their winter quarters in East Anglia and soon showed to all to whom it may have concerned that they were not leaving. The invasion of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia followed in quick succession and The Great Heathen Army overran the land.

The coming of The Great Heathen Army and its subsequent exploits in England found reflection in a number of stories/accounts that sprung into being in an attempt to reconfigure and make sense of the violent events threatening to disintegrate the very fabric, integrity and identity of the individual kingdoms. The historical events that are the subject of these reflections are: the battle of York and the slaying of king Ella in Northumbria in 867, the slaying of king Edmund in East

¹ Or "micel here," term appearing in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Anglia in 870 and king Alfred's struggle with the Danes in Wessex, with emphasis on the decisive battle of Edington Down. Three types of reflection can be discerned: Scandinavian, reflecting the battle of York, the slaying of king Ella and the slaying of king Edmund, East Anglian, reflecting the slaying of king Edmund, and Wessex, reflecting king Alfred's struggle with the Danes. These reflections are closely connected with their place of origin and the community that created them, they are characterized by the differing portrayals of their heroes and their purpose in describing the above given historical events.

This thesis endeavors to trace the origins and development of these reflections, discover the dynamics of their interaction and put emphasis on discerning their historical and fictional elements by confronting them with the record of the historical events to which they relate as presented in contemporary sources. For the purpose of successful identification of historical and fictional elements, the tracing of historical characters appearing in these reflections and inquiry into the probable factual nature of the historical events they reflect will be necessary. For highest possible degree of accuracy in this matter only contemporary and near-contemporary sources will be used, and conclusions pertaining to the historicity of characters and events will be drawn on the basis of the testimony of these sources.

The analysis will first focus on the strictly Scandinavian sources, which provide the fullest version of accounts referring to the invasion of England and the slaying of king Ella and king Edmund, inquiring into the historicity of the characters and events appearing in these accounts and attempting to find elements connecting the historically recorded events and characters with the final reflections contained in the Scandinavian sources. Scandinavian and East Anglian reflections will then be examined in connection with each other, with the aim to discover the dynamics behind their interaction, inquire into the motives they record as the cause of the Danish invasion of England and the historical circumstances behind the growth of these reflections, and establish the probable chronology of their development. The final segment will examine the Wessex reflection of king

Alfred's struggles with the Danes with emphasis on the battle of Edington Down. The record of the historical events as presented in contemporary sources and their reflections in the later, non-contemporary sources will be examined in terms of narrative and narrativity, that is, the basic distinction between a historical discourse that records and a discourse that narrativizes, as employed by Hayden White in *Content and Form*². The above-mentioned reflections will also be viewed in terms of their incipient genre characteristics.

Sources

1.

The Scandinavian reflections are contained in sources of both Scandinavian and English origin. The main characteristic of these sources is their secular nature, the motif of revenge by which they endeavor to account for the cause of the Danish invasion of England, and the positive portrayal of the Danes. The strictly Scandinavian sources, which also represent the fullest version of accounts referring to the invasion of England and the slaying of king Ella, include:

- *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, a prose narrative of Icelandic origin written most probably around 1250, although preserved only in a fragmentary text dating from the second half of the fifteenth century.³
- *Ragnarssona þattr*, an Icelandic prose narrative composed most probably in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century⁴ (this source also includes a mention regarding the slaying of king Edmund).
- *Krakumal*, a poetic monologue, completed most probably by 1200 (the earliest manuscript, where the text of the poem immediately follows that of Ragnars saga, dates from approximately 1400).⁵

² Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 21 - 29.

³ Rory McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1991) 54.

⁴ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 54.

⁵ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 53.

- *Gesta Danorum*, written around 1200 by Saxo Grammaticus in Denmark.

The heroes of these sources are Ragnar Lodbrok, son of the king of Denmark and Sweden, whose death in England brings about the Danish invasion, and his sons, leaders of the invading army, of whom Ivar is the most important, as it is he who is responsible for the slaying of king Ella.

The English sources, or source, to be precise, containing the remaining Scandinavian reflection is:

- Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, written around 1235⁶, which accounts for the slaying of king Edmund.

The hero is a certain Lodbroc, whose murder in East Anglia likewise brings about the Danish invasion led by his sons Hinguar and Hubba.

2.

The East Anglian reflections are characterized by their pronounced spiritual charge, as almost all of them are chiefly concerned with the martyrdom of king Edmund, absence of the revenge motif, its replacement by metaphysical causes behind the Danish invasion and the consistently negative portrayal of the Danes. These sources include:

- Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Edmundi*, written around 987.⁷
- *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, written between 987 – 1000.⁸

Both of these sources record the Danish invasion of East Anglia led by Hinguar and Hubba and the subsequent martyrdom of king Edmund, for which Hinguar was responsible, claiming that the invasion was brought about by the devil whose aim was to force king Edmund to renounce his faith. In Aelfric's translation of Abbo's *Passio Sancti Edmundi* the metaphysical cause is absent,

⁶ *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, trans. J. A. Giles, D.C.L. (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1859) vi.

⁷ *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, trans. ed. Cyril Hart, (The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2006) cvii.

⁸ Formerly known as *The Annals of St. Neots*. It was not until 1981 that the title *Annals of St. Neots* was rejected in favor of *The East Anglian Chronicle* and its compilation date was fixed at 987 – 1000, whereas before it was thought that it was compiled in 1200. *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, trans. ed. Cyril Hart, cxxxi – cxxxviii.

same as in Geoffrey of Wells' *Liber de Infantia Sancti Eadmundi*, dating approximately from 1150, which narrates that the three sons of a certain Lodebrok, a rich and famous man, Hinguar, Hubba and Wern, who lived in Denmark, coveted king Edmund's position and kingdom and schemed how to deprive him of it. The narrative of king Edmund's passion is not included in this source, it is, however, included in the later *Flowers of History*.

3.

The Wessex reflection concerning king Alfred's struggles with the Danes, with emphasis on the battle of Edington Down, appears in:

- *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a contemporary source.
- Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, written around 893.
- *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*
- Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*
- *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham*, written probably around 1120.⁹
- William of Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England*, written around 1120.¹⁰

4.

The contemporary and near-contemporary sources pertaining to this field of interest are of English, Irish, and Frankish origin.

The chief contemporary English source used is:

- *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

The Irish source used is:

- *The Annals of Ulster*, whose dating is somewhat problematic and a doubt arises as to whether it is possible to consider it a contemporary source. The entries up to AD 1489 were compiled

⁹ *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham*, trans. Rev. Joseph Stevenson, M.A., (Seeleys, 1855) vii.

¹⁰ William of Malmesbury, *The History of the Kings of England*, trans. Rev. John Sharpe, B.A., (Seeleys, 1854) xi.

in the late 15th century by the scribe Ruaidhrí Ó Luinín, while later entries (up to AD 1540) were added by others. It is conjectured that previous annals dating as far back as the 6th century were used as a source for the earlier entries,¹¹ but no information concerning the origin and authenticity of these annals is, unfortunately, available.

The Frankish sources used are:

- *Annales Bertiniani*
- *Annales Xantenses*
- *Annales Fuldenses*
- *Annales Regni Francorum*
- *Chronicon Fontanellense*, a near-contemporary source.

The greatest obstacle encountered in tracing historical characters and events is the paucity of contemporary and near-contemporary sources, problematic dating, as in the case of *Annals of Ulster*, and, at times, their unreliability, as will be demonstrated by *Annales Fuldenses*.

Non-contemporary, later sources are also used, although not for historical accuracy but rather to check the reflections of the developing accounts at different times in different geographical locations, which, in turn, is found helpful in establishing their chronological development. This applies mainly to the Scandinavian and East Anglian reflections, as the characters and historical events they pertain to are mentioned in a number of later sources of Norman, German, Danish, Icelandic and Irish origin.

The Norman source used is:

- *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* by William of Jumieges, written around 1070.¹²

The German source is:

- Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, dating from approximately 1076.¹³

¹¹ Annals of Ulster, 23 Jun. 2010 <<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/731080>>.

¹² McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 1.

¹³ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 1.

The Danish sources are:

- *Roskildekrøniken*, dating from approximately 1140.¹⁴
- *Tog-drapa* (Stretch-song), a praise poem on Canute the Great composed by Sighvat the scald most likely in 1027.¹⁵

The Icelandic source is:

- Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabok*, dating from 1120 – 1133.¹⁶

The Irish source is:

- *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments*, compiled around 1050.¹⁷

¹⁴ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 94.

¹⁵ *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, trans. ed. Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883) 122.

¹⁶ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 1.

¹⁷ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 46.

CHAPTER I.

The Viking invasion of England in Scandinavian tradition – history and legend

I.i.

The Scandinavian tradition

Presented below is the final product of the Scandinavian tradition reflecting the Viking invasion of England in 866. The sources here discussed are substantially more voluminous in their entirety, and the following excerpts were chosen on the basis of their relevance to the Viking activities in England, the heroes involved and their general background according to the Scandinavian tradition.

I.i.1.

Ragnars saga Loðbrokar

According to *Ragnar's saga*, Ragnar Lodbrok was the son of Sigurd hring, king of Denmark. His first wife was Tora, with whom he had two sons, Eirik and Agnar. Tora became sick and died, and Ragnar found himself a new wife, Kråka (whose real name, as revealed later on in the saga, was Aslaug), with whom he had five sons, Ivar, Hvitserk, Bjørn, Rognvald and Sigurd.

While Aslaug (who by that time had changed her name to Randalin) and Ragnar's sons embarked on many expeditions, defeated kings and conquered towns, winning fame and wealth, Ragnar was sitting at home, feeling old and useless, not even knowing where his wife and sons were. Frequently he received news of their exploits and growing fame, and, wishing once again to step into the spotlight and not be overshadowed by his family, he devised an ingenious plan, deciding to attack and conquer England with only two large knarr (cargo) ships and five hundred men. When his wife Randalin found out about this, she tried to dissuade Ragnar from so foolish an

expedition, pointing to the rather obvious fact that such large cargo ships would be difficult to maneuver and that it would be wiser to have a larger number of smaller ships. Ragnar paid no heed, but before he set out, Randalin gave him her shift for protection; as long as he had it on, no harm could come to him. As expected, his ships wrecked just off the coast of England, but Ragnar and his men managed to come ashore. They proceeded to attack everything within their reach and gained victory with every venture. Ella, the king of England, heard about Ragnar's exploits, and in order to stop him, he collected an immense army and engaged Ragnar and his men in battle. He issued orders, however, that no one was to slay Ragnar, for fear that his sons would seek vengeance if their father fell by English sword. Ragnar's forces were inferior to those of king Ella, all his men fell and he himself was taken captive unscathed (because he was wearing his wife's protective underwear).

When king Ella inquired after his identity, Ragnar refused to answer and was thrown into Ella's snake pit under the provision that as soon as he admitted that he was Ragnar, he would be taken out. The snakes began feeding on him after he was stripped of the magical shift, Ragnar then recited his famous death poem (see *Krakumal* below) and expired, but king Ella still was not sure that it indeed was Ragnar who died in his serpent pit. In order to find out, he sent an envoy to Denmark to see how Ragnar's sons would take the news. Ragnar's sons responded by collecting a fleet, but Ivar refused to join the expedition, convinced that his father did not behave as an honorable man when he attacked king Ella without a reason. After his brothers' army suffered defeat, Ivar opened negotiations with king Ella concerning a compensation for his father, and, after swearing not to raise arms against Ella, received a gift of land as big as he could cover with an ox hide. He cut the hide into thin strips and built a town called Londonborgen on the territory it encompassed. Ivar was kind, just and generous to the people, decided their quarrels wisely, helped king Ella with ruling the land and, in the end, won the people's trust and friendship. When thus established, he sent messengers to his brothers, asking for large sums of money, with which he bribed powerful nobles, lured them away from king Ella and exacted a promise from them that they

would not interfere if he chose to fight against the king. He then sent for his brothers, who arrived with a large force. Ella was not able to gather a sufficient army, lost the battle, was captured and executed, the blood eagle carved on his back, and Ivar became the king of England.¹⁸

I.i.2.

Ragnarssona þattr

The *þattr* agrees with *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* concerning Ragnar's origin and family situation, with the exception that Ragnar, after the death of his father, came to power not only in Denmark, but also in Sweden, and that he had only four sons by his second wife Aslaug, Ivar, Bjorn, Hvitserk and Sigurd.

The narrative describing the exploits of Randalin and Ragnar's sons, Ragnar's decision to conquer England and his unfortunate end in Ella's snake pit is virtually the same as that in *Ragnars saga*, differing only in that the town Ivar built was called York, not Londonborgen, and that he (Ivar) had two brothers born out of wedlock, Yngvar and Husto, who tortured king Edmund the Saint on Ivar's orders, after which Ivar took king Edmund's kingdom.¹⁹

I.i.3.

Krakumal

In the poem, Ragnar, cast in Ella's snake pit, lists all his adventures and military ventures. In strophe 14 he speaks of waging war in Northumbria and dispersing his enemy, but does not mention any names. In strophe 16, he speaks of a battle fought in Ireland, where he defeated the Irish king. In strophe 25 Ragnar expresses his conviction that people's lives are governed by fate. How else could the conclusion of his life be reserved for Ella? He goes on to voice his belief that had his sons known what suffering he was exposed to in the serpent pit, they would come and wage bitter war. In

¹⁸ *Ragnar Lodbroks saga*, trans. Kjell Tore Nilssen and Arni Olafsson, 20 Jun. 2010 <www.heimskringla.no>.

¹⁹ *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons*, trans. Peter Tunstall, 21 Jun. 2010 <www.northvegr.org>.

strophe 26 he again voices his belief that his sons will come soon and black their swords in the blood of Ella.²⁰

I.i.4.

Gesta Danorum

According to *Gesta Danorum*, Ragnar Lodbrok was the son of Siward Ring, a Danish king. His first wife was the shieldmaiden Ladgerda, with whom Ragnar had two daughters whose names Saxo does not mention, and a son Fridleif. Ragnar's second wife was Thora, daughter of king Herodd. By Thora he had only two sons, Radbard and Dunwat. Saxo mentions that these two had brothers, Siward, Biorn, Agnar, and Iwar, and while it is clear from his narrative that their mother was not Thora, no mention of their mother is made. Ragnar's third wife, as recorded by Saxo, was Swanloga, about whom no closer information is provided, except that she bore Ragnar three sons, Ragnald, Hwitserk, and Erik. Ragnar's last wife, who is not mentioned by name, was of lowly origin and bore Ragnar a son named Ubbe.

After Ragnar's wife Thora perished of a violent disease, Ragnar, in order to dispel his gloom, lifted up arms against Britain, attacked and slew in battle its king, Hame, the father of Ella, who was, according to Saxo, a most noble youth. Then he killed the earls of Scotland and of Pictland, and of the isles that they call the Southern or Meridional (Sudr-eyar), and made his sons Siward and Radbard masters of the provinces, which were now without governors.

After some time, however, Iwar, who ruled in England after Ragnar's defeat of Hame, was expelled from the kingdom, being replaced by Ella, the son of Hame. Ragnar took Iwar to guide him, since he was acquainted with the country, gave orders for a fleet, and approached the harbor called York. Here he disembarked his forces, and after a battle which lasted three days, he put Ella to flight. Here Ragnar completed a year of conquest, and then, summoning his sons to help him, he went to Ireland, slew its king Melbrik, besieged Dublin, attacked it, and received its surrender. Ella

²⁰ *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, trans. Bishop Percy, (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1763) 27 – 42.

then traveled to Ireland and put to the sword all who were attached to Ragnar. Ragnar attacked Ella with his fleet, but, by God's decree, was punished for openly disparaging religion, taken prisoner and cast into Ella's snake pit, where he was devoured by the serpents. Ivar heard of this disaster and set out for England with his fleet. When he saw that his fleet was not strong enough to engage the enemy and emerge victorious, he resorted to cunning, entering peace negotiations with Ella, begging as a pledge a piece of land as big as he could cover with a horse's hide. He then proceeded to cut the hide into a slender thong, and built a town on the piece of land this thong encompassed. Meanwhile, his brothers Siward and Bjorn arrived with a fleet of 400 ships, waged war against Ella, defeated and captured him, and executed him by carving the blood eagle on his back. After this victory, Ivar governed England for two years.²¹

It can be seen that the accounts presented in these sources do not provide unified information and are often at variance with each other. There are variations between the Icelandic sources; the greatest variations, however, are to be found when comparing the Icelandic and Danish sources. Variations pertaining to the respective sets of wives and sons aside, all sources, Danish and Icelandic alike, narrate Ragnar's campaign in England (Northumbria), his death in Ella's snake pit, the consequent revenge of his sons, led by Ivar, and, with the exception of *Krakumal*, the execution of Ella, after which Ivar becomes the king of England. It is interesting to note that *Ragnarssona Pattr* is the only one of these sources that records the slaying of king Edmund, an element that is otherwise absent from the later Scandinavian tradition, and that it further gives Ivar's brothers, Yngvar and Husto, as the murderers of king Edmund, an element that does not figure in any of the here examined sources (see pages 58 - 59 bellow).

²¹ F. York Powel, et al., eds. *The Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton (London: Norroena Society, 1905) 540 – 566.

I.ii.

Ragnar Lodbrok's sons in contemporary and near-contemporary sources

Endeavoring to trace the origins of these stories, we may now turn our attention to contemporary and near-contemporary sources concerning the Viking invasion of England in 866 and the following events, and confront them with the above-discussed accounts, paying attention especially to the historicity of the accounts and characters that could be considered as matching those presented as Ragnar's sons in the Scandinavian sources.

There are two sources that could be considered as contemporary - *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of Ulster*. As mentioned above, the dating of *The Annals of Ulster* is somewhat problematic and a doubt arises as to whether it is possible to consider it a contemporary source.

Personal names are used in their authentic forms appearing in the sources, including possible variations.

I.ii.1.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

When *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the coming of The Great Heathen Army to East Anglia in 866, it does not mention the names of its leaders, but follows its movements closely. In the entry for 867, *The Chronicle* records that The Army marched to Northumbria, as far as York, which was torn by discord, the nation having deposed the rightful king Osbert and admitted Aella, who had no natural claim. Facing the heathen threat, the two kings united, but were both slain in the ensuing hostilities. In 868 the same army went into Mercia, and the Mercians made peace with them. In 869 The Army went back to York and remained there a year. It is not until 870, when The Army rode into East Anglia and fixed their winter quarters at Thetford that *The Chronicle* decides to divulge names. For that year it is given that

in the winter King Edmund fought with them; but the Danes gained the victory, and slew the king; whereupon they overran all that land, and destroyed all the monasteries to which they came. The names of the leaders who slew the king were Hingwar [Ingwar] and Hubba.²²

This entry, of course, does not imply that Hingwar/Ingwar and Hubba were brothers, merely that both of them were leaders of the heathen host. In 871, The Army came to Reading in Wessex, and *The Chronicle* records hostilities between the Danes, led by two kings, Bagsac and Healfden, and king Ethelred and his brother Alfred. This is the first mention we have of Healfden. The second mention appears in the entry for 875, where it is given that Healfden advanced against the Northumbrians, subdued the land, and often fought with the Picts and the Strathclydwallians. For the same year *The Chronicle* records the advance of three kings, Guthrum, Oskytel, and Anwind, who went from Repton to Cambridge with a vast army, and sat there one year. This year marks the beginning of the decisive struggles between the Danes, led by king Guthrum, and king Alfred for the dominion of Wessex. Regarding year 876, when the fights for Wessex began in earnest, it is recorded that "Healfden divided the land of the Northumbrians; so that they became afterwards their harrowers and plowers."²³ From this entry it transpires that king Healfden and his army did not take part in the decisive battles for Wessex. A year of importance for the present inquiry is 878, in which, as *The Chronicle* narrates, the brother of Hingwar/Ingwar and Healfden landed in the kingdom of Wessex, in Devonshire, and there was slain with 800 of his men, on which occasion also the Danish war-flag called the Raven was captured.

From these entries we can deduce that Hingwar/Ingwar and Healfden were brothers, and that they had a third, unnamed brother, who fell in Devonshire. Rory McTurk suggests that it is possible that the brother of Healfden and Hingwar/Ingwar was Hubba. He bases his claim on *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*,²⁴ which mentions that the standard called the Raven was woven by the

²² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, trans. ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861) sub anno 870.

²³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 876.

²⁴ Formerly known as *The Annals of St. Neots*, see page 3. The earlier dating of this source - 987 – 1000 - does not change the fact that it is not a contemporary source and its testimony as to Ingwar, Hubba and Healfden being brothers should be approached with caution.

three sisters of Ingwar and Hubba, the daughters of Lodbrok,²⁵ and on the Anglo-Norman verse chronicler Gaimar, who wrote his *L'estoire des Engles* between 1136 -1137, whose sources are said to have included a lost version of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and who identifies Ubbe as the brother of Ywar and Haldene who was killed in Devon in 878.²⁶

From *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* it then follows that the Viking chiefs Hingwar/Ingwar and Healfden were brothers, and that they had yet another, unnamed brother, who fell in Devonshire. While there exists a tentative possibility that this third brother was Hubba, whom *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* identifies as a leader together with Hingwar/Ingwar, this conclusion is based on the testimony of non-contemporary sources and should, therefore, be approached with caution.

I.ii.2.

The Annals of Ulster

While England was predominantly harried by Danish fleets and armies, Ireland was exposed to Norwegian invasions. Dublin is said to have been established by a Viking chief Thorgisl, after his conquest of Ulster in 839 – 841,²⁷ and the Norwegian presence in Ireland was strong until 848, when *The Annals of Ulster* inform us that "a naval expedition of seven score ships of the people of the King of the Foreigners came to exercise power over the Foreigners who were before them, so that they disturbed all Ireland afterwards."²⁸ We are not informed as to the name of the said king of the foreigners, but it is clear that the new arrivals, also referred to as the Dubhgaill (the dark or black foreigners), were of Danish origin, whereas the Norwegians, who were already settled in Ireland, were referred to as the Finnegaill (the fair or white foreigners).

For 850, *The Annals* record

the coming of Black Foreigners to Ath-cliatli (Dublin), who made a great slaughter of the White

²⁵ *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, 121.

²⁶ Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy and Charles Trice Martin, eds. *Lestorie Des Engles Solum la Translacion Maistre Geffrei Gaimar* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1889) I. 3145 – 3150.

²⁷ Norman Davies, *The Isles, A History* (London: Papermac, 2000) 214.

²⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, trans. ed. William M. Hennessy (Dublin: Alexander Thom & Co., 1887) 357.

Foreigners; and they plundered the fortress, between people and property. A depredation by the Black Foreigners at Linn-Duachail, and a great slaughter of them [the White Foreigners].²⁹

For 851 *The Annals* record that "a fleet of eight score ships of White Gentiles came to fight against the Black Gentiles, to Snamh-aighech (Carlingford Lough). They were three days and three nights fighting; but the Black Gentiles were successful, that the others left their ships with them."³⁰ From these entries it transpires that the Danish involvement in Ireland begun with a series of attacks on the Norwegian settlements, resulted in the seizure of Dublin, and that the Norwegians attempted to recapture Dublin without success. *The Annals*, unfortunately, do not name any of the Danish leaders in connection with these events.

Two Viking chiefs, Imar/Imhar and Amlaibh, however, appear in *The Annals* in a number of following entries. Amlaibh, who, according to *The Annals*, arrived in Ireland in 852, is described as the son of the king of Lochlaind (the Norwegians),³¹ and identified in the Icelandic *Landnamabok*, which provides the fullest account pertaining to his person, as Olave the White, who harried in the Western Seas and won Dublin in Ireland.³² Alfred P. Smyth conjectures that Olave arrived in Ireland shortly after the Danish victory over the Norwegians in 851 with the aim to reassert Norwegian supremacy in the Irish Sea, but that Ivar (Imar/Imhar) and his Danes must have come to some sort of agreement with Olave, because subsequent entries in *The Annals of Ulster* show them acting together against the Irish.³³

While the situation in Ireland during this period was characterized by the forming of shifting alliances between the Danes, Norwegians and various Irish chiefs, and thus also very complicated, it is possible to discern a simple pattern. The Norwegians residing in Ireland were attacked and defeated by the Danes, which led to the arrival of more Norwegians under the leadership of Amlaibh. These Norwegians, however, did not act against the Danes, but rather reached an

²⁹ *Annals of Ulster*, 359.

³⁰ *Annals of Ulster*, 361.

³¹ *Annals of Ulster*, 363.

³² Ari Thorgilsson, *The Book of the Settlement of Iceland*, trans. Rev. T. Ellwood, M.A. (Kendal: T. Wilson, Printer and Publisher, 1898) chapter XVI.

³³ Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850 – 880* (Oxford University Press, 1977) 113 – 114.

agreement with them and fought together with them against the Irish and their allies, as recorded in the entries for 856, 858 and 862, all of which show Imar/Imhar and Amlaibh acting together. Three additional entries are of special interest to this inquiry, i.e. the entries for year 866, 869 and 870. The first entry records that "a battle was gained over the Northern Saxons, in Caer-Ebroc (York) by the Black Foreigners, in which Alii, King of the Northern Saxons, was slain."³⁴ The other entry gives that Amlaibh and Imar/Imhar, two kings of the Norsemen, besieged Ail-Cluath (Dumbarton in Scotland), and at the end of four months destroyed and plundered the fortress.³⁵ The entry for 870 states that Amlaibh and Imar/Imhar came again to Ath-cliaith (Dublin) from Alba (Scotland), with two hundred ships, and a great multitude of men, English, Britons, and Picts, were brought by them to Ireland, in captivity.³⁶ The entry for 872 records that "Imhar, King of the Norsemen of all Ireland and Britain, ended life."³⁷

From these entries it transpires that the Viking chief Imar/Imhar was active in Ireland from 856, that he formed an alliance with the Norwegian chief Amlaibh, and that both of them engaged in prolonged struggles with the Irish. It further transpires that both Imar/Imhar and Amlaibh were most probably absent from the Irish scene from 862, as there is no mention of them in *The Annals*, although the date of their departure is not given, and that they returned to Ireland in 870, according to the corresponding entry in *The Annals*. *The Annals* also record the battle of York and the consequent slaying of king Ella (Alii), which corresponds to the entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* pertaining to this event, but, neither of these sources, unfortunately, deem it necessary to give the names of the Viking leaders.

Aside from Imar/Imhar, *The Annals of Ulster* also mention a chief of the dark foreigners by the name of Albdan/Albann, who, in the entry for 874, attacked and slaughtered the Picts, and also deceitfully slew Oistin, son of Amlaibh, king of the Norsemen.³⁸ This entry appears to correspond

³⁴ *Annals of Ulster*, 377.

³⁵ *Annals of Ulster*, 383.

³⁶ *Annals of Ulster*, 385.

³⁷ *Annals of Ulster*, 387.

³⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, 389.

with that in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 875, where it is given that "Healfden advanced with some of the army against the Northumbrians, and fixed his winter-quarters by the river Tine. The army then subdued that land, and oft invaded the Picts and the Strathclydwallians."³⁹

The Annals mention Albdan/Albann for a second time in the entry for 876, where it is given that a battle took place at Loch-Cuan between the fair and black foreigners, in which Albdan/Albann, king of the black foreigners, was slain.⁴⁰

***.

From the records in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* it transpires that the heathen chiefs Hingwar/Ingwar and Healfden were brothers. The identity of the third, unnamed brother, who, according to *The Chronicle*, fell in Devonshire in 878, remains somewhat obscured, as I would be reluctant to put much faith in the testimony of the later, non-contemporary sources – *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* and Gaimar's *L'estoire des Engles* – that the third brother was Ubbe. This testimony may be based on the entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 870, where it is given that two Viking chiefs, Hingwar/Ingwar and Hubba, were responsible for the slaying of king Edmund, which may have over time developed, based on the joint leadership of said chiefs, into the statement that they were brothers. It is also possible that the statement that Hingwar/Ingwar and Hubba were brothers emerged as a result of the gradual development of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition, which, as we will see later on, was, by the time Gaimar wrote his *L'estoire des Engles*, in full swing.

In comparing the entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with those in *The Annals of Ulster*, the correspondence between the names Imar/Imhar and Hingwar/Ingwar, Albdan/Albann and Healfden becomes apparent. Taking into account the shift in the dating based on the Anglo-Saxon year, which began at 24 September,⁴¹ and which often puts the actual date of the events described in *The Annals of Ulster* a year later than as recorded, it further becomes apparent that the two sources agree in their recording of single occurrences, namely the slaying of king Ella and

³⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 875.

⁴⁰ *Annals of Ulster*, 391.

⁴¹ Smyth, 171.

Albdan's/Albann's/Healfden's raids against the Picts, under the same date. It would likewise appear that the entries concerning said Imar/Imhar/Hingwar/Ingwar and Albdan/Albann/Healfden in the two sources complement each other, based on which it would be possible to maintain that they pertain to the same Viking chiefs.

According to the testimony of these two sources it would then transpire that, before descending on England, Imhar/Hingwar was active in Ireland, held Dublin, and later formed an alliance with Amlaibh/Olave, king of the Norwegians, with whom he fought against the Irish. In 867, as both sources record, the battle of York took place, where king Ella was slain. Although neither of the sources, as mentioned above, gives any names of the Viking leaders engaged in this exploit, from the entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* pertaining to the movements of The Great Heathen Army after its arrival in East Anglia in 866, which record that it was the same army that marched on Northumbria in 867, fought at York, and returned to East Anglia in 870, it would appear likely that Hingwar/Ingwar, since his name is given as that of one of the leaders responsible for the slaying of Edmund, was present at York as well. This conclusion would be further supported by the fact that during this period of time his name does not appear in *The Annals*. After the entry concerning king Edmund's death, Hingwar disappears from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and appears in *The Annals of Ulster* in 870 (our dating – 871), apparently fresh from the siege of Dumbarton in Scotland, which must have taken place after the engagement in East Anglia. *The Annals* record his death in 872 (our dating – 873).

The information concerning Albdan/Albann/Healfden in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of Ulster* also appears to be rather consistent. *The Chronicle* mentions Healfden for the last time in 876, when he divided the land of the Northumbrians and his men became harrowers and plowers, a year after he, according to *The Chronicle*, subdued Northumbria, invaded the Picts and Strathclydwallians, and, according to *The Annals*, deceitfully slew Oistin, son of Amlaibh, king of the Norsemen. He then appears in *The Annals* for the last time in 876 (our dating – 877), when he is

slain at Loch-Cuan, fighting the fair foreigners (Norwegians). In light of this testimony I would be inclined to agree with Alfred P. Smyth that Healfden's efforts in Ireland would appear to have been aimed at regaining the dominion of Dublin, which, after the death of Hingwar, passed to Oistin, son of Amlaibh (Eysteinn, son of Olave, who was allied with Hingwar against the Irish),⁴² especially because both Healfden's expeditions in Ireland were directed against the fair foreigners and not the Irish. This would then appear to further support the conclusion that Hingwar and Healfden were brothers, because Healfden's involvement in Ireland could be seen as an attempt to enforce a dynastic claim on Dublin.⁴³ Concerning the problematic dating of *The Annals of Ulster*, I would, considering the above attested close correspondence of the two sources, be inclined to agree that at least the part of *The Annals* pertaining to the period here discussed is accurate.

It can now be concluded that the involvement of the two leaders, Hingwar and Healfden, Hingwar especially, encompassed both England and Ireland. Although his schedule would at times appear rather tight, traveling from Ireland to England and vice versa, Hingwar was, beyond a shadow of doubt, an accomplished warrior and chief, who played a decisive part not only in the subduing of East Anglia and very probably Northumbria, but also in leading both the Danes and Norwegians in their fight against the Irish. It is most likely for this reason that *The Annals of Ulster* call him the king of the Norsemen of all Ireland and Britain, confirming his accomplishment, as no other Viking chief from this period of time is endowed with such a title in the chronicles.

Comparing the later Scandinavian tradition with the above-discussed contemporary sources (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of Ulster*), it becomes apparent that the tradition reflects the battle of York and the slaying of king Ella. All Scandinavian sources also include the historical character of Hingwar/Ingwar. *Gesta Danorum* and *Ragnarssona Pattr* add Ubbe/Hubba (the name Husto appearing in the *Pattr* could be taken as a garbled version of Ubbe/Hubba),

⁴² Smyth, 258 – 259.

⁴³ Smyth, 259.

claiming Hingwar/Ingwar and Ubbe/Hubba to have been brothers. Glancing back to the Scandinavian sources with their sets of Ragnar Lodbrok's wives and sons, it, however, becomes painfully obvious that we have a mismatch. While Hingwar/Ingwar is present in all the sources hitherto discussed (with the exception of *Krakumal*), and while the Scandinavian sources reflect the battle of York and the slaying of king Ella, there is no mention of Healfden anywhere, although historically his activities in Northumbria were more extensive than those of Hingwar/Ingwar, and, because it was him who divided the land of the Northumbrians where his army settled and where he also had his base, his presence there was more prominent.⁴⁴ It also becomes apparent that the account concerning the death of king Edmund as presented in *Ragnarssona Pattr* is historically inaccurate, as from the above discussed sources it would seem rather clear that it was the same Hingwar/Ingwar who carried out his ambitious deeds in the British Isles (see page 58 - 59). It would then appear that the later Scandinavian tradition reflects the historical events surrounding the Viking invasion of England in 866 only to a certain, more or less exclusive degree, leaving out Healfden, whose blood ties with Hingwar/Ingwar, unlike those with Hubba/Ubbe, are historically documented. Keeping these discrepancies in mind, we can now take the next step and attempt to find a link (or links) that would help us bridge over the apparent gap existing between the testimony of the above-discussed contemporary sources and the later Scandinavian tradition. As the chief binding element of the later Scandinavian tradition appears to be the figure of Ragnar (which is entirely absent from the above-discussed contemporary sources), it may not be altogether futile to begin with an inquiry into the origin and historicity of this character, which may in turn shed some light on the development of the later Scandinavian tradition.

⁴⁴ The conjecture that Northumbria was Healfden's base between 875 – 877 could be supported by the entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Annals of Ulster*, according to which Healfden advanced against the Northumbrians in 875 and subdued the land (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), traveled to Ireland in the same year and slew Oistin (*Annals of Ulster*), after which he must have returned to Northumbria in order to divide the land in 876 (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), and traveled back to Ireland to be slain by the Norwegians at Loch-Cuan in 877.

I.iii.

The origins of Ragnar Lodbrok

Attempting to discover more about the character of Ragnar Lodbrok, we soon find out that we are faced with an obstacle. None of the contemporary sources pertaining to this field of interest mention anyone by the name of Ragnar Lodbrok. A slight compensation, however, swiftly presents itself. The names Ragnar and Lodbrok do not appear in any of the sources together, but they do appear separately and independently of each other.

While there are no contemporary Scandinavian or English sources mentioning either Ragnar or Lodbrok (with the exception of the Maes Howe runic inscriptions that mention the name Lodbrok), there are contemporary Frankish sources from the ninth century, namely *Annales Regni Francorum*, *Annales Xantenses* and the near-contemporary *Chronicon Fontanellense*, that provide scant information on a Viking leader known as Reginfridus, Reginheri and Ragneri respectively, names which could be considered as equivalents of the later Ragnar that appears in the later Scandinavian tradition.

The following discussion will show that all attempts to trace the historical origin and genealogy of Ragnar Lodbrok are based on a number of correspondences between the later Scandinavian sources and the Frankish contemporary sources, chiefly

- the correspondence of the above-mentioned names Reginfridus, Reginheri and Ragneri, appearing in the Frankish contemporary sources, to that of Ragnar (Lodbrok) of the later Scandinavian tradition
- the correspondence of the names of the historical characters of Sigifridus and Halbdeni, appearing in the Frankish contemporary sources, to Sigurd (orm-i -auga), whom the later Scandinavian sources describe as the son of Ragnar Lodbrok, and Healfden, whom *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes as the brother of Hingwar/Ingwar
- the correspondence of the name of Sigurd hring, whom the later Scandinavian sources

describe as Ragnar Lodbrok's father and king of both Sweden and Denmark, to that of the historical character Sigifridus, likewise appearing in the Frankish sources

The authors attempting to trace the historical origins of Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources proceed, for lack of other clues, almost exclusively by searching the contemporary sources for evidence that would confirm these correspondences.

I.iii.1.

Ragnar .

The first historical character, Reginfridus, who, according to *Annales Regni Francorum*, became king together with his brother Herioldus II in 812⁴⁵, poses almost no difficulties in terms of identification with the Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources, mainly because *Annales Regni Francorum* record this Reginfridus' death in year 814⁴⁶, which sufficiently prevents him from being associated with Ragnar Lodbrok, who was supposed to be active long after 814.

While nothing is known about the life of the historical Reginheri, a number of contemporary Frankish sources place his death in year 845, during or after the attack on Paris against Charles the Fat. The entry in *Annales Xantenses* for year 845 states that the Viking commander called Reginheri died as a victim of divine chastisement,⁴⁷ *Annales Bertiniani* record for the same year the same affliction that supposedly caused Reginheri's death but do not mention Reginheri by name⁴⁸, *Annales Fuldenses* merely record the Viking attack on Paris for year 845⁴⁹, and *Chronicon Fontanellense*, nearly contemporary, records that on March 28, 845, the Vikings led by Ragneri entered Paris.⁵⁰ Aside from the reportedly divine nature of Reginheri's death, which, admittedly, appears to be somewhat embellished, but is a testimony of a contemporary and should thus, at least

⁴⁵ *Annales Regni Francorum*, 10 Aug. 2010 <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com>>, sub anno 812.

⁴⁶ *Annales Regni Francorum*, sub anno 814.

⁴⁷ B. de Simpson, *Annales Xantenses et Annales Vedastini* (Hannoverae et Lipsiae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1909), sub anno 845.

⁴⁸ *Annales Bertiniani* (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1883) sub anno 845.

⁴⁹ *Annales Fuldenses* (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1891) sub anno 845.

⁵⁰ G.H. Pertz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Tomus 2 (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1829) 302.

in respect to the date of Reginheri's death, be viewed as reliable unless proved otherwise, this is all the conclusive information we have about this historical character, and this is the historical basis from which the subsequent endeavors at finding out more about Reginheri spin.

Based on the above-mentioned testimonies of the Frankish annals concerning the death of the leader Reginheri during the siege of Paris in 845, it has been conjectured that since this expedition would appear to be part of a larger, coordinated effort against the Frankish kingdoms under the supreme command of the Danish king Horicus I, who in the same year (according to *Annales Bertiniani* for 845) sent six hundred ships up the river Elbe against Louis the German, it would be possible that Reginheri, who was entrusted with the leadership of this expedition, was a person of importance at the Danish court and possibly related to king Horicus I.⁵¹ The following inquiry into the origin and genealogy of the said Reginheri builds on the presumption that Reginheri was related to king Horicus I, and attempts to discover, for lack of other clues, if Reginheri was indeed of Danish royal blood and could thus be linked to the character of Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources, where his father is described as the king of Denmark.

Rory McTurk, in his article "Ragnar Loðbrók in the Irish Annals?", maintains that according to *Annales Regni Francorum* (entry for year 819), in ninth century Denmark there were two royal houses that, for the most part, struggled for supremacy. These two houses came to be known as the house of Godofridus I and Herioldus I respectively, and it is suggested that Reginheri belonged to the house of Godofridus I, as a son of a certain Sigifridus, a relative of Godofridus I. According to the genealogy of the two houses used by McTurk, which appears to be somewhat precariously constructed from the sporadic evidence provided in the above-mentioned Frankish annals, it is then conjectured that the possibility exists that Reginheri had two sons, Halbdeni and Sigifridus, although none of the above-mentioned Frankish annals specifically state so. The matter becomes more complicated when *Annales Fuldenses* and *Annales Xantenses* record, for year 854, a three day

⁵¹ Rory McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrok in the Irish Annals?", *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress*, Bo Almquist and David Greene, eds. (Dundalgan Press Ltd., 1976) 98.

long battle between the two houses, in which, as *Annales Fuldenses* maintain, all members of both royal houses fell, with the exception of one boy, Horicus II from the house of Godofridus I, whose name appears in *Annales Fuldenses* for the first time in year 857, three years after the battle. The testimony of *Annales Fuldenses*, however, is somewhat problematic, as the *Annales* seem to give contradictory statements pertaining to the members of the two royal houses. As mentioned, the *Annales* record that all members of the royal houses fell in 854 with the exception of Horicus II from the house of Godofridus I, only to contradict this claim later, when members of the rival house of Herioldus I appear, apparently alive, in some of the following entries, from which it would seem to follow that not all the members of the royal houses fell. The historical Reginheri's two putative sons, Halbdeni and Sigifridus, likewise appear, alive and doing well, in the entry for 873, where they are described as kings of Denmark, further refuting the statement concerning the disastrous outcome of the battle of 854. *Annales Bertiniani* record for year 854 that “when King Hárekr (Horicus) and other kings with him had been slain, almost the entire nobility perished too,”⁵² implying, contrary to the entry pertaining to the battle of 854 in *Annales Fuldenses*, that not all the members of the royal houses perished. While these rather inconsistent entries in the *Annales* appear as a poor basis for any reasonably accurate conclusions and must, therefore, be approached with caution, I would like to make the following suggestions:

- Agreeing with Rory McTurk,⁵³ if the historical Reginheri, leader of the Viking attack on Paris, truly was of royal blood, a member of the house of Godofridus I, which is not at all certain, and if *Annales Fuldenses* provide us with accurate information in relation to the outcome of the battle of 854, then Reginheri's sons would have perished in the battle and the Halbdeni and Sigifridus that crop up in *Annales Fuldenses* for year 873 could not have been his sons.
- If Reginheri was not a member of the royal line of Godofridus I, it is then possible that he

⁵² *Annales Bertiniani*, sub anno 854.

⁵³ McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrok in the Irish Annals?", 117.

had two sons, perhaps by the names Halbdeni and Sigifridus, but it then becomes extremely difficult to account for the fact that these two sons became joint kings in Denmark, since there would be no way for them to succeed to the throne on the basis of royal line succession and we have no records from this period of them forcibly or otherwise claiming the kingdom.⁵⁴

- If Reginheri was a member of the royal line of Godofridus I, and the testimony of *Annales Fuldenses* concerning the outcome of the battle of 854 is inaccurate, it is then possible that Halbdeni and Sigifridus could have been his sons. These suggestions must, however, be viewed as mere guesses lacking an adequate basis, as the sources at our disposal fail to provide us with a coherent body of evidence.

It can be noted that the above discussed materials seem rather focused on the idea of fairly exclusive kingship and royal blood line succession – not as exclusive as in the later centuries, admittedly, but still quite exclusive, considering that only two royal houses are considered in the attempt to trace the origin and genealogy of the historical Reginheri/Ragnar. It is a well-known fact that in ninth century Scandinavia the notion of a well defined kingdom united under one ruler was quite foreign, as the land was fractioned into smaller units ruled by “petty” kings, who were either overcome and/or formed alliances and swore allegiance to an overking. These alliances often proved short lived and allegiances had a tendency to shift. The two royal houses of Godofridus I and Herioldus I could, based on their being mentioned in the Frankish sources and on the power they were said to have commanded (as mentioned above, *Annales Bertiniani* record for year 845 that king Horicus I sent a force counting 600 ships up the Elbe in Germany against Louis the

⁵⁴ Another possibility would be that Halbdeni and Sigifridus were the sons of Horicus II. Although Storm argues that Halbdeni and Sigifridus could not have been the sons of Horicus II, as Horicus II was probably born around the year 840 and Halbdeni and Sigifridus would have been too young in 873 to be kings (see "Ragnar Lodbrok in the Irish Annals?"), this argument appears to be rather weak, especially in the light of the fact that in medieval times people were considered mature and of age much earlier than at present, they entered marital unions and produced offspring earlier, so it is quite possible that Halbdeni and Sigifridus could have been the sons of Horicus II, which conjecture I make based on the fact that in *Annales Fuldenses* they are found to be negotiating with Louis the German, and it is thus more likely that they actually were members of the royal line of Godofridus I. This, however, cannot be proved beyond doubt, as there is no unshakable historical evidence either pointing to the conclusion that Halbdeni and Sigifridus were of the royal house of Godofridus I or to the conclusion that they were from a different background and usurped the power of the overkings.

German, which is a force a petty king could not possibly have had at his disposal), be considered two royal houses of overkings, while the existence of petty kings united under the leadership of overkings is further attested by the likewise above-mentioned entry in *Annales Bertiniani* for year 854, where the *Annales* state that “when King Hárekr (Horicus) and other kings with him had been slain, almost the entire nobility perished too.”⁵⁵ It could then be conjectured that, if the historical Reginheri, the leader of the Viking attack on Paris, was not a member of the royal house of Godofridus I, he could well have been one of the petty kings united under the house of Godofridus I, in which case it would be quite possible that he led the attack on Paris. This conjecture, however, gives us no insight into the existence of Reginheri’s sons, cannot be supported by evidence from contemporary sources, and must, therefore, remain just that, a conjecture.

For consistency’s and entirety’s sake I consider it beneficial to present one more theory pertaining to the genealogy of yet another historical counterpart of the Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources. This theory, however, appears to be built on a rather shaky ground, as, apart from *The Annals of Ulster*, it derives support from *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments* that date from the 12th century and can thus hardly be considered contemporary. This theory is based on a rather uncertain connection between *The Annals of Ulster* and *Gesta Danorum*. *The Annals of Ulster* record for year 831 an attack of the Norsemen (without giving any names) in Ireland and the subsequent slaying of Mael Brigte, king of Conaille, while Saxo records that on his first expedition against king Hella, Regnerus (Ragnar) went to Ireland, slew its king Melbriectus and conquered Dublin. In addition, *The Three Fragments* mention for year 869 the arrival of a certain Ragnall, son of Albdan, and his three sons in the Orkneys. It has been argued, based on this evidence, that this Ragnall could have been the son of a certain Halpdanus, father of Hemmingus, who, according to *Annales Fuldenses*, was slain in 837, that this Hemmingus was a member of the royal house of Herioldus I, the rival of the royal house of Godofridus I.⁵⁶ It is clear that if Ragnall was well and

⁵⁵ *Annales Bertiniani*, sub anno 854.

⁵⁶ For a full size account and step by step argumentation see McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrók in the Irish Annals?"

alive and in the Orkneys in 869, he cannot be equated with Reginheri who, according to contemporary sources, died in 845, and if Ragnall was the son of Halpdanus and if Halpdanus was a member of the royal house of Herioldus I, then Ragnall, as earlier argued, could not have been the son of Sigifridus and belonged to the house of Godofridus I, in which case his sons could not have been Halbdeni and Sigifridus. Seeing that this theory has no reliable backing in the form of contemporary evidence, I would be inclined to dismiss it as interesting and enriching but with no firm historical basis. It is, however, possible that this Ragnall is one of the characters the later Ragnar Lodbrok was moulded on.

Alfred P. Smyth, using a different line of reasoning and attempting to trace the origin and genealogy of the hero Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources by comparing them with the Frankish sources, finding and critically examining reflections of the Frankish sources in the Scandinavian sources, argues that it is quite possible that Reginheri was a petty king from Víkin who engaged in a prolonged struggle to control Zeland, that he was most likely never the most powerful king of the Danes, but that it is possible that he held some royal power, as in the Viking age the sons of landed kings might be referred to as kings even by their enemies in England and Ireland, although they themselves did not possess any territory.⁵⁷ The difficulty with Smyth's approach rests in the fact that he relies too much on the later Scandinavian sources, which in turn compromises the historical accuracy of his conclusions. While it is not altogether surprising that the later Scandinavian sources reflect elements from contemporary sources, namely the various Frankish and Irish annals, it must not be neglected to note that these later Scandinavian sources were written 250 – 450 years after the historical facts in question took place, and can thus in no way be considered as historically accurate or reliable.

The attempted identification of the character of Ragnar Lodbrok with the historical Reginheri, leader of the Viking attack on Paris, and the attempt to fit the historical Reginheri into

⁵⁷ Smyth, 24, 29.

the royal line of Godofridus I appears to rely on the following:

- The correspondence of the names Reginheri/Ragnar⁵⁸, who is called Reginheri in *Annales Xantenses* for year 845, Ragneri dux Nortmannorum in *Chronicon Fontanellense* for 845, princeps Reginerus in *Miracula Sancti Richarii* and Ragenarius dux incredulorum in *Miracula Sancti Germani*.⁵⁹
- The conjecture that the historical Reginheri had two sons, Halbdeni and Sigifridus, where Sigifridus could be taken to correspond with Sigurd (orm-i-auga), Ragnar Lodbrok's son in the later Scandinavian sources, and Halbdeni with Halfdane, who is, in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, described as the brother of Hingwar/Ingwar.
- On the dating of the attack on Paris and Ragnar's subsequent death, at which time the Ragnar Lodbrok of the Scandinavian sources is assumed to have been active.
- The claim of the later Scandinavian sources that Ragnar Lodbrok's father was a certain Sigurd hring, king of both Sweden and Denmark, the name Sigurd corresponding to Sigifridus, a relative of Godofridus I.
- The fact that Saxo Grammaticus in his account of Regnerus Lothbrog mentions an outbreak of a dysenteric disease among the troops of Regnerus during an expedition against the king of Bjarmaland, while there is evidence in Frankish sources (*Annales Bertiniani* for 845, *Annales Xantenses* for 845, and *Miracula Sancti Germani in Normannorum adventu facta*) to suggest that the followers of Reginheri were plagued by dysentery after the sack of

Paris.⁶⁰

It can be seen that the bases on which the identification of the legendary Ragnar Lodbrok with the historical Reginheri and Ragnall is attempted are themselves not entirely grounded in reliable historical fact and can thus be considered as mere conjectures that are, in addition, scantily backed by substantial fact. We are not able to establish, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that

⁵⁸ Which does not necessarily mean exact correspondence in linguistic terms.

⁵⁹ McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrok in the Irish Annals?", 95.

⁶⁰ McTurk, "Ragnarr Loðbrok in the Irish Annals?" 96.

the historical Reginheri was of royal blood, and his hypothetical parentage of Sigifridus and Halbdeni remains likewise obscured. None of the above discussed sources give any clues as to his involvement in the British Isles, parentage of Ingwar or any of the other sons that appear in the later Scandinavian sources. It has, by now, become painfully clear that the only conclusion of the preceding laborious undertaking is that there is no conclusion. Attempts to equate the Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources with the historical Reginheri, Reginfridus and Ragnall respectively have yielded no conclusive results. Acknowledging defeat on this field, we may now attempt to trace the name Lodbrok.

I.iii.2.

Lodbrok

Tracing the historical character known as Lodbrok is much easier, mainly because there is only one reasonably contemporary source pertaining to him or her, the Maes Howe runic inscriptions in Orkney. The inscription regarding the name Lodbrok reads as follows:

SIA HÖUHR, VAR FYR LATHIN HAELR LOTHBROKAR
SYNER HAENAR THAEIR VÖRO HVATIR SLIKT VÖRO
MAEN SAEM THAEIR VÖRO FYRI SIR
IORSALAFARAR BRUTU ORKHÖUH LIFMND
SAILIA IARLS UT NORTHIR IR FE FOLHIT MIKIT
THAT URLOFOIR HIR VAR FI FOLHGET MIKIT
RAEIST SIMON SIHR IN THO INGI SIHRITH
SAELIR SA IR FINA MA THAN OUTH HIN
MIKLA. OGDONAEGN BAR FI YR⁶¹

⁶¹ James Farrer, M.P., *Notice of Runic Inscriptions Discovered During Recent Excavations in the Orkneys*, (Edinburgh: R.&R. Clark, 1862) 37.

This barrow was formerly a sorcery hall, erected for Lodbrok; her sons were brave, such were men as they were for themselves (such we may call valiant men, such as they were in their achievements). The Iorsalafarar (visitors of Jerusalem) broke open Orkhow ... Earls. To the north-west a great treasure has been hid (but few believe that), a great treasure was hid here. Simon sigr (victor) carved (the Runes) and afterwards Inge. Happy he who may discover this great wealth. Ogdonaegn carried away the goods from this barrow.⁶²

Professor Stephens comments: "Written apparently by seven different persons, perhaps some of Lothbrok's sons. This first writing was probably inscribed about the year 870 or 880, by the celebrated Scandinavian sea kings, and the others at a later period."⁶³ The dating of the inscriptions is of utmost importance when trying to unravel the mystery behind the name Lodbrok, it is, however, difficult to assign a fixed time to the individual inscriptions. While the mentions of the Iorsalafarar (pilgrims to Jerusalem) make it easy to determine that some of the inscriptions date from approximately 1152-3, when the Orkney Jarl Ragnvald organized his naval expedition to the Holy Land, other inscriptions have been engraved during a long period of time, the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, as claimed by Professor Stephens.⁶⁴ The inscription pertaining to the construction that formerly served as the sorcery hall of a certain "Lothbrok", mentions *her* sons – "syner haenar" (without giving any names), who were brave and valiant men. If Professor Stephens' claim is correct and the inscriptions pertaining to Lodbrok and her sons are of an earlier date than those pertaining to the Crusaders, it is then possible to conjecture that the sons (or some of the sons) described in later sources as the sons of Lodbrok, who were supposed to be active in England at about that time, could well have been the sons of Lodbrok, with the difference that Lodbrok was a woman, not a man.⁶⁵

⁶² Farrer, 37.

⁶³ Farrer, 35.

⁶⁴ Farrer, 22.

⁶⁵ Farrer, 21. (Professor Rafn believes that the barrow mentioned in the second inscription was a sorcery hall for Lodbrok, a female magician, Professor Munch suggests that it was a burial place for a woman of the same name,

Another, albeit non-contemporary source pertaining to the name Lodbrok is the song of the tree-man in the last chapter of *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, where travelers find a large wooden man in the woods in Samsø, overgrown with moss. They wonder who could have sacrificed to this idol, when the tree-man recites some verses and states that “wearers of head-dresses (helmets), sons of Loðbroka, set me up in the south by the sea; at that time I was worshiped with human sacrifices in the southern part of Samsø.”⁶⁶ The interesting part is that the form of the name Lodbrok is, in the original, “loðbroku”, the genitive singular of a weak feminine noun “loðbroka”.⁶⁷

Concerning historical documents, the name Lodbrok appears for the first time in *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* (dating from 987 - 1000) in connection with the sisters of the Viking leaders Ingvar and Hubba, daughters of Lodbrok, who wove the Raven banner. Approximately seventy years later, Adam of Bremen, in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (dating from approximately 1076), tells us that, regarding the kings over the Danes and Northmen, “the most cruel of them was Ingvar, the son of Lodbrok, who everywhere tortured Christians to death.”⁶⁸ Roughly at the same time, William of Jumieges, in his *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* (dating from approximately 1070), mentions “the son of King Lothbroc, named Björn Ironside,”⁶⁹ who would, according to the later Scandinavian sources, appear to correspond to Björn, one of Ragnar Lodbrok's sons.

Approximately sixty years later, the earliest occurrence of the names Ragnar and Lodbrok in combination appears in Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabok* (dating from 1120 - 1133), where Ari states that “Ivar Ragnarssonr Loðbrokar was responsible for the slaying of the English king Edmund.”⁷⁰ This is the first source that mentions a documented historical occurrence, the death of king Edmund,

while Professor Stephens considers the writings that speak of Lodbrok's sons as indicative of its having been used in early times by the celebrated Scandinavian Vikings of that name as a fortress and a place of retreat.)

⁶⁶ *Ragnar Lodbroks saga*.

⁶⁷ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 23.

⁶⁸ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 37.

⁶⁹ *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumieges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torgini*, trans. ed. Elisabeth M. C. van Houts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 11.

⁷⁰ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 1.

for which Ivar was, according to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, responsible together with Hubba, and provides the information that Ivar was the son of Ragnar Lodbrok, which, in light of the previously discussed sources, appears to come out of nowhere.

Reflecting on the preceding efforts to trace Ragnar Lodbrok in contemporary and near-contemporary sources, it transpires that no link can be made between the historical Reginheri, Reginfridus, Ragnall and Lodbrok, because none of the sources mention these two names in connection with each other, and because the sources referring to Lodbrok are, with the exception of the Maes Howe runic inscriptions, of much later date, and refer either to a woman of that name or a historically untraceable man. There is no contemporary historical mention of Ragnar Lodbrok. Absolutely none. It can, therefore, be stated, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that the Ragnar Lodbrok of the later Scandinavian sources has no certain historical counterpart and never truly existed. Nonetheless, it is likely that all three previously examined historical personages (Reginfridus, Reginheri and Ragnall), their background, genealogy, activities and exploits, contributed to the formation of the character of Ragnar Lodbrok appearing in the later Scandinavian sources.

An interesting development, however, presents itself. In I.ii. we have ascertained that the Viking chief Ingwar was active in the British Isles and responsible for king Edmund's death. One hundred and thirty years later, *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* comes with the intelligence that not only were Ingwar and Hubba brothers, but they also had sisters and their parent was a mysterious Lodbrok. Not long after, information concerning Lodbrok's parentage of Ingwar and Bjørn appears in *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (Ingwar) and *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* (Bjørn). It takes another sixty years for the sources to make a quantum leap and for *Islendingabok* to record the existence of Ragnar Lodbrok, describing Ingwar as his son in connection with a recorded historical occurrence.

As we have already proven that Ragnar Lodbrok had, with the highest degree of probability, no historical counterpart, and as *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* and *Islendingabok* are the first sources that begin describing Viking leaders traceable in contemporary historical sources, i.e. Ingwar, Hubba and Bjørn, as the sons of Lodbrok or Ragnar Lodbrok, it appears increasingly more likely that we are dealing with the development of a legend, to the tracing of which we will turn presently.

CHAPTER II.

The Anglo-Danish tradition

II.i.

Ragnar Lodbrok and sons in non-contemporary sources

There are three accounts pertaining to the Danish invasions of England in which Ragnar Lodbrok or just Lodbrok plays a role. One can be found in the Scandinavian sources we have acquainted ourselves with in I.i. The other is found in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History* and the third in Geoffrey of Wells' *Liber de Infantia Sancti Eadmundi*. As we have already seen, according to *Gesta Danorum*, *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and *Ragnarssona þattr*, Ragnar launched an attack on England, was defeated in battle by Ella, king of Northumbria, and thrown into a snake pit where he died. *Gesta Danorum* differs from *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and *Ragnarssona þattr* in that Saxo presents a whole chain of revenge, where Ragnar first slays the king of Britain, Hame, father of Ella, and only later, when Ingvar is expelled from Britain, returns in turn to be slain by Ella, on whom Ingvar and his brothers consequently take revenge.

According to Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, Lothbroc was a man of the royal race in the kingdom of the Danes. One day he took his hawk and went unattended in a little boat to catch wild fowl on the sea coast and in the islands. It so happened that he was surprised by a sudden storm and carried to the coast of England, to Norfolk in East Anglia. The people of the country found him and took him to the court of king Edmund, who gave him an honorable reception. Lothbroc spent some time at the court and was greatly impressed by the accomplished manners of king Edmund, his military discipline and the courtly manners of his attendants. He expressed a desire to remain at the court and be instructed in every kingly accomplishment. His wish being granted him, he attached himself to the king's huntsman, Berne, in order to practice his hunting skills. Lothbroc

soon became a favorite with the king, and Berne became increasingly jealous of him, both on account of his position at court and his supreme hunting skills. One day he could not control his hatred for Lothbroc any longer and slew him in the forest, leaving his body there. Lothbroc, however, had a dog, which remained with his body in the forest. When Lothbroc did not show up at court, king Edmund inquired about him. Berne said that when they were returning from hunting the previous day, Lothbroc stayed behind in the forest and he had not seen him since. Precisely at that time Lothbroc's dog joined the company. Edmund bade his attendants follow the dog, certain that he will lead them to his master, which, of course, was the case, and Lothbroc's dead body was found. Berne, convicted of the crime, was placed in the boat in which Lothbroc had come to England and exposed in the midst of the sea without any instruments of navigation. This proved to be a rather unfortunate decision, as Berne was carried to Denmark, where he was presented to Hinguar and Hubba, the sons of Lothbroc, who immediately recognized the boat and, in order to find out what had happened to their father, put Berne to torture. Berne falsely asserted that Lothbroc landed in England and was put to death by king Edmund. Hinguar and Hubba collected a large army and sailed to England to exact vengeance for their father. The winds, however, drove their fleet in a contrary direction and they landed at Berwick-upon-Tweed in Scotland, where they commenced their ravages, which they continued all the way to East Anglia, where they engaged in a long and cruel battle with king Edmund and his forces. After much slaughter king Edmund was taken and martyred.⁷¹

Geoffrey of Wells narrates that

Lodebrok was a very wealthy and famous man, but deceitful and criminal, whose name when interpreted signifies Lothly brook, from whom as from a river emanated that spawn of hateful existence, ... the three sons of Lodebrok, Hingwar, Ubba, and Wern. This family ... in accordance with long-standing practice carried on the ferocious business of piracy, giving themselves over entirely to brigandage and depredation, and bringing cruel ruin upon province

⁷¹ *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 193 – 198.

after province... One day while the deceitful brethren were assembled in mischievous conversation with their father, and were haughtily bragging of their own wickedness and presumption, the latter, in the swelling pride of his demoniacal designs, and chafing with disdainful elation, replied, 'Much reason you have to be so boastful, and to make the air ring with your proud words! What, I should like to know, have you ever achieved worth remembrance as the result of all your hard-fought battles? Why, there is a young man named Eadmund, who, not many years ago, embarked from Saxony, and landed in an English haven with a few followers, and now he has the realm of East Anglia under his absolute control! What have you ever accomplished like that? Oh, how inferior are you whom I have begotten!' The sons, therefore, being alike incensed with envy, and put to shame by their father's reproaches, entered upon a conspiracy of crafty machination against Eadmund. For a long while they plotted by what manoeuvres they could attack him, and an army was collected in furtherance of their design; it was then unanimously determined, that with their united forces a sudden irruption should be made upon his kingdom, and that by fraud and stratagem king and people should be together destroyed. How they succeeded in perpetrating their designs, and how Eadmund, the accepted saint of God, consummated his blessed life by a blessed martyrdom, has been described by an eloquent man, Abbo of Fleury ...⁷²

When surveying these accounts, it becomes apparent at first glance that the Scandinavian accounts, although reflecting a historical occurrence, are not accurate. We have examined contemporary sources pertaining to Viking activities in the British Isles in I.ii. and know only too well that there is no mention of Ragnar Lodbrok or a king by the name of Hame, that the political situation in Northumbria was somewhat volatile and Ella's claim to power was problematic⁷³, that York most definitely existed before the arrival of The Great Heathen Army and was thus not erected by Ingwar (and that only cuddly, playful snakes live in England). We also know that, concerning the

⁷² Lord Francis Hervey, *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1907) 157-162.

⁷³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records for 867 that "there was much dissension in that nation among themselves; they had deposed their king Osbert, and had admitted Aella, who had no natural claim ... later in the year, however, they returned to their allegiance, and they were now fighting against the common enemy ... and both the kings were slain on the spot."

death of king Edmund, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states only that king Edmund engaged the Danes in battle and was slain, without any further mention of martyrdom. The core message the Scandinavian sources wish to transmit is, however, clear: the Danish invasion of England was motivated by Ragnar's sons' desire to avenge the murder of their father, a motif that would in turn render the atrocities connected with the invasion as an honorable undertaking.

The accounts found in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History* and Geoffrey of Wells differ radically from the Scandinavian accounts as well as from each other. Firstly, and most importantly, they endeavor to account for the death of king Edmund in East Anglia and contain no mention of the death of king Ella in Northumbria. Secondly, unlike the Scandinavian sources, they do not mention Ragnar Lodbrok but only Lothbroc or Lodebrok, and give exactly the same limited range of sons we get if we combine the accounts of *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* (Ingwar and Hubba), *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (Ingwar) and *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* (Bjørn). Geoffrey of Wells also adds Wern, which could be taken to correspond to the above-mentioned Bjørn Ironside. Thirdly, although both accounts are of English origin, they cast the character of Lodebrok and his sons in a very different light. Roger of Wendover portrays his Lothbroc without a trace of negativity, as a friend and admirer of king Edmund, and ascribes his death to the treachery of the English huntsman Berne. The consequent death of king Edmund at the hands of Lothbroc's sons Hingvar and Hubba is caused by Berne's lies, by the virtue of which the blame for the king's death remains with the English. Geoffrey of Wells, on the other hand, describes his Lodebrok family as hateful, wicked, given to sin and depredation. According to his account the death of king Edmund had no noble cause, but was motivated by Lodebrok's nagging and low, negative, ungodly emotions, a portrayal consistent with the portrayals of Ingwar and Hubba in *Passio Sancti Edmundi* and *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, which describe the Viking leaders as impious pirates and monsters of depravity.

When contemplating these accounts, it becomes apparent, as already mentioned, that,

although they reflect historical events, they contain very little factual information and are, to a great degree, spun from the yarn of legend. They present the reader with a strong feeling that, by embellishing given historical occurrences and spinning a tale of revenge around them (except in Geoffrey of Wells' *Liber de Infantia Sancti Eadmundi*, where the revenge motif is absent), they attempt to explain or account for them. While I would be reluctant to agree with Alfred P. Smyth that these tales were created *solely* to account for the invasion of Northumbria or East Anglia and for the slaying of king Ella or king Edmund, it is clear that accounting for the invasions is of chief importance in these tales. I would be inclined to agree with Smyth that, precisely because the tales, especially as presented in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and the Lothbroc story in *Flowers of History*, attempt to explain and account, they give the impression of artificiality and appear to be strained at almost every point. No amount of suspension of disbelief will render these stories even remotely realistic and believable as historical accounts to the contemporary reader. Smyth explores the artificiality of the account in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, claiming that it simply is not believable that although king Ella was warned of Ragnar's departure from Scandinavia and the invasion of Northumbria, he was not sure that Ragnar was present in the army, and that even before the conflict he was concerned about the vengeance of Ragnar's sons. It is not believable that Ragnar was the only survivor of the fight, due to his amazing martial prowess and his wife's magical underwear, and still king Ella did not recognize him. Ragnar's refusal to reveal his identity was convenient in that it provided king Ella with a reason to toss him into the snake pit, and the horrible manner of Ragnar's death in turn justified the invasion by his sons. By the time the story progresses to the end of the snake-pit episode, it has reached an undreamt of level of absurdity. King Ella suspects that it was Ragnar who died in the pit, but in spite of all the evidence and clues presented him, he is still not sure. After pondering how he might find out and preserve his life and kingdom at the same time, he does not manage to come up with a better plan than to send messengers to Ragnar's sons to tell them about their father's death. Ragnar's sons, surprisingly, hop on ships, sail to England and kill

king Ella. Only then is king Ella sure that it indeed was Ragnar who died in the pit.⁷⁴

The English account is similarly strained. It is not very believable that Lothbroc, a man of the royal race, went fowling all by himself, without any kind of retinue, that by pure chance a storm came and carried him to the shores of East Anglia, and that he survived on the stormy sea in his little boat. It puzzles the inquisitive mind that Berne, after murdering Lothbroc in the forest, did not think to conceal the body, take care of the dog and invent some kind of alibi for himself. The inquisitive mind is mute with wonder when Berne is put in Lothbroc's little boat and the winds unmistakably carry him to Denmark to Lothbroc's sons, when Berne falsely asserts that king Edmund executed Lothbroc and Lothbroc's sons stage the invasion of England based on the dubious testimony of one man, without subjecting it to any kind of scrutiny.

The account contained in Geoffrey of Wells is, however, quite believable. No complicated causes for the invasion are given, the attack on king Edmund's realm is accounted for in the simple terms of aggression as a result of envy and the desire to prove one's worth and prowess. Plot is minimal, but Geoffrey of Wells still presents a dramatized account employing characterization by dialogue.

The apparent gap between the testimony of the contemporary sources examined in I.ii. and the above-discussed accounts can be, at least partially and very theoretically, elucidated by the distinction between two kinds of historical representation – annals and histories, as used by Hayden White. While the function of the contemporary sources examined in I.ii., according to this basic distinction, is merely to provide intelligence as to what historical occurrence took place in a given year, that is, to *inform*, not elucidate and explain, the function of the later historical works (histories) is to provide explanation of given historical occurrences in the form of a plot, a clearly demarcated story with a beginning, middle and end.⁷⁵ While the contemporary sources generally simply record, the later sources resort to narrativity, they feign to "make the world speak itself, and

⁷⁴ Smyth, 38.

⁷⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 5-6.

speak itself as a story,"⁷⁶ endowing events with a significance they do not possess as a mere sequence.⁷⁷ It can be noted that narrativity appears in contemporary sources as well, albeit sporadically and inconsistently, as exemplified by the claim of *Annales Xantenses* that Reginheri died as a result of divine chastisement. However, this formal functional distinction between annals and the later historical works (histories) would appear to explain, to a degree, the gap between the testimony of the contemporary sources examined in I.ii. and the above-discussed accounts contained in later, non-contemporary sources. As the gradual development of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition is of a substantially later date than the previously examined contemporary sources, it could not, naturally, be included therein. But the basic distinction stands - explanation or interpretation of recorded occurrences is, as a rule, absent in the contemporary sources, at least in the entries pertaining to our field of interest.

The later, above-discussed accounts, especially those contained in *Gesta Danorum*, *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and *Flowers of History*, that begun developing and slowly taking shape over extensive periods of time, are, as already mentioned with regard to their "artificiality" and the strain they put on the modern readers' capacity to suspend their disbelief, all based on an explanation in the form of a story. In other words, they are fully narrativized. The difficulty the modern reader may experience in assimilating these accounts as "historically believable" can be said to be based on their degree of emplotment, which stands in stark contrast to the standard of a modern historical account, not in the least because narrativity, in factual storytelling, tends to be closely related to the impulse to moralize reality – to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality we can imagine.⁷⁸ This "moral element" is strongly felt in the above-discussed accounts, which seem willing to go to any length to present the Viking invasion of England as an honorable undertaking, as a moral obligation, indeed, to avenge the murder of a parent. In this sense, these strongly narrativized accounts with their inherent moral charge can be

⁷⁶ White, 2.

⁷⁷ White, 14.

⁷⁸ White, 14.

perceived as the product of a community wishing to legitimize its actions and confirm its social and legal order.

It must not be neglected that the narrativity of these accounts *in itself* would not produce such a strong feeling of artificiality in the modern reader, simply and commonsensically because avenging the murder of a parent is considered natural in countless diverse cultures. The revenge motif appears frequently in various historical and other works, very often without putting the readers' ability to suspend their disbelief to the test (e.g. *Njal's Saga*). In the above-discussed accounts it is the blend of their narrativity with a variety of folktale motifs that renders them unacceptable to modern readers as historical accounts. It is, first and foremost, these motifs that betray the origin of these accounts in folktales emerging as an explanation of a difficult period in history, whose complicated causes cannot be contained in a simple tale of crime, injustice and retribution. As an example, the following motifs can be isolated:

- Tale of the murdered innocent – while the protagonist of this motif is usually a female (lovely, young maiden of exceeding beauty and virtue), male protagonists are not excluded. This motif often appears in connection with the motif of jealousy, in which the likeable and unoffending innocent awakens someone's jealousy – frequently a family member or a relative, although this is not a rule – whereupon he or she is promptly slain, as exemplified in the account of the murder of St Kenelm.⁷⁹ The parallel with Lothbroc's tale in *Flowers of History* is clear – Lothbroc becomes king Edmund's favorite, he is possessed of supreme hunting skills, the huntsman Berne becomes jealous of him and murders him.
- Murdered while hunting – yet another familiar motif, whose popularity can be explained by the fact that hunting in forest or over open country offered many opportunities for private vengeance, which may have been quite frequent in daily life.⁸⁰
- The rudderless boat – a frequent motif that gives the impression that in the olden times the

⁷⁹ Catherine Cubitt, "Folklore and Historiography," *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretto, eds. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2006) 194.

⁸⁰ C. E. Wright, M.A., Ph.D., *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oliver and Boyd, 1939) 142 – 143.

rudderless boat was a cheap and popular means of transport, appearing, for example, also in Chaucer's tale of Custance.

- The clever animal – animal motifs are likewise frequent and popular; here the animal helps discover the heinous crime and the body of the victim. In Lothbroc's tale it is his dog, a bird and a cow also appear in other tales, and we must, of course, not neglect to mention the wolf guarding the head of king Edmund.
- Magical item – the heroes of a wide range of tales acquire, in the course of their adventures, various magical items. Ragnar Lodbrok acquires his wife's magical shift that protects him from injury.
- The snake pit – this motif appears for the first time in *Volsunga saga*. As it is generally accepted that *Ragnars saga* is a loose continuation of *Volsunga saga* and was influenced by it, the snake pit motif is also thought to have been transferred to *Ragnars saga* from the *Volsunga*.⁸¹

Another characteristic these accounts have in common and that betrays their origin among the lay population is their secular nature, as the causes leading to the Danish invasions are safely removed from the clerical realm of “spiritual terror” and from the vicious cycle of sin and retribution. While the accounts in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, *Flowers of History* and Geoffrey of Wells are entirely secular, Saxo's account introduces a religious element – Ragnar died in the snake-pit because he disparaged religion (meaning Christianity), and God punished him. This element in Saxo's narrative is, however, but a distant echo of accounts presented in the English sources, where the sinfulness of the population and the wrath of God play a major role in bringing about a disaster in the form of the Danish invasions, and where the paganism and cruelty of the Danes bring, in turn, their imminent downfall.

Of the later chronicles, Simeon of Durham, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon and Roger of Wendover, only *Flowers of History* include the account about Lothbroc's death at the

⁸¹ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 97.

hands of Berne and the subsequent Danish invasion. Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Edmundi*⁸² describes King Edmund as the most benevolent, just and pious of all men and kings, and narrates that

... so eminently conspicuous was he in the face of Christ and of the Church, through the adornment of good deeds, that, as in the case of Saint Job, to test his patience became the aim of the enemy of the human race, who cherishes a grudge against the good, which is all the deeper, because he lacks every impulse towards good-will. With this object he despatched one of his own satellites as an adversary to Eadmund, in the hope that, stripped of all his possessions, the king might be goaded into an outburst of impatience, and in despair curse God to His face. This adversary was known by the name of Inguar; and he, with another called Hubba, a man of equal depravity, attempted (and nothing but the divine compassion could have prevented them) to reduce to destruction the whole confines of Britain.⁸³

Inguar is further described as the monster of impiety, his soldiers as his murderous minions, and their sole mission in England is to attempt to force king Edmund to renounce his faith in Christ.⁸⁴

The account of the invasion in *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, where the invading Danes are also portrayed as the servants of the devil, and the purpose of their ravages in England and especially in East Anglia is to test the patience of king Edmund and goad him into cursing God in his desperation, is consistent with that of Abbo, and was, most likely, copied from his *Passio*. It is interesting to note that Aelfric's paraphrase of Abbo's *Passio* differs from the original in that it does not give king Edmund's renunciation of the Christian faith as the main reason for the Danish invasion, but rather, similar to Geoffrey of Wells' account, states that "the Danish people came with

⁸² Abbo of Fleury visited Ramsey Abbey, staying there for nearly two years during the period 985 – 987. While there, he visited Archbishop Dunstan at Canterbury where he heard the story of Edmund's death, which is said to have been told to Dunstan by Edmund's standard bearer when he was an old man. On his arrival back at Ramsey, he wrote his famous *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, before he returned to Fleury. See *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, cvii.

⁸³ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 17 – 19.

⁸⁴ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 23.

a fleet, harrying and slaying widely over the land, as their custom is."⁸⁵ Both Aelfric and Geoffrey of Wells, then, seem to communicate that the Danes invaded and ravaged England because such was their custom and long-standing practice (clearly, at least in this case, they were not given to excessive narrativity), refraining from describing the invasion as Satan's design to corrupt king Edmund, whereas Abbo's account, and its reflection in *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, present a purely metaphysical cause of the invasion. They are also the only religious accounts where the Danish invasions are brought about by the devil and not the wrath of God.

William of Malmesbury and Simeon of Durham simply record the death of king Edmund at the hands of Hinguar and Hubba,⁸⁶ and Henry of Huntingdon mentions that St Edmund was taken to heaven after being tortured by the infidels.⁸⁷ *Flowers of History*, however, give the above described account about Lothbroc's arrival at the court of king Edmund and his death at the hands of Berne, smoothly transiting into the narrative of king Edmund's passion. It is interesting to note that while the account regarding Lothbroc's death is secular in nature, the narrative of king Edmund's martyrdom is highly religious (as is natural, the passions of saints *are* religious), the result being that these two narratives present, within the space of a few pages, rather clashing and inconsistent portrayals of the Danish leaders. While from the secular narrative it follows naturally that Hinguar and Hubba wished to avenge their father's death, which endeavor is in perfect accord with the contemporary, not only Viking, code of honor, the narrative of the passion of king Edmund portrays Hinguar and Hubba, in keeping with other English sources pertaining to the Danes, as infidels, murderers, the servants of the devil and atrocious robbers. The narrative further communicates, same as *Passio Sancti Edmundi*, that Hinguar's objective was to force king Edmund to relinquish his faith in Christ under torture,⁸⁸ an element that does not figure in any of the secular accounts, where Hinguar and Hubba's objective was revenge.

⁸⁵ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 63.

⁸⁶ *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham*, 655.
The History of the Kings of England, 204.

⁸⁷ *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*, 152.

⁸⁸ *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 195 – 198.

In comparison with the accounts where Hinguar is the servant of the devil and his sole objective is to force king Edmund to relinquish his faith in Christ, it becomes increasingly apparent that the account relating the arrival and death of Lothbroc at king Edmund's court is strangely out of character, especially since *Flowers of History* give earlier as the cause of the Danish invasions the increasing depravity of the English royalty and nobility.⁸⁹ In light of the otherwise consistent claims of the English chroniclers that the invasions were brought about by the wrath of God as a punishment for the depravity of the English populace, it would appear that the Lothbroc account originated neither with the chroniclers themselves nor among the English populace. As it cannot be found in any of the earlier written sources, only one explanation is left to us - it found its way into *Flowers of History* from oral tradition or, which is more likely, from earlier, now untraceable manuscripts containing this tradition. Given the secular nature of the account, the revenge motif, which presents a rather reasonable explanation of the cause of the Danish invasion, the favorable portrayal of both Lothbroc and king Edmund and the honorable resolve of Hinguar and Hubba to avenge the death of their father, not neglecting the fact that it was the lies and treachery of the English huntsman Berne that brought war and destruction upon the English, it would appear most likely that this tradition originated among the Danish population of East Anglia.

Geoffrey of Wells' account, on the other hand, exhibits clear traits of having originated among the English population of East Anglia. This could be accounted for by the fact that Geoffrey of Wells refers to *Passio Sancti Edmundi* in the closing lines of his Lodebrok account, by the unfavorable portrayal of Lodebrok and his sons and by the absence of the revenge motif.

We can, therefore, discern four traditions pertaining to the Danish invasions of England:

⁸⁹ "In the primitive church of the English religion shone with great lustre, insomuch that kings and queens, princes and dukes, earls and barons, and rulers of churches, from love of the heavenly kingdom, chose the monastic life, voluntarily submitting to exile and a life of solitude, and forsaking all things, that they might follow the Lord; but in process of time all goodness had so died away among them, that no people could be compared with them for treachery and fraud, nor was anything so odious among them as piety and justice, or anything which conferred honour so much as civil wars and shedding innocent blood. Almighty God sent, therefore, against them those cruel and pagan nations, ... who spared neither the female sex nor infantile years – Danes and Norwegians, Goths and Swedes, ... who for nearly two hundred and thirty years devastated this sinful land from sea to sea" *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, 178.

the Scandinavian Ragnar Lodbrok tradition, contained in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, *Ragnarssona Pattr*, *Gesta Danorum* and *Krakumal*, the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition presented in *Flowers of History*, the English Lodebrok tradition presented in Geoffrey of Wells *Liber de Infantia Sancti Eadmundi*, and the clerical tradition presented in Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Edmundi* and *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*.

In light of the above examined materials it is now possible, with some degree of accuracy, to establish the chronological development of the Scandinavian Ragnar Lodbrok tradition. We have already noted (see page 38) that *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* was the first historical document mentioning the name Lodbrok, and also the first historical document ever mentioning the name Lodbrok in connection with his sons, Ingwar and Hubba. It is equally significant that this document is of East Anglian origin, that it was compiled in a place settled by Danes where Danish activity was pronounced and where, last but not least, the St Edmund tradition developed. Considering that there are no mentions of either Lothbroc or Ragnar in connection with Ingwar or Hubba in any other English documents from approximately the same period of time (with the exception of the Maes Howe runic inscriptions, where, however, the names of her sons are not given), it would appear as a rather plausible explanation that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition, although recorded much later (in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*), sprung into being in East Anglia, before the time of Byrhtferth, the compiler of *The East Anglian Chronicle*, as an attempt on the part of the Danish settlers to justify the murder of king Edmund. While the view that the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition originated among the Danish settlers of East Anglia is commonly accepted, although it is usually placed in the reign of king Canute, it has not until now been backed up by hard evidence, as the authors I turned to most and found most helpful in this my medieval endeavor, i.e. Alfred P. Smyth and Rory McTurk, both labored under the assumption that *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, formerly known as *Annals of St. Neots*, was composed in the 12th century. It is interesting to note that the emerging Ragnar Lodbrok tradition appears to

incorporate Ingwar and Hubba as the sons of Lodbrok not on the basis of their actual and historically documented blood ties, which, as treated in I.ii., are uncertain, but rather on the basis of their shared responsibility for the death of king Edmund. This element could further be taken to represent a blend of historicity and story-making in the sense that Healfden's absence from the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition can be accounted for by both the dynamics of the revenge motif (and the consequent inclusion of Lodbrok) and the testimony of the contemporary sources examined in I.ii.. The Ragnar Lodbrok tradition seems to exclude Healfden because the revenge motif includes Ingwar and Hubba as the slayers of king Edmund, omitting Healfden because, according to the contemporary sources examined in I.ii., he was most likely not present at either of the key events that lie at the core of the tradition.

In case a reader of inquisitive disposition raises the question why the Lothbroc account was not included in *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, if it originated before the time of Byrhtferth and was wide-spread among the Danish population of East Anglia, it would be beneficial to note that the compiler of *The East Anglian Chronicle* was, in all probability, acquainted with the Lothbroc account, as he records that the father of Hinguar and Hubba was Lothbroc, but that including both narratives in his chronicle would produce a similarly clashing effect as in *Flowers of History*. This, in turn, would prove to be detrimental to the negative portrayal of the Danes as Satan's minions, rendering them as ordinary human beings, acting and reacting to outside stimuli in accordance with the customs of their society, which would then completely destroy the chronicle's carefully constructed anti-Danish spin. *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* was most probably compiled for the *familia* of the foundation at Bury St Edmunds⁹⁰, and including an account justifying the slaying of the saint king would probably not have gone over well with the patrons.

Maintaining, then, that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition was the first link in the later development of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition as presented in the later Scandinavian sources, I would suggest that the English Lodebrok tradition came in second, although it was recorded much

⁹⁰ *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, cxxxviii.

earlier. The evidence speaking in favor of this conclusion is represented by the wider range of sons, as the English Lodebrok tradition gives us not only Ingwar and Hubba, but also Wern (Bjørn), who, as already mentioned, appears for the first time in connection with the name Lodebrok in the writing of William of Jumieges, and was, judging by the silence of English historical sources concerning his person, not active in the British Isles. Further, the English Lodebrok tradition contains an element that is not present in the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition, but plays an important role in the Scandinavian Ragnar Lodebrok tradition. According to Geoffrey of Wells, Ubba was versed in the demoniacal arts and sorcery. When he approached the forces of an enemy, he would ask his comrades to lift him up so that he may overlook their army, and if he could succeed in getting a view of his foes, he would emerge out of the battle victorious, by virtue of his magical incantations.⁹¹ The same motif appears in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, only there it is transferred to Ingwar. The English Lodebrok tradition can thus be taken to represent the further blossoming of the Ragnar Lodebrok tradition, still within the confines of England.

As the earliest occurrence of the names Ragnar and Lodebrok in combination appears in Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendigabok*, it is possible to conjecture that, at least until 1120, Ragnar Lodebrok did not exist as a legendary character and father of the brothers Hinguar and Hubba.⁹² The connection of the names Ragnar and Lodebrok must have taken place sometime between 1070 and 1133, but the lack of sources and sufficient evidence covering the period during which the Ragnar Lodebrok tradition developed makes a more accurate dating almost impossible.

We have, so far, been able to proceed relatively smoothly, tracing the development of the Ragnar Lodebrok tradition from its East Anglian cradle. A difficulty, however, presents itself in the transition to the later Scandinavian Ragnar Lodebrok tradition. While *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and *Gesta Danorum* both describe the Danish engagement in Northumbria and the death of king Ella, only *Ragnarssona Þattr* mentions the death of king Edmund, without, however, incorporating the

⁹¹ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 157.

⁹² It is, however, possible that in oral tradition preceding the written records Ragnar Lodebrok already existed.

mitigating circumstances as presented in the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition. If the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition originated in East Anglia, and came into being first and foremost as an explanation for the slaying of king Edmund, which was, although much later, reflected in the writing of Ari Thorgilsson, why does it not appear in *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* and *Gesta Danorum* as well?

Considering that there are two earlier Scandinavian sources mentioning the Northumbrian conquest to the exclusion of the East Anglian, i.e. the *Tog-drapa* (Stretch-song), a praise poem on Canute the Great composed by Sighvat the scald most likely in 1027⁹³ and *Krakumal* (completed most probably around 1200), it would appear that the East Anglian account showed relatively early signs of retreating, being replaced by the Northumbrian one, which, gaining dominance, is primarily reflected in the later Scandinavian tradition. There are also two sources that mention both the East Anglian and Northumbrian conquest, i.e. *Roskildekrøniken* (dating approximately from 1140) and *Ragnarssona Þattr* (dating most probably from late thirteenth or early fourteenth century), although they do not reflect the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition but rather *Passio Sancti Edmundi*. I would like to suggest that the retreat of the East Anglian account and the ascent of the Northumbrian one, as well as the appearance of both conquests in *Roskildekrøniken* and *Ragnarssona Þattr*, can be accounted for by the phenomenon of story travel and the rise of the cult of St Edmund.

Concerning the phenomenon of story travel, there were two main routes by which story material traveled. According to de Vries, the main route whereby the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition was supplied with material of English provenance lay first from Northumbria to the Orkneys and then to southern Norway, where the tradition acquired material from other sources and developed orally into forms close to those in the Icelandic *Ragnars saga* and Saxo's account in *Gesta Danorum*.⁹⁴ Another route led from the Danelaw directly to Denmark, although this contact of the Danes with their homeland is unlikely to have remained close or frequent after the death of Canute the Great in

⁹³ *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, 122.

⁹⁴ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, Rory McTurk, 103.

1035. It appears, however, that an awareness of the English tradition continued in Denmark well after the death of Canute the Great, showing itself, for example, in the work of the 12th century Danish chroniclers, which suggests personal consultation with the English clerical element in Denmark. *Roskildekrøniken* mentions “meget grusomme konge Ivar, Lodbrogs søn (a most terrible king Ivar, son of Lodbrok),” and provides the information that Ivar was said to have lacked bones (legendary element appearing later in *Ragnars saga*) and that his brothers were Ingvar, Ubbe, Bjørn and Ulf. After recording that Ivar called together the kings of the Danes to destroy the realm of the Franks, the chronicle goes on to describe his cruel contests in Northumbria and East Anglia.⁹⁵ The chronicle provides the first Danish mention of Lodbrok and of the Vikings it presents as his sons; it is the first Scandinavian source to treat Ingvar and Ubbe as brothers and sons of someone with a name corresponding to Lodbrok.⁹⁶ The chronicle further demonstrates that the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition underwent different stages of development not only at different times, but also at different places at approximately the same time, as the names Ragnar and Lodbrok have obviously not yet been connected here, unlike in Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabok* just a few years earlier, but the number of sons is larger. It is interesting to note that *Roskildekrøniken* claims Ivar and Ingvar to be brothers, displaying a lack of awareness that historically they were the same person.

This is a valuable example of the not always so clear transmission of the tradition on its journey in time, it is, however, not the only one. The previously mentioned *Ragnarssona Þattr* provides another valuable example of story travel, giving us a reason to suspect that while *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* was supplied with material via the route from Northumbria to the Orkneys and then to southern Norway, parts of *Ragnarssona Þattr*, although likewise of Islandic origin and an older date than *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, traveled from the Danelaw to Denmark and underwent development there. It is not altogether unlikely that *Ragnarssona Þattr* was exposed to similar influences as *Roskildekrøniken*, as both sources mention the Northumbrian as well as East Anglian

⁹⁵ *Roskildekrøniken*, trans. Michael H. Gelting (Wormianum 2002), 10 – 11.

⁹⁶ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 104 – 107.

conquest and give a garbled account of Ragnar Lodbrok's sons. The conjecture that parts of *Ragnarssona Pattr* traveled from England to Denmark and underwent development there can be based on the following observations:

- The *Pattr* quotes the opening lines of Sighvat's⁹⁷ *Tog-drapa*, in which the king is reminded of Ivar's victory over king Ella: "Ivar, he who held court at York, had eagle hacked in Ella's back."⁹⁸ While it is true that, after departing from Canute's court, Sighvat sailed to Norway to join king Olaf Haraldsson, it is unlikely that the praise poem on Canute traveled with him and gained foothold in Norway. Sighvat had sworn fidelity to king Olaf, and although Canute wished to enroll him among his men, Sighvat excused himself with the remark that one lord at a time was sufficient.⁹⁹ Moreover, there was enmity between king Olaf and Canute, as the latter wished to annex Norway to his dominion, which he successfully accomplished in 1028. It is more likely that the poem was more widely known in Denmark, as the communication between England and Denmark was frequent at the time, more frequent than with the distant Norway, and as Canute's position in Denmark was strong (he ascended the Danish throne in 1019 after the death of his brother, king Harald¹⁰⁰).
- The *Pattr* records that Ivar had two brothers born out of wedlock, Yngvar and Husto, whom he commanded to torture king Edmund the Saint. Because the revenge motif as presented in the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition is absent, this entry betrays its origin in the account of the passion of king Edmund, as the king is here referred to as saint subjected to torture at the hands of men whose names bear close resemblance to Ingwar and Hubba. It would then appear that, as was most likely the case with *Roskildekrøniken*, this information was supplied by the English clerical element in Denmark or traveled there from England after the cult of St Edmund was established.

⁹⁷ Sighvat, although chiefly considered Olaf Haraldsson's scald, visited the court of Canute the Great and composed *Knutsdrapa* in his praise.

⁹⁸ *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons*.

⁹⁹ Laurence Marcellus Larson, *Canute the Great: 995 – 1035 and the rise of Danish imperialism during the Viking age* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912) 295 – 296.

¹⁰⁰ Larson, 138.

- The *Þattr*, just like *Roskildekrøniken*, gives a confused account of Ragnar Lodbrok's sons, likewise demonstrating a lack of awareness that Ivar and Yngvar were historically the same person. The faulty transmission of the tradition is further demonstrated by the garbled name Husto, which would roughly answer to that of Hubba. The interesting part, however, lies in the distribution of the various sons of Ragnar Lodbrok in the text of the *Þattr*. At the beginning, the *Þattr* gives an almost identical set of wives and sons as *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* (with the exception of Røgnvald who does not appear in the *Þattr*), and it is not until later, after the adventures of Ragnar and the death of king Ella, that the *Þattr* recites the opening lines of the *Tog-drapa* and ascribes the death of king Edmund to two new, suddenly appearing brothers of Ivar, giving the impression that this material was inserted into the body of the *Þattr* from other sources. I would be inclined to believe, taking into consideration the above stated reasons, that this part of the *Þattr* was supplied from Denmark, where it had originally traveled from England after the revenge motif was transferred from the East Anglian to the Northumbrian setting. *Ragnarssona Þattr* can thus be seen as a clear example of a source incorporating materials traveling by both of the above- mentioned routes.

Concerning the retreat of the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition from which, as previously argued, the later Scandinavian Ragnar Lodbrok tradition originally sprung, it is necessary to consider it in connection with the rise of the cult of St Edmund. *Roskildekrøniken* and *Ragnarssona Þattr* have demonstrated that, at least in Denmark, information concerning the death of king Edmund was available, although it had clearly been transmitted from *Passio Sancti Edmundi* and not the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition. Although de Vries suggests that the gradual replacement in the Scandinavian tradition of the figure of Edmund by that of Ella took place in the Danelaw during the reign of Canute the Great, as its purpose was to explain the Viking invasions by providing the honorable motif of vengeance, and for this purpose Ella, a relatively unimportant

upstart, was more suited than the (by the time of Canute) famous martyr Edmund,¹⁰¹ I would be inclined to believe that this replacement took place earlier, most likely after the *Passio* was committed to written form. It is almost certain that, during the reign of Canute, the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account was fully overshadowed by the cult of St Edmund and the undoubtedly well-known narrative of his passion, with which the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account would find it very hard to compete. It would then appear very likely that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account, having initiated the development of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition, slowly retreated before the growing momentum of the cult of St Edmund, and was replaced by the account concerning the death of king Ella.

It would be interesting to follow the development of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition beyond the confines of England in greater detail, it would, however, not fit the framework and description of this thesis. One of our tasks, tracing the rise of the Ragnar Lodbrok tradition, is almost completed. We have already ascertained that the first link in the chain of the elaborate Ragnar Lodbrok tradition originated among the Danish settlers in England, and that *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle* is the first existing source, both in England and on the continent, mentioning Lodbrok as the father of Hinguar and Hubba, both of whom appear in the later Ragnar Lodbrok tradition. This link further demonstrates the blending of history and legend in the figure of the mysterious Lodbrok about whom nothing is known, except that which the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account in *Flowers of History* tells us, that he was of the royal race in the kingdom of the Danes.

While Hinguar and Hubba can be historically traced, there is, as has been discussed above, no contemporary historical mention of a male Lodbrok that would give us a clue as to his background or origin. The only mentions of a male Lodbrok are all of later dates and appear exclusively as various stages of the development of the later Ragnar Lodbrok tradition. The Maes Howe runic inscriptions speak about a female Lodbrok, and while it is possible, according to the

¹⁰¹ McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga Loðbrokar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, 233 – 234.

dating of the inscriptions and the activities of Hinguar and Hubba in England, that they were the sons of a woman of that name, we will never know because we have no evidence to prove or disprove it. Two conclusions are open to us. Either Hinguar and Hubba were the sons of said historically traceable Lodbrok, or were, during the initial stages of the development of the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account, somehow connected or associated with her without having had any actual family ties with her, but because an arms bearing father of the royal race would prove more useful and representative in a tale invented to account for the Danish ravages in England, the she-Lodbrok became conveniently transmogrified into a he-Lodbrok (in which case the Lothbroc account may actually include a grain of historical fact), or the he-Lodbrok was invented among the Danish settlers of England from scratch. Because, however, there is a historically traceable she-Lodbrok, who probably lived at the same time as the leaders of the Great Army, it would appear more likely that it was she who, in the initial stages of the development of the account, served as the parent of Hinguar and Hubba, if, indeed, Hinguar and Hubba were brothers. While this is a conjecture that, although plausible, cannot be proved or disproved, it is almost certain, in light of the above discussed evidence, that the later Ragnar Lodbrok tradition originated in East Anglia, that Ragnar Lodbrok, the male hero of the Scandinavian tradition, did not have any certain historical counterpart and thus most probably never truly existed, and that it is not altogether unlikely that he sprang from the sorcery hall of the female magician Lodbrok. It becomes apparent, then, that the almost mythical atmosphere surrounding the Viking invasion of 866 is grounded in legend that has slowly developed, traveled and matured over centuries in different parts of England and Scandinavia.

II.ii.

Edmund and Lothbroc

The preceding chapters focused on the historical and legendary circumstances pertaining to the descent of The Great Heathen Army on England. We have seen that the Ragnar Lodbrok

tradition rose almost out of thin air in the wake of the Northumbrian and East Anglian conquests, and, considering that contemporary and near-contemporary sources give very scant information regarding king Edmund, or the later St Edmund, it appears that his cult and legend, as presented in Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Edmundi*, did so too. It has been suggested above that the development of the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition and the rise of the cult of St Edmund coincided, as the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition endeavors to provide an honorable motif (of revenge) for the demise of king Edmund, implying that his cult was already on the rise and the tradition came into being as a reaction to it. We will now examine the circumstances surrounding the rise of the cult and the extent of influence the two respective traditions may have had on each other.

The first obstacle, as it ever is with this thesis, is the disturbing scarcity of contemporary records regarding king Edmund prior to his death and the consequent initial bloom of his cult. The only contemporary information we have about king Edmund is contained in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and can be fitted in two sentences: In 870, The Great Heathen Army rode over Mercia into East Anglia and fixed their winter quarters at Thetford. And in the winter king Edmund fought with them, but the Danes gained the victory, slew the king, overran the land and destroyed all the monasteries they came to.¹⁰²

Asser, writing approximately 23 years after the death of king Edmund, gives us the same information. According to his *Life of King Alfred*, in 870, Edmund fought most fiercely against the Danes, but the pagans triumphed, he was slain and the enemy reduced all that country to subjection.¹⁰³ These two entries represent pretty much all the information available to us from contemporary and near-contemporary sources. After Asser, the fate of the cult of St Edmund is shrouded in profound silence for almost a hundred years until Abbo of Fleury writes his *Passio Sancti Edmundi* (claiming to be based on first-hand information provided by Edmund's standard bearer), translated

¹⁰² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 870.

¹⁰³ *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, trans. Albert S. Cook (Ginn & Company, 1906) 18.

by Ælfric, which suddenly presents the unfortunate king as a full-fledged saint and martyr. Obviously, the cult of St Edmund must have undergone some sort of development, but how and why?

We may not have sufficient written sources, but we have coins whose rather accurate dating will aid us in the following endeavor. It has been suggested by Ridyard that, after the death of king Edmund in 870, two crucial points of interest appear, marking the beginning and development of his cult - the first translation of his body and the issue of the St Edmund memorial coinage.

Unfortunately, as has been stressed before, we have no contemporary or near-contemporary evidence regarding the first translation of the body. The only information available comes from Abbo's *Passio*, where it is given that after many years, when the time of war and persecution was over, miracles at Edmund's tomb prompted a translation to the royal vill of Bedricesgueord (later Bury St Edmunds), where a church was built to house the body and an examination revealed that the body was uncorrupt, with only a thin scar around the neck, a testimony to Edmund's beheading.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately, it transpires from the text that Edmund's relics were already translated by the time of Theodred, bishop of London from 926 to 951.¹⁰⁵ It is, however, possible that the body was translated within fifteen years after Edmund's death,¹⁰⁶ as Abbo's claim that the event took place when the time of war and tribulation was over could be interpreted as pertaining to the time after Guthrum's army settled in East Anglia, divided the land and blended in.

While this is a guess with no reasonable evidence to support it, the St Edmund memorial coinage can be dated relatively accurately. Almost 2000 coins were found, bearing the inscription SCE EADMVND REX ('O St Edmund the king!'). The names of more than 70 moneyers are recorded, a high proportion of which are of Continental Germanic origin.¹⁰⁷ The coins are absent

¹⁰⁴ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 46 – 47.

¹⁰⁵ Susan Janet Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A study of West Saxon and East Anglian cults* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 212, cf. *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*

¹⁰⁶ Simon Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities: miracle stories in twelfth century England* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 33.

¹⁰⁷ Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage: The early Middle Ages (5th - 10th centuries)* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 320.

from the Ashdon and Stamford hoards deposited in 893/5, but appear in later hoards dating from 910 and later, which indicates that they must have been struck and put in circulation shortly after 895. The evidence of hoards containing these coins, together with a number of single finds, suggests that they were circulated primarily in areas under Danish control, especially since the single finds have been concentrated in East Anglia and the East Midlands.¹⁰⁸ The generally accepted view (see Yarrow and Ridyard) is that the Vikings themselves minted these coins in response to the development and blossoming of the cult of St Edmund in an attempt to show their recognition of the saint and placate the East Anglian community. The East Anglian community needed placating because, less than happy with the Viking aggression and rulership, it seized upon the death of Edmund and, by venerating him, showed their disapproval and protest against the Viking presence. The Vikings settled in East Anglia realized, most probably, that in order to live in a given community and prosper one needs to get along with the community one lives in, and recognition of the saint popular with the East Angles became thus necessary. It would seem to make sense that the issue of the memorial coinage did not just come out of nowhere, but rather came as a response to an upward momentum in the development of the cult. As I have noted above, there is no contemporary or near-contemporary evidence regarding the translation of king Edmund's body, but it would appear likely that the translation was an event of some magnitude, as, according to Abbo, commoners as well as nobility participated,¹⁰⁹ and it would therefore seem plausible that this first translation marked the upward momentum of the cult to which the Vikings responded by issuing the memorial coinage. Thus, the issue of the coinage would indicate that the translation took place before 895, which would be consistent with Ridyard's claim pertaining to the matter as mentioned above.

There exists yet another theory concerning the St Edmund memorial coinage, one that almost smacks of medieval conspiracy. According to A. Chapman, the St Edmund memorial coinage was

¹⁰⁸ Ridyard, 215.

¹⁰⁹ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 45.

supposed to have been minted and supported by king Alfred in an attempt to enhance his influence in East Anglia. By evoking the memory of the fallen king and setting into circulation the St Edmund coins, Alfred and his successors supposedly endeavored to gloss over the last two decades of Viking rule in East Anglia, and instead of acknowledging whomever had succeeded Guthrum to the kingship (most likely a certain Eohric, see Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, year 905 – note mine), they chose to honor Edmund not as the only but also the last legitimate king, thus undermining the Viking claims to legitimacy and removing them from the list of East Anglian rulers. Chapman supports this claim by maintaining that eighteen out of the total number of the moneyers' names appearing on the coins can also be found either on the coinage issued by Athelstan-Guthrum or by Alfred and his successors Edward the Elder, Athelstan and even Edmund, who succeeded his half-brother Athelstan in the late 930s, adding that none of these moneyers is known to have previously minted for East Anglia. From this she infers that a certain link between the St Edmund coinage and the ninth-century kings of Wessex existed, allowing for the possibility that it was the West Saxons, rather than the East Angles, that first sought to promote the veneration of king Edmund as a saint.¹¹⁰

In resolving this issue, experts in numismatics come to the rescue yet again. Concerning the coinage of Athelstan-Guthrum, it is no wonder that it copies Alfred's coins. Grierson and Blackburn tell us that the Vikings who settled in Britain and Ireland were unfamiliar with the use of coin per se, the only coinage of their own had been a small local one produced for the trading center at Hedeby. It comes therefore as no surprise that, as is often the case with an initial coinage, the earliest coins of the Vikings in England imitate those of the neighboring states with which they were most familiar, i.e. Wessex and Mercia. Athelstan-Guthrum's coins mainly copy Alfred's coins of the later 880s and 890s, and a series of coins were struck for Guthrum of East Anglia (880 – 890) in his baptismal name Æthelstan. Some of his coins bear the names of moneyers that minted for Alfred, and a die-link between the coinages suggests that they may have shared a mint near the border with the

¹¹⁰ Anna Chapman, *King Alfred and the Cult of St Edmund*, 7 Jul. 2010 <www.questia.com>.

Danelaw.¹¹¹

Concerning the St Edmund coinage, on a few of these, struck from a single pair of dies, the moneyer's name, usually appearing on the reverse, is replaced by the legend + AELFRED REX DO (DO standing for Canterbury). These belong among the earliest St Edmund coins. It is especially these coins that have been interpreted as evidence that the series was originated by Alfred at Canterbury or that the dies were captured during the Danish sack of Canterbury in 892. However, despite some similarities, the coin does not appear to be struck from official Canterbury dies, though it is no doubt based on it. The coins are in all likelihood an early Viking experiment made before it was decided to place the name of the moneyer on the reverse, because the Vikings had been accustomed to producing good imitations with Alfred's name. It is generally assumed that they were minted in East Anglia; in any event several mints are likely to have been involved, possibly including some in the Five Boroughs.¹¹² In addition, a number of the moneyers' names reveal the presence of Carolingian moneyers working in England. Their presence has been explained by the recruitment of moneyers from among the Frankish captives that accompanied the Viking army at that time.¹¹³ It would then appear that the fact that some of the moneyers who struck for the West Saxons also minted for the Vikings, as well as the fact that Guthrum's coins copied Alfred's, carries no implicit political meaning testifying to the desire of the Wessex rulers to gain influence in East Anglia via the means of the St Edmund memorial coinage. Moreover, even if some of the coins were minted by moneyers who struck for the Wessex rulers, the far greater part of them was still produced in areas under Danish control. The fact that a number of these coins was struck by Frankish and Germanic moneyers in Danish employ provides further proof that it were indeed the Vikings who initiated the coinage. And, just to lighten things up a bit, if the Danes were already producing their own St Edmund coins and circulating them in the areas under their control, while Wessex was secretly minting the same coins and sneaking them into the Danelaw, it would have

¹¹¹ Grierson and Blackburn, 318.

¹¹² Grierson and Blackburn, 320.

¹¹³ Yarrow, 33.

been such a well thought out conspiracy that it would remain virtually undetectable, to the East Angles as well as the Danes. It would then appear substantially more likely that the minting of the St Edmund coinage was indeed initiated by the Danes, and this coinage is the only historically reliable evidence that hints at the dynamics behind the interaction between the Danes and East Angles which lie at the roots of the cult of St Edmund.

The basis on which the St Edmund legend was built can easily be discerned by comparing the information regarding king Edmund's death contained in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and Abbo's *Passio Sancti Edmundi*. Both *The Chronicle* and Asser record that king Edmund engaged the Danes in battle and was simply slain. A hundred years later, according to the *Passio*, as mentioned above, Hingwar and his army suddenly descended on East Anglia, slew men, women and children, and tormented innocent Christians, because it was Satan's design to test king Edmund's patience. After an extensive carnage, Hingwar sent a message to Edmund, demanding that he divide his treasures with him and in the future rule under him as his under-king. King Edmund, his people slain, could not face Hingwar's forces in battle. He likewise refused to submit to the Dane or flee because he did not wish to survive his subjects who were massacred in their sleep, he could not compromise his faith by submitting to a heathen, and he had never considered fleeing from battle, realizing how glorious it would be for him to die for his country. He refused to submit to anyone but to God, having dedicated himself to live and rule under Christ alone, from whose love, as he was convinced, nothing could separate him.¹¹⁴ For these reasons Edmund replied to Ingwar

Son of the devil, well do you imitate your father, who through his swelling pride fell from heaven, and striving to involve mankind in his falseness, rendered multitudes liable to his punishment. You, his chief follower, are powerless to terrify me by threats, nor shall you deceive me with the snares and sophistries that inveigle to destruction, for you will not find me lacking

¹¹⁴ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 17 – 30.

the armor of Christian principles. As for the treasures and the wealth, which till now God's favour has bestowed on me, take and squander them as your insatiable greed may prompt, since, even though you should break in pieces this frail and perishable body, like a potter's vessel, my soul, which is truly free, will never for a moment submit to you. For it is more honorable to champion the cause of perpetual freedom, if not with arms, at any rate with life, than to spend tearful complaints in re-demanding it when lost, since in the one case death is glorious, but in the other the opposition is but the rebellion of slaves.¹¹⁵

Reflecting on these excerpts from the *Passio*, it transpires that it follows two chief aims. Firstly, it endeavors to discredit the Danes and present a very unfavorable portrait of them not only by calling them Satan's minions and emphasizing their cruel ways, but also by pointing out their treachery and cowardice, as illustrated by their slaying of king Edmund's subjects in their sleep. Secondly, it renders king Edmund's historically documented defeat as a moral, ethical, and, above all, spiritual victory, communicating that true Christians, though defeated on the earthly battlefield, still remain victorious over the heathens, as they are possessed of the kingdom of heaven and the love of Christ, and are willing to die for the cause of freedom. Removing, then, the earthly warfare to the spiritual realm, the *Passio* stresses the superiority of the Christian faith, the chief element marking, in this context, the "otherness" of the Danes, who could never gain victory on the spiritual battlefield. The defeated king emerges victorious in Christ, and as such can serve as the patron and protector of the English, as well as a symbol of the resistance against Danish presence in East Anglia, resistance that has been transformed to that of the spirit, by whose virtue it becomes the safest and most infallible of all varieties of resistance. Abbo's *Passio* and its later translation/paraphrase by Aelfric, which (although somewhat simplified and missing a large part of king Edmund's exciting speeches) was more accessible to a larger part of the populace because written in the native tongue, can, then, be taken as a model narrative showing what the cult and its direction may have looked like, its chief principles being freedom, unwavering faith in Christ and

¹¹⁵ *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi*, 31.

spiritual victory.

We, of course, have no way of knowing in what form or shape the account of the death and martyrdom of St Edmund existed around 895 when the Danes issued the memorial coinage, we can, however, view their recognition of the saint as an attempt to remove this rather unfavorable and stigmatizing label of "otherness" (after all, in order to live among and trade with Christians, they must have, at least formally, accepted the Christian faith) and as a sign of their desire to be integrated into the East Anglian community.

If we, then, accept that the Danes themselves issued the St Edmund memorial coinage in response to the blossoming of the cult of St Edmund, it would likewise seem plausible that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition started developing around that time, also in response to the rise of the cult, explaining the death of the newly emerging saint in terms of an international misunderstanding. We, unfortunately, have no written proof that the Lothbroc tradition started developing this early, it is, however, clear that the St Edmund legend and the Lothbroc tradition influenced each other, and that, since the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account was replaced by the Northumbrian account as early as 1027 (probably even earlier), it must have come into existence prior to the St Edmund boom around 1000. The pattern of interaction between the two narratives can, then, be described as follows: while the initial rise of the cult of St Edmund gave the impulse for the creation of the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account, this account was, in turn, forced to retreat before the upward momentum in the development of the cult and the St Edmund legend, being replaced by the Northumbrian account, as discussed previously. The rise of the cult and legend of St Edmund and the Lothbroc tradition are inseparable, and I believe it would not be a great exaggeration to say that without the cult of St Edmund, the Scandinavian medieval canon would be the poorer for the absence of Ragnar Lodbrok and his adventurous sons, while the English legendarium would, had it not been for Hingwar's ambitious conquests, be deprived of one of its

most popular and illustrious saints.

As an illustration of the role of St Edmund in the capacity of the protector of the English or, in this case, East Angles, as well as the dynamics pattern between the English and Scandinavian narratives, I would like to include the accounts of St Edmund's chastisement of king Sweyn (Forkbeard/Tjuguskegg) and the murder of Sweyn's sister Gunhildis. Accounts of St Edmund's chastisement of Sweyn appear in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England* and *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham*.

Wendover's account shows the least degree of emplotment and can, thus, be considered the least miraculous, recording that after much rapine and slaughter, when Sweyn was exacting an immense sum from the town where the body of St Edmund rested and from all his lands, and speaking ill of the saint, he was pierced by an arrow from the town and died.¹¹⁶

Malmesbury records that, after Sweyn oppressed England with rapine and slaughter, while devastating the possessions of St Edmund, the saint appeared to him in a vision and gently addressed him on the misery of his people. When Sweyn responded insolently, the saint struck him on the head, after which he died.¹¹⁷

Simeon of Durham narrates that Sweyn, having perpetrated innumerable and savage deeds in England as well as in other countries, dared to exact a great tribute from the town where the body of St Edmund was enshrined, threatening that, if the tribute were not paid, he would burn the town, destroy the church of the martyr and torture the clergy. Further, he often spoke ill of the martyr, claiming that there was nothing saintly about him. The saint responded by coming to Sweyn one evening when he was in the company of his fellow Danes and stabbing him with a javelin, after which he (Sweyn) died, suffering intense pain.¹¹⁸

The account concerning the murder of Sweyn's sister Gunhildis at the hands of the English offers a parallel to the murder of Ragnar Lodbrok and demonstrates the same chief traits as the later Ragnar Lodbrok Scandinavian tradition, i.e. secular narrative and revenge motif. Narrativity is likewise present in the Gunhildis account, but it can be appreciated that the absence of the folktale motifs renders this account, at

¹¹⁶ Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, 285.

¹¹⁷ *The History of the Kings of England*, 164.

¹¹⁸ *The Historical Works of Simeon of Durham*, 519 – 520.

least in the modern readers' perception, considerably less strained and artificial.

Sweyn's ravages in England were considerable, as documented by *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (see entries for 994 – 1014). However, even for these ravages there exists an explanation utilizing the same dynamics of revenge as the Northumbrian and East Anglian accounts pertaining to the death of (Ragnar) Lodbrok/Lothbroc. Roger of Wendover records how Ethelred the Unready ordered the massacre of all the Danes settled in England on the feast of St Brice's (cf. ASC, 1002), as a result of which the Danes, who had made a league with the English and had sworn to live peaceably with them, were shamefully slain and their wives and children dashed against the posts of their houses. Even those who had fled to a church for refuge were butchered before the altars. Nonetheless, some Danish youths had managed to get away on board a vessel, reached Denmark and related the whole unsavory matter to king Sweyn. King Sweyn was moved to tears, he called together all his nobles and asked what was to be done. All of them determined that the blood of their kinsmen and friends should be avenged. During the massacre also perished Sweyn's sister Gunhildis, a fully assimilated and baptized member of the English society, who had mediated a peace between the Danes and English and had given herself, with her husband and only son, as a hostage to king Ethelred.¹¹⁹ Similar account can be found in Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England*.¹²⁰ It is interesting to note that this account shares a crucial element with the accounts of Ragnar's death in Ella's snake pit and Lothbroc's death at the hands of the huntsman Berne, i.e. the invention of a family member whose murder requires revenge. The industrious scholar will soon find that Gunhildis, the sister of king Sweyn, is virtually untraceable in contemporary sources and is mentioned exclusively in Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History* and Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England*, although an account of the massacre of St Brice's Day, the escape of the young men and the subsequent coming of king Sweyn to England is also recorded in *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*, *The Chronicles of John of Wallingford*, and *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* by William of Jumieges. This account, judging by the highly positive portrayal of Gunhildis and the emphasis on the unjust, shameful and brutal slaying of the Danes, most probably also originated among the Danes, although, as is the case with the Lothbroc account, it is at present very difficult to establish how it found its way into the above-mentioned chronicles. Moreover, this account further illustrates the dynamics behind the English and Scandinavian story-making, the mutual dependence and reactive pattern of the English and Scandinavian narratives.

¹¹⁹ Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, 282 – 283.

¹²⁰ *The History of the Kings of England*, 160.

CHAPTER III.

The Wessex tradition

III.i.

King Alfred and his heroic spin

Aside from the St Edmund legend and the Lothbroc tradition that rose in the wake of the 9th century Danish conquest of England, and that, as we have seen, were closely tied together, there is another story presenting yet another reaction to the Viking invasions of England that, in my view, deserves to be told - the story of king Alfred's heroic stand in face of the threat the Danish invaders posed to the autonomy of Wessex.

In making a record of the life and deeds of king Alfred, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* appears to go to some lengths to present the king as a man in a position of power, when, upon reviewing and reflecting on the factual nature of the matter, or on the probable factual nature of the matter, it seems more likely that he was instead a man in dire straits. There are several instances of this behavior in *The Chronicle* entries pertaining to his rule, which I have, for lack of a better term, decided to call “the Alfredian spin.” In the following pages, let us look closer at these instances and view them from a slightly different angle.

The life of king Alfred passed in the sign of nearly constant struggles with the Scandinavian invaders. While, prior to year 866, the Scandinavian incursions were undoubtedly damaging and devastating for the land and the local populace, the plague truly swept the land in the ominous year 866, when The Great Heathen Army came to England and fixed their winter quarters in East Anglia. According to *The Chronicle*, it was in this year that Ethelred took to the West-Saxon government after the death of his brother Ethelbert, with Alfred as his secundarius. (“Asser speaks of Alfred as secundarius, a term implying, apparently, some kind of authorized viceroyalty,

connected with his position as next in the line of succession to the West-Saxon throne.”)¹²¹ After the winter of 866, The Great Heathen Army moved fast. The inhabitants of East Anglia made peace with the invaders and provided them with horses. Year 867 saw The Great Heathen Army conveniently horsed, invading Northumbria, defeating York and making peace with the Northumbrians, collecting danegeld. Year 868 saw The Army moving into Mercia for the winter. While the king of the Mercians, Burhred, asked Ethered and Alfred for help, the Mercians made peace with The Army instead. In 870, The Army invaded East Anglia, defeated king Edmund, overran and ravaged the land. Year 871 was significant and eventful for Alfred and his brother the king, for the heathen host came to Reading in Wessex. *The Chronicle* states that nine battles were fought that year, aside from common skirmishes; it describes, however, only six of them - Englefield, Reading, Ashdown, Basing, Marton, and Wilton. The English gained only two victories, at Englefield and Ashdown. While it was no small feat to fight nine battles with the invading host, not mentioning being beaten in seven of them, at the end of 871, after the death of Ethelred and Alfred’s ascension to the Wessex throne, Alfred was forced to make peace with the heathens, delivering danegeld.

In 872, according to *The Chronicle*, The Great Heathen Army overwintered in London and the Mercians again made peace with them. In 873, The Army went again against the Northumbrians and the Northumbrians again made peace with them. In 874, The Army returned to Repton in Mercia, drove the king Burhred out, and subdued the land. In 875, The Army advanced again against the Northumbrians and subdued the land, not contenting itself with making peace and collecting danegeld. In 876, The Army stole into Warenham, fort of the West-Saxons, and Alfred was once again forced to make peace with them.

The situation up to year 876 looked quite bleak for the English. The only kingdom that managed to hold itself together, to a degree, was Wessex. The Great Heathen Army, to begin with,

¹²¹ Beatrice Adelaide Lees, *Alfred the Great: The Truth Teller, Maker of England, 848-899* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915) 105.

moved through the land and collected danegeld, only to return later, depose or kill local kings, subdue and occupy. The entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* concerning Wessex and king Alfred, up to and including year 876, give the impression that control and efficient management of his forces were somewhat lacking in the young king's register of abilities. The surrounding kingdoms, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria were in the power of the enemy and Alfred himself was forced to make peace with the invaders twice. Further, it bespeaks ill of the king's powers of observation and foresight that he, in the years between 872 and 876, when the surrounding kingdoms were being massacred by the heathen host and it must have been clear that a new invasion of Wessex was just a matter of time, did not attempt to reorganize the Wessex forces and strengthen the system of fortifications like he did later, between 879 and 885, a period of peace which allowed for it.¹²² However, even in face of this evidence of insufficiency on Alfred's side, *The Chronicle*, concerning the entry for 876, resorts to ambiguous wording, attempting, perhaps, to put a different and more favorable spin on the information presented therein. The entry for year 876 states that "the army stole into Wareham, a fort of the West-Saxons. The king afterwards made peace with them; and they gave him as hostages those who were worthiest in the army; and swore with oaths on the holy bracelet, which they would not before to any nation, that they would readily go out of his kingdom."¹²³ This entry, taking into account the giving of worthy hostages and swearing oaths on the holy bracelet, strives to give the impression that king Alfred was in position of power when negotiating for peace. This is, however, rather unlikely. Considering the fact that just five years prior to this encounter Ethelred and Alfred lost seven battles, and that Alfred was forced to make peace with the invaders, it is quite easy to arrive at the conclusion that the military forces of Wessex were depleted and lacking efficient organization. For those who would argue that five years is a sufficient time to put a new army together, let us keep in mind that the nine battles that were fought in 871 were nine massacres, men died, the land suffered, and soldiers do not grow on trees even in

¹²² It is, however, possible that, despite *The Chronicle's* positive presentation, his position in the kingdom of Wessex was at this time not strong enough to effect such changes.

¹²³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 876.

the best of times. Although it is true that the hostilities must also have taken their toll on the Danish forces, there is a reason to believe that the Danish forces were somewhat "fresher", as *The Chronicle* records, for year 871, that after the battles of Englefield, Reading, Ashdown, Basing and Marden, a vast army came in the summer to Reading,¹²⁴ replenishing the Danish forces. Further, *The Chronicle* does not record any sort of fight or battle taking place at Wareham, nor does it make a note of any kind of armed force accompanying the king. If king Alfred had had a reliable and sufficient military force with him, he would have fought at Wareham, instead of making peace with the enemy, who had on numerous previous occasions shown that bought peace lasts for a short time only and the invaders return at regular intervals to renew the contract. Similarly, the Scandinavians would not leave, unless threatened by a supreme force or bribed with money. It is for these reasons I suggest that king Alfred came to Wareham with a tidy sum of danegeld in his purse, and the disrespect for his position and authority is reflected in the Scandinavians' breaking of the oaths they gave him the very same night and spilling into Exeter.

I believe that from year 877 the fate of the English lands would have been quite different had it not been for the storm/mist at Swanwich, where 120 Danish ships perished on their way to Exeter to meet the land force that traveled there from Wareham. 120 ships could have borne approximately 6000 men, if we count circa 50 men per a common ship with 15 pairs of oars. 50 men per ship is a rather modest estimate, it is likely that the fleet wrecked at Swanwich had more than 6000 men, as L. M. Larson claims that an average ship with 15 pairs of oars carried 80 or 90 men on board.¹²⁵ This was a severe loss for the Danes and it can be most probably attributed to this disaster that the Danes at Exeter swore oaths of peace to king Alfred and entered Mercia, which they afterwards proceeded to divide and settle.

At the beginning of May 877, the Vikings in the Seine collected a handsome payment in danegeld from Charles the Bald and, most probably, turned their attention on England. It is likely

¹²⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 871.

¹²⁵ Larson, 306.

that their fleet, counting approximately one hundred ships, sailed to England, replacing, in a sense, the fleet that met its end at Swanwich.¹²⁶ While it is not explicitly stated in the Frankish annals that the departing fleet sailed to England, the probability of this is rather high. The Great Heathen Army that came to England in 866, or at least a substantial part of it, in all probability came from the Seine after collecting danegeld from Charles the Bald (also in 866).¹²⁷ In 880, the army that previously faced Alfred at Edington Down went to Francia and sat there a year, in 881, 882 and 884 the army continued its exploits in Francia, and in 885 half of the army returned and besieged Rochester. In 893, 250 ships departed from Francia, landed in East Kent, and the army fortified itself at Milton and at Appledore. In 897 the remnants of the Viking forces that did not settle in East Anglia or Northumbria got themselves ships and went over sea to the Seine.¹²⁸ Judging by this evidence it would seem that the Vikings were in the a habit of changing location from Francia to England and vice versa (besides other promising places) based on where the situation was more favorable to their exploits at a given time. For this reason I would suggest that it is entirely possible that at least a part of the fleet of 877 sailed to England, while it is equally possible that a part of it may have decided not to participate in more gruesomeness and took an exotic holiday instead (a cruise to Miklagård, perhaps). This new reinforcement would, of course, increase the Danish numbers substantially.

The entry for year 878 is crucial, while, at the same time, presenting a number of problematic points. *The Chronicle* for 878 records that

... at Midwinter ... the army stole itself away to Chippenham, and harried the West Saxons' land, and settled there, and drove many of the people over sea, and of the remainder the greater portion they harried, and the people submitted to them, save the king Alfred, and he, with a little band, withdrew to the woods and moor-fastnesses. And in the same winter the brother of Ingwar

¹²⁶ Lees, 153.

¹²⁷ *Annales Bertiniani*, sub anno 866.

¹²⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 880, 881, 882, 884, 885, 893, 897.

and Healfden was in Wessex, in Devonshire, with twenty-three ships, and he was there slain, and with him eight hundred and forty men of his force. ... And the Easter after, Alfred, with a little band, wrought a fortress at Athelney, and from that work warred on the army, with that portion of the men of Somerset that was nearest. Then in the seventh week after Easter he rode to Ecgbyht's stone, and there came to meet him all the Somersetshire men, and the Wiltshire men, and that part of Hampshire which remained of it on this side of the sea ... and one night after, he went from the camp to Iley, and one night after that to Ethandun, and there fought against all the army, and put it to flight, and rode after it, as far as the works, and there sat fourteen nights. And then the army gave him hostages with great oaths, that they would depart from his kingdom; and also promised him that their king would receive baptism ... and three weeks after, king Guthrum came to him, with thirty of the men who were most honorable in the army, ... and the king received him there at baptism ... ¹²⁹

Upon a closer look it would seem that this entry contains contradictory information. The victory at Eddington Down stands in contrast to the preceding account describing the Danish invasion of Wessex, the resulting poor state of the populace and the dire straits the king found himself in, which, in turn, stands in contrast to the defeat of Ingwar and Healfden's brother in Devonshire.

The narrative describing the Danish invasion of Wessex gives the impression that the land was subdued, people were fleeing over the Channel and the king himself was hiding in the bogs, communicating that the situation could not have been more hopeless. The narrative concerning the defeat of Ingwar and Healfden's brother in Devonshire would, on the other hand, seem to communicate that Wessex was not quite defenseless and the situation was not quite as hopeless. The description of Alfred's victory at Edington Down would, then, appear as an almost miraculous feat when compared to the description of the Danish invasion of Wessex, whereas, compared to the description relating to the Danish defeat in Devonshire, it would not appear quite as miraculous. Let us now examine this entry more closely, beginning with an inquiry into the factual nature of the

¹²⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle according to several original authorities*, sub anno 878.

military operations concerning the battle of Edington Down, which could provide us with useful information as regards this event.

Beatrice Lees attempts to calculate the number of soldiers Alfred could have obtained from the three above-mentioned shires. Arguing that “Wessex, exclusive of Kent, but inclusive of Surrey and Sussex, measured about twenty-two thousand five hundred hides, and, at the rate of one man for five hides, could collect a well-equipped field army of about five thousand men,” she goes on to claim that, based on this measurement, “Alfred's force from the three shires, at this same rate, would be about two thousand seven hundred or three thousand men, or about three thousand five hundred including Dorset ... this makes a respectable army for days of scanty population and hand-to-hand warfare.”¹³⁰ It is a valid claim that Alfred's force from the three shires could have been approximately three thousand men, in a time of peace, when the land had not been ravaged by invaders. As mentioned above, the drawn out hostilities (see the nine battles fought in 871) must have depleted the reserves of combat-able men Wessex had at its disposal, and, unlike the Danish forces, who received reinforcements when the summer army came to Reading in 871 and, most probably, again in 877 when a fleet came from the Seine, the Wessex army was not to be replenished so easily. The fact that Wessex was subdued and overrun, if we choose to believe *The Chronicle's* testimony, must be taken into consideration when attempting to estimate the size of Alfred's forces. Another point to consider is the quality of his army. We can hardly imagine that fully equipped warriors poured to the rescue from the three shires. It is more probable that the nucleus of Alfred's army consisted of his thegns and “professional warriors”, the small company that went into hiding with him, and such noblemen with their following as were left in the three shires and could join the king, while the majority of the rest of the men were commoners, meaning not “professional warriors”. These points would seem to present a good enough reason to suspect that Alfred's army from the marshes was nothing to write to Rome about. If we, in addition, take into account only the sheer size of the Danish fleet that probably came from the Seine, which could

¹³⁰ Lees, 175.

count anywhere between 4000 and 6000 men¹³¹, aside from Guthrum's land force, it becomes apparent that Alfred was probably rather outnumbered. And yet *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claims that Alfred was victorious, although he reportedly fought with “all the (heathen) army”. Considering, then, the probable size and quality of Alfred’s army, the probable size of the heathen army and the condition of Wessex and its people at the time, it is difficult not to doubt *The Chronicle* entry claiming, in other words, that “the heathen army” that overran and subdued the land of Wessex was defeated and scattered by a band collected in a hurry from the surrounding areas of the Somerset marshes.

It is, however, equally difficult to imagine that, if indeed Alfred was as outnumbered as the above-stated numbers would seem to indicate, the Scandinavians, at the time in a position of power, would willingly leave Wessex, swear oaths of peace and agree to baptism. While a vast majority of historians seems to take the authority of *The Chronicle* for given, although it is strange that *The Chronicle* provides so little information in regard to this battle,¹³² there are few dissenting voices that view Alfred’s military victory with a certain amount of doubt and suggest that although it is possible that “Alfred’s improvised army somehow managed to inflict an important reverse at Edington Down,”¹³³ one of the main reasons for the peaceful arrangement with the Scandinavians was the fact that “Guthrum was gradually convinced that a negotiated settlement might offer him more than a fight to the finish.”¹³⁴ If Guthrum’s main interest was prosperity, peace and trade, it would indeed seem a wise and mutually beneficial decision to maintain friendly ties with Wessex. His baptism can also be seen in this light, as it is a known fact that many Scandinavians got baptized in order to improve business, personal and political relations in areas that were predominantly Christian.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Lees, 153.

¹³² In other cases, *The Chronicle* provides details pertaining to the outcome of battles, e.g. the battle of Englefield, Reading and Ashdown in 871.

¹³³ Davies, 222.

¹³⁴ Davies, 221.

¹³⁵ Carolingian rulers such as Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald also demanded conversion to Christianity as an essential precondition for peace and recognition of territorial authority, as was the case of the Viking chief Weland, who had to accept baptism in order to become a vassal of Charles the Bald. By standing sponsor for Guthrum at his

While it is possible that Guthrum might have preferred a peaceful settlement to drawn out hostilities, acting in this manner stands, nonetheless, in stark contrast to the customary behavior of invading Scandinavian armies, where the usual course of action was to invade and plunder, or invade, plunder, depose existing rulers and settle. It may be possible, as Alfred P. Smyth suggests, that Guthrum and his forces preferred peace negotiations because they were weary of war and anxious to settle on the estates they had already won in Mercia and East Anglia,¹³⁶ but their failure to seize Wessex would still seem to indicate that the forces of Wessex were not quite as negligible, or the Danish forces not quite as great. I would suggest, then, that Wessex, although weakened, still represented an enemy that would be difficult to crush with ease, and for this reason the Danes resorted to negotiations. I would be inclined to believe, based on the previously discussed approximate size and "freshness" of the warring factions, that *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is given to exaggeration in reporting Alfred's victory at Edington Down, and that the outcome of the engagement was the result of negotiations rather than the military supremacy of Wessex. Due to a lack of sufficient evidence it is, however, impossible to arrive at a clear conclusion in this matter.

We can, regardless, appreciate that the entries for 876 (Warenham) and 878 (Edington Down) have a distinct pro Anglo-Saxon spin. The entry of 876, as discussed above, strives to give the impression that king Alfred was in position of power when negotiating for peace with the Danish force occupying the fort of Warenham, when he was, in all probability, forced to resort to paying danegeld. The entry for 878, on the other hand, appears to employ a narrative strategy aimed at presenting the king as the hero of the English nation. As mentioned above, *The Chronicle* portrays Alfred's situation in 878, when he was forced to hide in the marshes and all of Wessex was overrun by the pagan hordes, in the darkest colors, which is immediately contradicted by the Viking defeat in Devonshire. It is, of course, possible that, in defeating the brother of Ingwar and Healfden, the

baptism, Alfred was recognizing the Danish king's legitimacy as ruler of East Anglia. He was welcoming him into the company of 'civilized' rulers. Richard Abels, "Alfred the Great and Æthelred II 'the Unready': the Viking Wars in England, c. 850-1016", 20 Jul. 2009, 16 Jul. 2010

<<http://www.nadn.navy.mil/Users/history/abels/hh315/vikingsrevised.html>>.

¹³⁶ Smyth, 252.

English "got lucky", and it is also true that eight hundred men is a substantially smaller force than that presented by the army that overran Wessex. Be that as it may, based on the discrepancy between the entries pertaining to Alfred's desperate situation and the Devonshire defeat, it could be suggested that it is possible that *The Chronicle* makes use of an element from the heroic pattern, according to which the hero, prior to his often almost miraculous victory and comeback, is reduced to most dire circumstances under which all seems hopeless and lost. And, we must remind ourselves, Alfred was the only ruler in 9th century England who was able, by whatever means, to withstand the pagan invasions and preserve his kingdom, and, therefore, the only reasonable candidate for a hero status. Nor shall it be neglected that England was in sore need of a hero in this bleakest of times and may have been forced to settle for a Trabant instead of a BMW.

While *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems content using this element and is not given to excessive verbosity regarding the subject, *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*¹³⁷ elaborates on this brief account, adding a spiritual dimension. King Alfred is consistently portrayed in all sources pertaining to him, from Asser to the later chronicles, as a just and pious ruler, the light and protector of the English nation, doer of good and righteous deeds, with not a blemish on his reputation, a paragon of Christian virtue. *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, however, narrates that the hardships Alfred was forced to endure battling the pagan forces came as a punishment for sins he was guilty of in his youth, and for this reason

... the Lord did not choose just to grant to that glorious king (Alfred) victory over his enemies and prosperity in adversity. For indeed, the same God suffered him to be wearied by his enemies on many occasions, to be plagued with misfortune, and to be shamed before his own subjects, to the end that he might learn that there is but one Lord of all, to whom every knee shall bow ...

¹³⁷ Those who are familiar with *Asser's Life of King Alfred* would argue that the following account first appears in the *Life*. I have, however, been using a more critical edition, from which this part is absent, as it is thought to have been interpolated from *The East Anglian Chronicle*, formerly known as *Annals of St Neot*, by Archbishop Parker in the 16th century. (see *The Life of King Alfred*, trans. Albert S. Cook (Gin & Company, 1906), also see William Henry Stevenson, *Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of St Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904).

Now indeed, we believe that these adversities were not inflicted upon the king unjustly. For when he began his reign, being yet a young man, he indulged himself in youthful passions; and when his subjects came to him, seeking aid and favor, he would neither heed nor assist them, but held them in contempt. Whereupon the most holy Neot, who was his kinsman, and still living in this world, was cut to the heart, and being filled with the spirit of prophecy, he foretold that for this reason, the king would be visited with great adversity. Wherefore, inasmuch every human sin must be punished in some manner, either in this life or in that which is to come, the true and righteous Judge would not allow the king's foolishness to escape punishment in this world, only to have the consequences visited upon him in the last judgment. For this reason then, on many occasions the oft mentioned Alfred endured great misfortune ...¹³⁸

Of the later chronicles, Roger of Wendover narrates king Alfred's dialogue with St. Neot and the following vision of St. Cuthbert during the difficult times when king Alfred was hiding in the Somerset marshes. King Alfred, for the sake of receiving edification, visited St. Neot, who

... sharply rebuked him for his wicked actions, set before him the punishment of eternal fire, showed him that the great would suffer the greater torments, and, besides this, revealed to him by the spirit of prophecy almost everything which was to happen to him. 'You are ... enduring many sufferings from your adversaries, but you will have to endure still greater; for whereas you show yourself proud and exercise excessive tyranny in your kingdom, instead of walking humbly before the face of the divine Majesty, you shall be harassed in your kingdom by a people ignorant of Christ, from whom you shalt with difficulty hide yourself, and in this condition you shall remain some days on account of your sins; but nevertheless I have obtained of God by my prayers that if you repent of your cruel acts and the heat of your lust, he will yet look upon you in mercy, and restore your sceptre and former prosperity.' The king returned to the island from where he had come, and the following night he had a vision of St. Cuthbert, assuring him of restoration of his kingdom, and from this time forth he was ever a terror to his

¹³⁸ *Byrhtferth's East Anglian Chronicle*, 119.

enemies.¹³⁹

William of Malmesbury gives a slightly different account, omitting the conversation with St. Neot and recording only the vision of St. Cuthbert. Prior to the battle of Ethandun (Edington Down), king Alfred was hiding in the marshes, when he was graced by a vision of St. Cuthbert, who spoke to him thus:

God hath sent me to announce good fortune to you; and since England has already largely paid the penalty of her crimes, God now, through the merits of her native saints, looks upon her with an eye of mercy. You too, so pitiably banished from your kingdom, shall shortly be again seated with honor on your throne ... But when your fortune shall succeed to your wishes, you will act as becomes a king, if you conciliate God your helper, and me his messenger, with suitable devotion.¹⁴⁰

Alfred won the battle and the Danish king Guthrum and his men accepted baptism.¹⁴¹

The punishment for impiety or various sins represents yet another theme of the heroic pattern,¹⁴² and while impiety or general sinfulness of the population is commonly given as a reason for the Danish invasions in the English sources, in the context of Alfred's struggles with the Danes it could be seen not only as an explanation for his hardships, but also a further elaboration on his hero status. It can be seen that the tale is improved upon by later chronicles, Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England* and Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, which incorporate the dialogue with St Neot and introduce the vision of St Cuthbert, placing both at the critical time when Alfred was hiding in the marshes. The vision can be interpreted in terms of the concept of sacral kingship, as it has been claimed that

... during the earlier years in Britain and the rise of Christianity, the Christian ruler served as a figure leading his people from the old faith to the new, while later, when Christianity was firmly

¹³⁹ Roger of Wendover's *Flowers of History*, 227.

¹⁴⁰ *The History of the Kings of England*, 123.

¹⁴¹ *The History of the Kings of England*, 123.

¹⁴² G. S. Kirk, *Myth, its meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), 188.

anchored in Britain, the king served as the protector of the faith, as Christ's deputy among Christian people, whose duty it was to avenge offenses against Christ, to be a father to a Christian nation, Christ's vicegerent on earth, to shun heathenism and to honor and protect God's church. In this spiritual context, kings claimed to be of divine descent and were often endowed with visions from God, which placed them in a special relationship with the divine... prophecies were made in Anglo-Saxon England concerning specific kings. Although these parallel well the prophecies in the vitae of Christian saints and Continental rulers, they served to place the monarch in a special God-related role, as did the heathen religion, showing him in a peculiar and sacral relationship with the divine. ... In an entirely Christian setting the king is made an object of heavenly voices and prophecies...¹⁴³

While this view emphasizes the inherent spiritual nature of kingship, in the above-mentioned context, where both the dialogue with St Neot and the vision of St Cuthbert take place at the time of crisis, it could be seen as yet another element of the heroic pattern, the intervention of a supernatural entity that gives the hero guidance in fulfilling a difficult task or a quest.¹⁴⁴

Regardless of whether king Alfred won the battle of Edington Down (or even managed to "inflict an important reverse") or reached some kind of agreement with Guthrum, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* took the first step in turning him into a hero, and the later chronicles followed suit, embellishing the story. Just as East Anglia created their beloved martyr Edmund, victorious in Christ, superior in faith by the virtue of which he was removed from the harmful influences of the pagan hordes, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* created the glorious, heroic king who, by almost superhuman effort, saved the kingdom from the invaders.

It can be concluded, with some degree of objectivity, that the entries up to year 885 present a record of insufficiency in regard to Alfred's military prowess. While it is clear that Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia (later divided into Danish and English Mercia by the Danes themselves)

¹⁴³ William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (University of California Press, 1970) 186 – 187.

¹⁴⁴ Kirk, 188.

succumbed to the invaders without mounting a noteworthy resistance, Wessex just barely managed to maintain a semblance of autonomy. In other words, while Wessex, prior to year 885, fought poorly, the other kingdoms' military performance was even worse. Had it not been for the settlement with Guthrum and the preceding battle, on which *The Chronicle* conveniently provides so little information and which appears to be the main basis of Alfred's hero status, the fate of Wessex would, most probably, have followed a different path. The attention and spin *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives king Alfred, calling him “the king over all the English nation except that part that was under the power of the Danes”, can be translated, without spin, as “the only king that was left in what was left of the English nation, as the Scandinavians held over a half of the English territory.”

It appears that king Alfred's virtue rests in that, up to year 878, the kings of the other English kingdoms were even more incompetent on the field of battle than he was. After and including year 878, his virtue, however, rests in his diplomatic skills and his ability to successfully effect a reorganization of the West Saxon army and the system of fortifications. Where *The Chronicle* calls him “the king over all the English nation”, I would call him, more in accordance with the probable factual nature of the matter, an assiduous holder-onto and protector of that which was left of the English nation, speaking in terms of territorial boundaries, of course.

CONCLUSION

On the preceding pages we have discussed the historical background and the circumstances surrounding and leading to the creation of three different stories, stories that sprung into existence in the wake of the 9th century Danish invasions of the British Isles. These stories not only transmogrify historical occurrences and characters, they do so in a specific manner, responding to this difficult period in history by different ways of narrativizing tales in three different genres – the saga, the legend and the heroic epic.

It can be appreciated that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc account (and subsequently also the later Scandinavian tradition) and the Passion of St Edmund respectively cast the same historical occurrence in very different light and explain them in diametrically different terms. The emplotment of these accounts is determined by the community that created them and the purpose they were to serve - it is apparent that legitimization and confirmation of the given community's social and/or religious order is a key motivator in these accounts, which their inherent moral charge further serves to justify and enhance. The same can be said about the Wessex tradition.

As pertains to the three different incipient genre characteristics, it needs to be admitted that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition that originated in England can hardly be called a saga. If we accept, as I have suggested above, that it originated and begun developing shortly after the rise of the cult of St Edmund, which could be traced approximately to the time when the St Edmund memorial coinage was issued, it can with confidence be stated that at that time saga as a genre did not exist, as it begun flourishing only mainly between 1150 – 1400.¹⁴⁵ It is, however, built around a motif characteristic of the saga, the motif of revenge for a family member, fictional (like Lothbroc and Gunhildis) or real one. While the revenge motif is not only limited to the sagas and appears freely elsewhere, it is especially prevalent in the family sagas where the entire narrative is often

¹⁴⁵ This dating pertains to written sagas. Oral tradition undoubtedly existed before, but is, due to its ephemeral form, difficult to date.

structured around a family feud, resulting in a chain of revenge, until everybody dies and there is no one left to kill (e.g. *Njal's Saga*). Aside from the revenge motif, the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition is further characterized by its fully secular nature, which is also true of a large part of the later saga canon, although there are sagas with a pronounced Christian element (e.g. *Saint Olav's Saga*), or sagas where supernatural elements or the northern gods appear (e.g. *Volsunga Saga* and also *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, where the supernatural elements represent a later development). Concerning the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition, we can conclude that, if it is not a saga, it certainly includes elements characteristic of the later sagas, and can, thus, be viewed as their precursor. In addition, it is interesting to note that the Scandinavians, faced with the challenge of inventing a story that would explain and excuse their crude and hostile behavior in England, rose to it quite admirably and laid one of the first cornerstones of the later saga tradition.

The East Angles, on the other hand, reacted to the political situation of the times, the Viking hostilities, presence and rulership in East Anglia by endowing king Edmund with a saint status and creating a legend. It is true that this legend (*Passio Sancti Edmundi*) is hardly original and is, as Ridyard eloquently puts it, rather a minefield of hagiographical topoi¹⁴⁶, but it represents a characteristic response of a religious community which has been overpowered by forces outside of its control and which, as a result, resorts to retreating to the spiritual realm where those forces do not reach, and where the newly created saint represents a unifying element for the entire community, as well as a possible symbol of resistance. As I have touched upon above, the St Edmund cult and legend and the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition, that is, the legend and the saga, represent a unique instance of mutual dependence within the framework of a single historical occurrence, the defeat of the East Angles and the death of king Edmund, to which both sides involved responded by creating tales in genres characteristic for their community, tales that transcend the dreary reality of the actual historical occurrences and political situation of the time, and intended, perhaps, to fashion a new, (slightly) different identity for their creators. Thus the East Angles created a spiritual East Anglia,

¹⁴⁶ Ridyard, 213.

victorious, free and abundant in Christ, where the Vikings had no place, and the Vikings created a story that freed them from guilt, justified their actions, gave them a reason to be in East Anglia and made them look like really honorable people to boot.

To say that king Alfred's life and exploits could read as a heroic epic would be as inaccurate as to say that the Anglo-Danish Lothbroc tradition could read as a saga. The heroic elements, i.e. patterns characteristic of the heroic epic, appear exclusively in connection with the period of time when the king was hiding in the Somerset marshes and the battle of Edington Down. It would, then, be more accurate to suggest that *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the later chronicles, by employing certain patterns characteristic of the heroic epic, endeavor to endow king Alfred with the aura of a hero, while, regarding the rest of his exploits, they adhere to a rather realistic, matter of fact narrative, by the virtue of which they create an image of a living legend (kind of like Harry Potter, the boy who lived), a man, yet a hero, the ruler and protector of all the non-Scandinavian inhabitants of the English kingdoms. This special hero dimension ascribed to king Alfred in turn enhances his role in establishing the unifying concept of the English nation, which did not exist prior to Alfred's reign (the inhabitants of the kingdoms were customarily referred to as East Angles, Mercians, Northumbrians, etc.) and appears for the first time in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for year 901, according to which Alfred was king over all the English nation, except that part that was under the power of the Danes. Since, as I have mentioned in the preceding section, the Danes held over a half of the English territory, this would make Alfred look not quite as accomplished as the entry for year 901 would have it. It, then, appears that this term takes on an abstract meaning, fashioning a community that transcends borders and earthly boundaries, a community of which the Danes are not a part. Viewed in connection with the St Edmund cult and legend, it would appear that in both kingdoms, Wessex and East Anglia, the stories, i.e. St Edmund's legend and Alfred's heroic spin, either contributed to or were instrumental in the creation of the concept of imagined communities¹⁴⁷, the spiritual East Anglia and the sheltering concept of the English nation.

¹⁴⁷ A term used by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*

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ABSTRACT

"Contextualizing the Vikings in Anglo-Saxon History and Literature" examines the Scandinavian impact of Viking presence in Anglo-Saxon England during the so-called First and Second Viking Age, concentrating on the portrayals of the Viking activity in Anglo-Saxon chronicles and annals, as well as Scandinavian (chiefly Icelandic and Danish) sources. It aims to identify the patterns of representation in those portrayals and their development relative to the historical events of the period, the political situation in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the state and progress of the Church, and contemporary literary tendencies, including the influence of heroic literature and the development of the Anglo-Saxon kingship.

Three distinct accounts that came into existence as a result of the Viking invasion of England in 866 are examined. Three main traditions can be discerned - the Scandinavian tradition, reflecting the battle of York, the slaying of king Ella and king Edmund, the East Anglian tradition, reflecting the slaying of king Edmund, and the Wessex tradition, reflecting king Alfred's struggle with the Danes.

The thesis proposes to trace the historical origins and development of these traditions, attempting to discern their historical and fictional elements by comparing them with the record of the historical events to which they relate as presented in contemporary sources, making an inquiry into the probable factual nature of the historical events they reflect, and finding links connecting these traditions with the records in contemporary sources. An inquiry is made into the motives these traditions record as the cause of the Danish invasion of England, the historical circumstances behind the growth of these traditions are put to scrutiny, and an attempt is made at establishing the probable chronology of their development.

The development of these traditions is further viewed in terms of narrative and narrativity, the employment of folktale motifs, incipient genre characteristics, and an inquiry is made into the

dynamics of their interaction with each other and the degree to which they influenced each other.

ABSTRAKT

Diplomová práce "Contextualizing the Vikings in Anglo-Saxon History and Literature" se zabývá dopadem přítomnosti Vikingů v anglosaské Anglii v průběhu takzvaného prvního a druhého vikinského období, s důrazem na zobrazování vikinských aktivit v anglosaských kronikách a análech a skandinávských (v první řadě islandských a dánských) zdrojích. Práce si klade za úkol identifikovat způsoby reprezentace užití v těchto reflexích, zkoumá jejich vývoj ve vztahu k historickým událostem daného období, politické situaci v jednotlivých anglosaských královstvích, situaci a vývoji v církvi a soudobým literárním tendencím, včetně vlivu hrdinské literatury a vývoje anglosaského konceptu královské moci.

Předmětem práce jsou v první řadě tři příběhy, které vznikly v důsledku vikinské invaze do Anglie roku 866, a které lze rozlišit do tří hlavních tradic – skandinávské, zobrazující bitvu o York, usmrcení krále Elly a krále Edmunda, jihoanglické, zobrazující usmrcení krále Edmunda, a wessexské, zobrazující boje krále Alfreda s Dány.

Práce se vydává po stopách historického původu a vývoje těchto tradic, srovnává je s historickými událostmi, ke kterým se vztahují, zaznamenanými v soudobých zdrojích, a klade si za cíl identifikovat jejich historické a fikční prvky. Dále se pokouší odhalit pravděpodobnou skutečnou povahu historických událostí, které tyto pozdější tradice zobrazují, a nalézt prvky spojující soudobé historické záznamy a jejich odraz v těchto pozdějších tradicích. Práce dále zkoumá motivy, které tyto tradice uvádějí jako příčinu skandinávské invaze do Anglie, historické okolnosti spojené s vývojem těchto tradic, a pokouší se určit pravděpodobnou chronologii jejich vývoje.

Vývoj těchto tradic je také nazírán v rámci záznamu a vyprávění, počátečních žánrových charakteristik a užití lidových motivů. Práce se dále zabývá dynamikou interakcí mezi těmito tradicemi a mírou, do které se navzájem ovlivňují.

