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Massacre and the Danes in England
Under Aethelred the Unready

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Sanctuary Burning: The St. Brice's Day Massacre and the Danes in England under Aethelred the Unready

In 1004 King Aethelred the Unready of England was fighting a desperate war against the Danish Vikings who threatened to conquer his land. A large swath of the Northeastern countryside was already ruled by King Swein Forkbeard of Denmark, and the English situation was uncertain. However, Aethelred had at least one victory to report: a group of Danes had barricaded themselves in an Oxfordshire church to escape their English pursuers, and the English had taken full advantage of the situation by burning the church and all it contained to the ground. What may have seemed a victory at the time was deemed a “treacherous plot” in later years.¹ The Anglo-Norman chronicler Henry of Huntingdon described how Aethelred committed this “crime” by secretly ordering the English to either hack to pieces or else burn alive “all the unsuspecting Danes,” this group apparently including the Danish residents of several cities.² The attack took place on the day of the feast of St. Brice, and was later dubbed the St. Brice's Day Massacre.

Due to the scarcity of contemporary sources, and the ambiguities of those which do exist, the historical narrative that has emerged in the literature provides a shortsighted view of the Massacre. The abundance and concurrent arguments of the Anglo-Norman chronicles, added to

¹ Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 341.

² Henry of Huntingdon, 341.

the vagaries of the early written records, has led many scholars to ignore the wide array of possible events which may have taken place in Oxford in 1002. In order to fully understand these, several sources must be examined. First, the few available contemporary sources. Then, one must analyze the Anglo-Norman sources, their biases and their sources. Third, a broader scope of evidence including Anglo-Saxon law and the archaeological record should be included. Once all of these elements have been studied, the scholar may enumerate the many possible situations which the sources may be describing. A thorough examination of the ambiguities in the record and their implications shed new light on the historical significance of the St. Brice's Day Massacre.

The Earliest Records

Contemporary records of the St. Brice's Day Massacre were sparse and contradictory in detailing the event, leaving the reader with very little evidence as to the nature of the events of St. Brice's Day. The earliest description of the Massacre was written in 1004, two years after the commonly given date for the Massacre itself (1002). This first record, a charter written by King Aethelred concerning the rebuilding of the St. Frideswide's church in Oxford, demonstrates that the Massacre was not as infamous in its own time as it became later. The full description of the event runs as follows:

To all dwelling in this country it will be well known that, since a decree was sent out by me with the council [sic] of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockle amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination, and this decree was to be put into effect even as far as death, those Danes who dwelt in the afore-mentioned town, striving to escape death, entered this sanctuary of Christ, having broken by force the doors and bolts, and resolved to make a refuge and defence for themselves therein against the people of the town and the suburbs;

but when all the people in pursuit strove, forced by necessity, to drive them out, and could not, they set fire to the planks and burnt, as it seems, this church with its ornaments and its books.³

Aethelred described sending out a “decree” of rather vague character, stating that the Danes in England should be “destroyed.” The decree itself is not extant, and thus its particulars can only be guessed at. This is perhaps the most frustrating gap in the textual sources, and necessitates speculation to be a key component in almost any analysis of the Massacre. In studying this event, it is crucial to distinguish between what Aethelred claimed to have ordered done, and what he said actually transpired. In describing his decree against the Danes, Aethelred reported having ordered “all the Danes who had sprung up in this island” to be destroyed, implying a nationwide order pertaining to the entirety of England. This language has often lead to later accounts and discussions of the Massacre assuming that the event consisted of a massive bout of anti-Danish violence encompassing large swaths of England.⁴ However, although Aethelred described having *ordered* a slaughter throughout England, the only violence actually reported by any contemporary source as having *transpired* is the burning of the church in Oxford. Aethelred himself did not claim that any violence took place outside of Oxford, but only that he ordered it to be done.

Aethelred’s language was also crucial in his description of the participants in the Massacre. There are two distinct groups which must be identified in interpreting this event: the pursuers and the victims. Aethelred provided a general description of the pursuers, stating that the Danes had fled to the church in order to “make a refuge and defence for themselves therein

³ King Aethelred II, “Renewal by King Ethelred for the Monestary of St. Frideswide,” in *English Historical Documents Vol. I: c. 500-1042* by Dorothy Whitelock, vol. 1 of *English Historical Documents*, ed. David C. Douglas, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955), 545.

⁴ E.g. Williams, *Aethelred the Unready*, 53; Ian Howard, *Swein Forkbeard’s Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England, 991-1017* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 61-64.

against the people of the town and suburbs.” Aethelred thus identified the pursuers as local to Oxford. It is easy to assume from this quotation that Aethelred was describing a mob consisting of local villagers, that is, ordinary people rather than soldiers. However, there are still several possibilities within Aethelred’s identification that must be kept in mind in any attempt to reconstruct the Massacre. First, Aethelred never said whether the “people of the town and suburbs” consisted solely of local men, or whether women and children were also involved in the pursuit. Secondly, he did not identify the pursuers as ‘ordinary people’ or as a certain social group, but only as local to the area. Thus we do not know whether those involved were the general population of Oxford, or only a specific group such as the local law enforcement. Thirdly, he did not describe the pursuit itself as either spontaneous or organized, in other words we do not know whether the Massacre was strategically planned or the result of a sudden flaring of ethnic tensions. Yet each of these possible circumstances radically alters the historical significance of the event, and it is extremely important to take these ambiguities into account when describing the Massacre.

Aethelred was even vaguer in identifying the victims of the Massacre. He simply stated that “those Danes who dwelt” in Oxford were the targets of the violence. In 1002 several different classes of Danes were living in and around England, and Aethelred may have included any or all of these groups in his classification of “Danes.” First, there were peasants, either Danish or descended from Danes who had been settling on the English and Scottish coasts since the 800s.⁵ Second, there were Swein’s Danish soldiers, who conducted periodic raids on coastal areas and those bordering the Danelaw.⁶ Third, there were Danish mercenaries, employed by

⁵ Dawn Hadley, “Scandinavian Settlement,” in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500-c. 1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 212.

⁶ E. g. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 82-83.

Aethelred himself to fight against Swein Forkbeard.⁷ Furthermore, the class of “Danes” who were killed in Oxford may or may not have been the same as those who Aethelred intended as the victims of his 1002 decree.

Finally, Aethelred claimed that the events in Oxford were the direct result of his decree against the Danes in 1002. However, the decree is explicitly described as pertaining to all of England, and we have already established that the only documented violence was a single event in Oxford. Further, Aethelred himself named local people, *not* an army raised in another part of the country, as the pursuers of the Danes. Thus, in relating the Massacre directly to his decree against the Danes, Aethelred was describing his order as such an effective display of rhetoric that a local group purged their town of some class of Danes simply because they had heard of or received it. However, the same order would have been received very differently across the rest of England, since no disturbances or violence of a similar character was reported in other areas by any contemporary source. These contradictory claims leave several possible explanations open: first, Aethelred’s order may have been prevented from being distributed outside of the region of Oxford. Secondly, there may have been some particular quality about Oxford - left unrecorded at the time - that made it more amenable to anti-Danish rhetoric or more capable of carrying out violence. Finally, the events in Oxford may have taken place independently of Aethelred’s order, and Aethelred may have then either assumed or created a connection between them in order to bolster his political position. After all, it would take a powerful king indeed to spur his people to eject a whole class of people from their town by violence, without the presence of an army or even a single visiting official. Aethelred’s charter of 1004 was a political document, and Aethelred’s rhetoric must therefore have been written with a political end in mind. Whether or

⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 85.

not it was the direct result of Aethelred's order against the Danes, the St. Brice's Day Massacre could be seen as a welcome victory in a conflict otherwise marked mainly by the treachery of Aethelred's mercenaries and the failure of his payoffs to Swein and his army. Thus it is important, when studying the Massacre, to examine Aethelred's charter of 1004 as a potentially biased source, because Aethelred may have had his own reasons for rhetorically bolstering the significance of the St. Brice's Day Massacre.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the most contemporaneous source after Aethelred's charter,⁸ added little to Aethelred's description of the events themselves, but it provided a potential explanation for Aethelred's order. The entire description reads as follows:

And in that year [1002] the king ordered to be slain all the Danish men who were in England – this was done on St. Brice's day – because the king had been informed that they would treacherously deprive him, and then all his councilors, of life, and possess this kingdom afterwards.⁹

The most striking aspect of this description is the inclusion of a possible motive for Aethelred's original order. The suggestion of treachery adds a new angle to the possible identities of the "Danes" in question. If these were Swein's soldiers, then the suggestion of treachery would imply a breaking of the rules of war, a situation which would seem to have already taken place in the raids which Swein and his men regularly conducted on the English coast.¹⁰ It is conceivable, however, that Swein's men could have been suspected of treachery even beyond these boundaries, such as failing to cease hostilities once paid off by Aethelred. If the "Danes" in question were instead peasants of Danish descent, then the suggestion of treachery becomes akin to the logic behind the Japanese internment in the United States during

⁸ Due to the nature of the Chronicle and its many versions a precise date is unidentifiable.

⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Dorothy Whitelock (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 86.

¹⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 84, 86-87.

World War II. Unfortunately, the conceptualizations of ethnicity, race, nation and loyalty during Aethelred's reign bear little resemblance to those of the 20th century, and thus the idea of suspicion of disloyalty falling on these "Danes" for their 'ethnic connection' to a hostile 'nation' is historically untenable. The most logical group of "Danes" to be suspected of treachery by Aethelred is his own Danish mercenaries, who could have betrayed him by defection to Swein. This hypothesis is strengthened immensely by the fact that, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a Danish mercenary of Aethelred's did in fact desert to Swein's army in 1001.¹¹ However, it is again important to note that although Aethelred's order may have been directed against a group of "Danes" whom he suspected of treachery, the Danes killed in Oxford in 1002 may or may not have belonged to the same group. The Chronicle's assertion that Aethelred was motivated by suspicions of treachery must be studied with caution, as will all textual sources. However, an examination of this assertion adds important elements to the analysis of the possible identities of the "Danes" against which Aethelred's order was directed.

The length of the Chronicle's entry on the Massacre was unusual for the extremely pithy Chronicle. Aethelred's exile from England in 1013, by comparison, is also described in two sentences, and Swein's death and Cnut's accession as king are described in only one.¹² This suggests that the St. Brice's Day Massacre was seen as an important event by people beyond Aethelred's immediate circle, and thus it was unlikely to have been an unremarkable incident given undue attention by Aethelred for political gain, although he may still have exaggerated his personal role. The Massacre was thus in some way unusual and seen by some contemporaries as worthy of comment, although the exact nature of its remarkable character to contemporaries may

¹¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 85.

¹² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 93.

be impossible to identify. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle made no mention of Oxford, and gave no details about the practicalities of the Massacre. Despite the Chronicle's brief tone, it usually gave a large amount of detail about the location and duration of battles, such as it did when describing the raids of 997, 1001, or 1004.¹³ Thus the St. Brice's Day Massacre was given a strange balance of attention and lack of detail by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Since the Chronicle gave such detailed accounts of battles and raids as a matter of course, it seems likely that such details were not available for the Massacre, a situation which would be implausible if the entire country had erupted in Anti-Danish violence in response to Aethelred's order.

From the contemporary sources available on the St. Brice's Day Massacre, few facts can be established for certain. One may conclude that a church was burned in Oxford in 1002, in the process of an eruption of violence perpetrated by a subset of the local population against some class of Danes in the area at the time, and that this event was remarkable enough to be given an explanation and an unusual amount of space by the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. Despite the severely ambiguous evidence surrounding almost every aspect, the narrative of St. Brice's Day Massacre would later be constructed within a narrow set of parameters, many of which still form the basis of literature on the Massacre to this day. This standard narrative was largely established not by the contemporary sources, but instead by the Anglo-Norman Chronicles and their view of the Massacre.

The Anglo-Norman Chronicles

The Anglo-Norman Chronicles are a tempting source of information for the scholar of the Massacre, because they are abundant, they were written under 200 years after the event, and they

¹³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 84, 86-87.

give a much clearer and more consistent explanation of the Massacre than the contemporary sources did. However, all of these chronicles were written after one of the most intense political upheavals in English history – the Norman Conquest – and they almost certainly were compiled without any primary evidence beyond the two sources discussed above. Only one chronicle, that of William of Jumièges, was written within living memory of the Massacre, and even then a child who was twelve years old at the time of the Massacre would have been eighty when the chronicle was written, making eyewitness accounts or even secondary but contemporary testimony an unlikely source for the Jumièges Chronicle.

William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, written around 1070, is the earliest of the Anglo-Norman sources on the Massacre, and yet it also gives the most theatrical and damning description of the St. Brice's Day Massacre and Aethelred's responsibility:

“But while, as we learnt above, under such a famous ruler [Richard, duke of Normandy] the prosperity of Normandy grew, Aethelred, king of the English defiled a kingdom that had long flourished under the great glory of most powerful kings with such a dreadful crime that in his own reign even the heathens [possibly the Danes] judged it as a detestable, shocking deed. For in a single day he had murdered, in a sudden fury and without charging them with any crime, the Danes who lived peacefully and quite harmoniously throughout the kingdom and who did not at all fear for their lives. He ordered women to be buried up to their waists and the nipples to be torn from their breasts by ferocious mastiffs set upon them. He also gave orders to crush little children against door-posts. When thus on the appointed day this outburst of violence, death and murder accumulated beyond measure, some quick and active young men took hold of a ship and fled, speedily rowing down the Thames out into the open sea. They crossed the wide sea and finally reached the harbor they sought in Denmark, and there they reported the bloody fate of their people to King

Swein ... when the king had heard the news, he quickly ordered all who lived in his kingdom to take up their arms.¹⁴

Jumièges' description was radical for several reasons. It was the first record of specific methods of violence – apart from the burning of the church described by Aethelred – supposedly used at the Massacre. It was the most brazen of all the accounts in accusing Aethelred of directly ordering the murder of women and children. This account not only offered no explanation for Aethelred's actions, but specifically states that he had no reason, where other chroniclers – such as Henry of Huntingdon (see below) – simply did not discuss any justification for Aethelred's order, leaving the proverbial door open for the idea that Aethelred may have had good reason for ordering the Massacre. Finally, Jumièges directly blamed the Massacre for Swein's decisive invasion of England that dethroned and exiled Aethelred in 1013, an invasion which Jumièges had conflated with an earlier, smaller invasion by Swein in 1003.¹⁵

By contrast, the Chronicle of Florence of Worcester, written after 1124, appeared to follow the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in its relatively unbiased and pithy description of the Massacre. The entire entry on the Massacre was only one sentence long:

The same year [1002] king Ethelred gave orders for the massacre of all the Danes of every age and both sexes, in consequence of their having conspired to deprive him and his nobles of their life and kingdom and reduce the whole of England under their dominion.¹⁶

¹⁴ William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* in *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Ordric Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni, Vol. II*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth M. C. Van Houts, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 15-17.

¹⁵ William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, 17, footnote 3.

¹⁶ Florence of Worcester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester with the two Continuations; Comprising Annals of English History, from the Departure of the Romans to the Reign of Edward I*, ed. and trans. Thomas Forester (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854), 114.

Upon closer inspection it may be seen that this entry did in fact implicate guilt, but its veiled judgements were so contradictory as to almost cancel each other out. The author described the Danes as having “conspired” against Aethelred, and accuses them of seeking “dominion” over England. Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s reading, the Worcester chronicle took the Danish treachery as fact, rather than as a belief of Aethelred’s which may or may not have been justified. And yet even as it accepted the Danes as treacherous, the Worcester Chronicle still depicted the Danes as the ultimate victims of Aethelred’s tyranny. First, the Chronicle used the word “massacre” to describe the events of St. Brice’s Day - the first recorded use of the term in the context of this event – implying that the Danes were killed indiscriminately. The clear implication of women and children being among the victims (who were “of every age and both sexes”), also deducted from Aethelred’s justification for the Massacre. These two contradictory assertions – that Aethelred was defending himself against traitors and that the Danes were killed mercilessly and indiscriminately –make it difficult to discern whether the author of the Worcester chronicle believed Aethelred or the Danes to have been the party at fault in the Massacre.

The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon, first published over a century after the Massacre in 1129, condemned Aethelred in no uncertain terms:

King Aethelred’s pride increased and his faithlessness grew: in a treacherous plot, he ordered all the Danes who were living peacefully in England to be put to death on the same day, namely the feast of St. Brice. Concerning this crime, in my childhood I heard a very old man say that the king had sent secret letters to every city, according to which the English either maimed all the unsuspecting Danes on the same day and hour with their swords, or, suddenly, at the same moment, captured them and destroyed them by fire.¹⁷

¹⁷ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 341.

Huntingdon's prose style was generally longer-winded and includes more descriptive elements than the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, so it was perhaps inevitable that he should pass ethical judgement on the events he recounted, but his account is much less equivocal than the Worcester Chronicle in condemning Aethelred. In describing the Massacre, he labeled the Danes in question as "peaceful," while Aethelred was "faithless" and "treacherous." The anecdote of the "secret letters" sent by Aethelred adds additional evidence to Huntingdon's argument that Aethelred's actions were examples of tyranny and betrayal, rather than an attack on a military enemy. In Huntingdon's Chronicle, the suspicion of treachery connected to the Massacre had fully migrated from the Danes to Aethelred.

William of Malmesbury, writing around 1140, was equally explicit in condemning Aethelred, though Malmesbury's account of the Massacre is very short:

Of the king's insolence I will now speak ... the Danes, all of whom in the whole of England he had ordered, on the strength of flimsy suspicions, to be murdered on the same day (and a pitiful sight it was when every man was compelled to betray his beloved guest-friends, whom he had made even more dear by close ties of relationship, and to disrupt those embraces with the sword) ...¹⁸

William of Malmesbury identified the victims of the Massacre as settlers of Danish descent who had integrated well into their new Anglo-Saxon home, describing them as the close friends of many an ordinary Anglo-Saxon. Yet, Malmesbury was also describing those ordinary Anglo-Saxons as the aggressors in the St. Brice's Day Massacre, describing the local residents themselves as the betrayers and wielders of swords, though their actions were implicitly attributed to governmental pressure. Malmesbury was clearly blaming Aethelred for the ultimate

¹⁸ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regnum Anglorum, Volume I*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 277.

corruption that would allow peaceful immigrants to be brutalized, but a more intriguing and possibly unsolvable question is why Malmesbury was so certain of the identities of the Danes as farmers.

The pattern of judgements made by the chroniclers discussed can be readily explained by their positions in the history of the Norman Conquest. The period during which these chronicles were written is important not only because it shows that most of our information comes from after the Massacre would have passed out of most living memory (William of Jumièges is the only chronicler who could have consulted witnesses in writing his account: a ten-year-old child in 1002 would have been 78 years old by 1070), but because the political climate of Anglo-Norman Britain would have encouraged portrayals of Aethelred II as a treacherous king. A negative portrayal of any Anglo-Saxon king would likely have been encouraged by the Anglo-Norman court, as the more defunct the previous dynasties seemed the easier Anglo-Norman power would have been to legitimize. Moreover, Aethelred's dethronement and exile would have made him an easy choice for deprecation: he was conquered by a superior military force, just as William conquered Harold Godwinson. Finally, the charge of treachery is an especially productive one to level against any political enemy, and especially a displaced regime. This is because the need for perfidious methods of ruling imply at once incompetence and defunct morals, painting the regime in question as the worst sort of ineffective rule. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that the most intensely anti-Aethelred account was written almost immediately after the Norman Conquest, when the political climate would have been the least stable and the need for pro-Norman propaganda would have been greatest. From William of Jumièges' vehement denunciation of Aethelred in 1070 through John of Worcester in 1124, Henry of Huntingdon in 1129 and William of Malmesbury in 1140, each chronicler was

necessarily influenced by this political context, and thus their accounts must be examined with extreme caution.

The Wider Field of Evidence

Direct evidence for the St. Brice's Day Massacre has long been exclusively textual, and the possibility of archaeological evidence for the Massacre is thus highly sought-after. An excavation undertaken in Oxford in 2008 may or may not be the first direct evidence of the Massacre, but either way it is an important contribution to the context of the event. In his report on the artifacts, Mark Pollard explains that the approximately 35 bodies found on the grounds of St. John's College in Oxford were initially connected to the Massacre by excavators because of the location of the site, the severe premortem traumas on the bodies, their burial in a mass grave without grave goods, and the evidence of charring on the bodies which did not appear to be connected with burial processes (in other words, the bodies had not been cremated, but rather the charring had occurred elsewhere before the bodies were buried).¹⁹ Unfortunately, due to the nature of archaeological preservation and the lack of definite information on the Massacre, it is currently impossible to determine whether the site represents victims of the Massacre. However, the site has much to tell us about the historical context of the Massacre, whether or not it is directly related.

The identity of the bodies is perhaps the aspect of this excavation with the most convincing evidence. The fact that all of the bodies except two can be identified as male, that they were all between their teen and middle years, that they were all more robust than average

¹⁹ A. M. Pollard, P. Ditchfield, E. Piva, S. Wallis, C. Falys and S. Ford, "Sprouting like Cockle Amongst The Wheat': The St. Brice's Day Massacre and the Isotopic Analysis of Human Bones from St. John's College, Oxford," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (2012), 84.

and possessed many old scars of healed wounds strongly suggests their identity as soldiers.²⁰ Their nationality is less clear, but there is moderately strong evidence that their diets were more marine than the average Anglo-Saxon diet, and thus suggests a Scandinavian origin.²¹ Perhaps the most convincing evidence that these men were not Anglo-Saxon is the fact that the bodies were buried in a mass grave, after having been stripped of goods.²² This disrespectful treatment suggests that the men were seen as outsiders by those who buried them. Most of these men, if Scandinavian, would have been Danish rather than Swedish or Norwegian,²³ but they also seem to have come from many different areas of Denmark and Scandinavia in general,²⁴ which supports the idea that they were a group of mercenary soldiers.

The date of their deaths is harder to determine, and this is this factor which makes it so difficult to determine whether the site is associated with the St. Brice's Day Massacre. Carbon dating of the remains has yielded a date several decades too early,²⁵ but the calibration of these dates is partially dependent on the diet of the subject being dated. Thus, the uncertainty noted above regarding the diets of the men introduces uncertainty into the carbon dating process. If the men had been raised on Scandinavian, rather than Anglo-Saxon, diets, then the newly calibrated dates would encompass the St. Brice's Day Massacre.²⁶ If these men were not victims of the massacre, then the site is likely the evidence of an earlier skirmish won by the Anglo-Saxons against the Danes,²⁷ and in this case the rough treatment of the bodies may inform our understanding of the political climate in which the St. Brice's Day Massacre occurred. Whether

²⁰ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 98.

²¹ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 91.

²² Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 84.

²³ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 95.

²⁴ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 97.

²⁵ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 85.

²⁶ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 92-93.

²⁷ Pollard et al., "Cockle Amongst the Wheat," 98.

the men buried at Oxford were the victims of the St. Brice's Day Massacre or the losing side of a skirmish between the English and the Danes, the site gives important context to an examination of the St. Brice's Day Massacre.

In discussing the Massacre, the question of the legality of the violence described is central to an understanding of the event and its historical meaning in its own time. Aethelred's description of the Danes burnt to death inside a church may seem an outrageous violation of the principle of Sanctuary, and thus an unlikely action to have been taken against any but those seen as total outsiders, such as Danish soldiers would have been. Thus the idea that the victims of the Massacre were local peasants of Danish descent may seem illogical. However, the act of burning down a church with criminals inside does not go directly against the principle of sanctuary, but rather skirts the border of Anglo-Saxon legality. The laws of King Alfred, the most contemporaneous king to comment on sanctuary, phrased the matter thusly:

5. Also, we set down for each church, which a bishop has consecrated, this peace: if a foeman runs or rides to it, that for seven nights no man may take him out, if he is able to live through the hunger, unless he fights out himself ...

5.2 The church elder shall be aware of that, that no food shall be given to him in that period of time.

5.3 If he himself desires to give out his weapons to his foes, they shall keep him 30 nights and they shall tell his kinsmen.²⁸

These laws do not explicitly prohibit harming a criminal claiming sanctuary within a church, but only the forcible removal of the criminal from the church before his time of clemency is up. Law 5.2 states that church officials cannot provide food to such a criminal, suggesting that no one

²⁸ King Alfred, *Domboc* in *King Alfred's Book of Laws: A Study of the Domboc and Its Influence on English Identity, with a Complete Translation*, ed. and trans. Todd Preston (London: McFarland & co., 2012), 114-115.

should feel obligated to help him because of his claim of sanctuary. However, law 5.3, stating that a criminal who willingly gives up his weapons should be allowed a longer term of clemency and his family contacted for him, suggests that criminals behaving well should not be harassed. These tones underlying Alfred's sanctuary laws leave a criminal claiming sanctuary in a decidedly enigmatic position. The letter of the law provides him with very little protection for his claim of sanctuary. By Alfred's laws, then, the burning of a church with people inside was not explicitly illegal, and thus Aethelred's account of the St. Brice's Day Massacre depicts an event of ambiguous legality.

The Many Faces of the Massacre

Once the artificial narratives of the Anglo-Norman Chronicles have been largely discarded, the field of evidence related to the St. Brice's Day Massacre may seem so ambiguous as to be more or less useless. It is tempting to conclude that we can never know the true meaning or significance of the Massacre, and that further study is thus an exercise in futility. Although the exact nature of the Massacre may never be conclusively established, a thorough examination of the full range of possibilities regarding the Massacre reveals myriad narratives and interpretations, the full study of which must be undertaken by any scholar hoping to explain the St. Brice's Day Massacre. As a case study, one may examine the question of identifying the victims of the Massacre, universally identified by textual sources as "Danes," a question which is crucial to any interpretation of the event and its place in history.

Perhaps the most obvious meaning for the term "Danes" in England in 1002 would be Swein Forkbeard's soldiers conducting raids on border and coastal English towns. This identification of the victims of the St. Brice's Day Massacre may seem to present the most

straightforward historical interpretation as well. Oxford was close enough to the Danelaw border that a raid from the Danelaw on the town is conceivable. These Danes would have been enemies of Aethelred's government, it would have been justifiable or even admirable for the residents of Oxfordshire to attack these foes. However, this reading of the Massacre is unlikely for several reasons. If the Danes in question were in fact Swein's soldiers, then a special order for their destruction would seem premature: Swein did not begin earnest efforts at conquering England outside the Danelaw until 1003.²⁹ Oxford may or may not have been close enough to the Danelaw to be in danger from routine Danish raids, but Aethelred's order was addressed to the English generally, not only to residents of Oxford. If one supposes that Danish soldiers *were* in Oxfordshire in 1002 for whatever reason, it seems unlikely that the local citizenry would be able to overpower these soldiers, considering how successful the Danish raids on England had been up to this point (and how successful they continued to be after 1002).³⁰ Although Danish soldiers may have raided Oxford in 1002, it is implausible either that residents of the town would have been able to attack the soldiers as Aethelred described, or that Aethelred's order was directed at invading Danish soldiers.

If the Danes that Aethelred wanted destroyed weren't Swein's soldiers, then they may have been settlers of Danish descent, who had emigrated from Denmark and the Danelaw and become ordinary peasants. In her article "Scandinavian Settlement", Dawn Hadley shows that Scandinavians had been settling in England since the late 800s.³¹ These settlers would probably have intermarried with the Anglo-Saxon population, and thus the two groups would have been

²⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 86.

³⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 87.

³¹ Dawn Hadley, "Scandinavian Settlement," in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500-c. 1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 212.

difficult to distinguish by 1002, over a century later.³² The relative assimilation which must have been achieved by many of these Danes and their descendants supports the vehemence with which the Massacre was condemned by Anglo-Norman Chroniclers, but also makes them unlikely targets of Aethelred's order. If Aethelred did hear rumors of unrest among the Danish peasants, then there is little reason for him to have tried to deprive them of power by having them killed – peasants, especially as far away as Oxford, would already have had little power. It is conceivable that Aethelred could have heard convincing rumors of a generalized uprising among all of England's peasants of Danish descent and ordered them killed to forstall such a possibility. However, in that event one still must wonder why Aethelred's order would have been carried out only in Oxford and nowhere else. There is no practical reason why the Danish peasants in Oxford should have been singled out as less trustworthy than others, and if the order was indeed directed at the entire country of England, then there is no reason why it should only have been carried out only in Oxford. If ethnic hatred resulting in a local riot was the cause of the Massacre, rather than Aethelred's order, there is again no explanation for the extremely localized nature of these hypothetical ethnic tensions. There is no record of similar confrontations between peasants of Danish and Anglo-Saxon descent in or near 1002, and thus it is unlikely that the St. Brice's Day Massacre was such a confrontation.

The Danes killed in the massacre may have instead been Danish mercenaries under Aethelred's employ. In his book *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England 991-1017*, Ian Howard argues that the practice of hiring mercenary soldiers was common in Aethelred's time, and that there is circumstantial and some textual evidence for

³² Hadley, "Scandinavian Settlement," 218.

Aethelred's having hired Danish soldiers after they were defeated in battle against him.³³ This hypothesis provides a neat explanation for Aethelred's mistrust of the Danes cited both by his charter of 1004 and by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.³⁴ If the Danes at the Massacre were Swein's soldiers, then it would seem obvious that Aethelred would never have trusted them, and the explanation that the Danes were killed because Aethelred suddenly began to suspect them of treason makes little sense. If the Danes in question were instead immigrant farmers, then Aethelred's initial trust of them might be more logical – however, his sudden policy shift would have still been rather nonsensical. However, if the Danes killed on St. Brice's Day were Aethelred's Danish mercenaries, then the situation appears more linear. Howard describes Aethelred's close relationship with the commander of his first Danish mercenaries, and his later mistrust of those same mercenaries after their leader's death. Then, in 1001, Pallig, Aethelred's mercenary general and king Swein's brother-in-law, defected to the Danes.³⁵ This series of events would seem to provide good reasons for Aethelred to mistrust his Danish mercenaries' loyalty. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Aethelred was still trying to pay off Swein's forces in 1002,³⁶ but if Aethelred's order against the Danes later in the year represented the first action of his new approach to the Danish problem – that is, dispensing with diplomacy, bribery and mercenaries and instead mounting a full-scale military defense against all the Danes with his own English soldiers – then a generalized order that all the Danes in England be destroyed may have been Aethelred's way of getting his new policy out to as many officials and as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is significantly weakened by an examination of the

³³ Ian Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions*, 60.

³⁴ King Aethelred II, "Renewal for the Monastery of St. Frideswide," 545; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 86.

³⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 85.

³⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 86.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's entries for the years immediately following the Massacre. The Chronicle recounts how Aethelred began hiring Danish mercenaries again at least as early as 1012, an action that directly conflicts with the idea that Aethelred had lost faith in the safety of hiring Danish mercenaries.³⁷ Many intriguing possible explanations exist for the St. Brice's Day Massacre, which have only been touched on here. Although the ambiguity of the sources makes a study of the event difficult, these ambiguities must be explored and analyzed before the Massacre can have any hope of being properly contextualized.

The St. Brice's Day Massacre has gone down in history as an atrocity committed against peaceful Danes, and as an example of the inadequacy of Aethelred II's government. This reputation is mostly due to the accounts of the Massacre in the chronicles, as they form the main body of historical evidence on the subject, and the majority of chronicles, particularly those written after the Norman Conquest, paint a grim picture of the atrocities committed by Aethelred against the Danes. However, a close reading of Aethelred's charter of 1004 and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle raise doubts about the logistics of the Massacre, and further inquiry into the nature of Sanctuary laws and the Danish settlement in England show that the Massacre was most likely an isolated incident in Oxford, and may have involved Aethelred's Danish mercenaries rather than local peasants. Even this hypothesis does not completely explain the many inconsistencies present in every record of the event. The St. Brice's Day Massacre has been examined from an extremely restrictive viewpoint, and it is necessary to fully unpack the many layers of evidence in order to properly contextualize the St. Brice's Day Massacre.

³⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Whitelock, 91-92.

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