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Heathens to Christians: Exploring Norse Interactions with Anglo-Saxons and Notions of Medieval Identity

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Exploring Norse Interactions with Anglo-Saxons and Notions of Medieval Identity

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Abstract

The Viking Age lasted from approximately the 8th century CE to the 11th century CE, and throughout this period Norse people raided, traded, settled, farmed, and came to political power in the British Isles. Due to Norse culture being predominantly oral rather than written, there is limited documentation of early Norse activities by the Norse themselves. For most of this period, surviving records about Norse activity in Britain come from the Anglo-Saxons. Because a lot of early Norse interactions in the British Isles were raids on Christian monasteries, these Anglo-Saxon accounts painted the Norse as merciless murderers who wanted to punish Christians. However, this perception of Norse intent was inherently distorted and was clouded by misconceptions. As Norse people began to settle in Britain, these interactions fundamentally changed, and emerged from this continued contact was new conceptions of Anglo-Saxon and Norse identity. This research project explores the changes in Anglo-Saxon perceptions of identity as they confronted Norse identity through continued interactions with them.

Introduction

In 1027 CE, King Cnut of England, Denmark, and Norway (r. 1016 CE-1035 CE)

traveled to Rome to pray for the remission of his sins and the protection of all people

under his rule. Cnut explained this journey and his interactions with Pope John XIX and

other important European political figures in his letter to the people of England.[1]

Preserved within two different chronicles, Cnut's letter assured his subjects in England

of his devotion to them as their king.[2] Notably, Cnut was not born in the British Isles. In

fact, Cnut was Danish, and his family contributed to a then centuries-long tradition of

Norse invasions in Britain.

King Cnut's family members were not the only Norsemen who invaded Britain;

unknown Norse people orchestrated many raids on Britain beginning in the late eighth

century.[3] The first recorded attack on Britain at the monastery of Lindisfarne off the

eastern coast noted that this raid was the result of several different foreboding omens

including a famine, lightning, and fiery dragons in the sky.[4] What was clear about this

first raid was that life in the British Isles was changing yet again. A series of invasions

and settlements of various groups of people had shaped England's early history, and the

Norse invasions contributed to a subsequent series of changes in politics, culture, and

social climate. As the Norse continued their activities in the British Isles during the

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[1] King Cnut, "Cnut's Letter of 1027," in *English Historical Documents Volume 1: c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 416-418.

[2] King Cnut, "Cnut's Letter of 1027," 416-418.

[3] For the purposes of this paper, the words Norse and Norsemen will be used to describe the population of travelers from Scandinavia. Rather than using the word "viking," which has its own connotations and implications, "Norse" offers a descriptive yet accurate account of the multitude of fluid identities that existed within this population.

[4] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. Anne Savage, (Surrey: Coombe Books, 1996), 73.

eighth through eleventh centuries, Anglo-Saxons questioned their own identity when confronted with this foreign culture, especially as the Norse and Anglo-Saxon relationship developed from raiding to settlement and integration.

Early scholarship on the Norse and their activities in the British Isles painted the Norsemen just as the medieval authors did: as merciless, pillaging barbarians with little to offer in terms of culture.[5] As the twentieth century progressed and more archaeological excavations took place, archaeological evidence became a rich source of information about Norse activities apart from raiding and pillaging. Peter Sawyer was the principal scholar who offered these new perspectives, reshaping how historians approached the Norse. In the second half of the 20th century, Sawyer sparked the conversation about the significance of Norse impact on Anglo-Saxon society and culture through settlement, prompting scholars to rethink how historians had previously approached Norse history during this period.[6] Since Sawyer, scholars have turned away from depicting the Norse as uncivilized, raiding barbarians and have embraced the trading, commercial Norseman. Increasingly, scholars like Dawn Hadley have adopted an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing material culture in tandem with medieval texts to develop theories regarding medieval ethnicity. Hadley's interdisciplinary approach is most influential on this project. This paper applies archaeological evidence and seeks to

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[5] Some of these scholars include F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947); Norman F. Cantor, *The English: A Review of Politics and Society to 1760* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).

[6] P.H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (London: Arnold, 1962); P.H. Sawyer, "The Density of the Danish Settlement in England," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 6, no. 1 (1958): 1-17.

analyze medieval texts critically to uncover how the Anglo-Saxons' understanding of the Norse evolved over three centuries.

From the first known contact between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons in 793 CE to the end of King Cnut's reign at his death in 1035 CE, the Norse had raided, traded, and settled in England. The earliest form of contact between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons were raids. Because many of the attacks were on monasteries, the Anglo-Saxons saw the Norse not only as threats to England but also as threats to Christianity. Since many of the surviving records of these attacks were produced at Christian monasteries, some medieval authors also understood the raids as punishment from God.[7] Though most Norse raiders and early Norse settlers were pagans, many began to convert to Christianity by the tenth century as Norse settlements within the British Isles became more established and trading interactions increased. By 878 CE Norse territories had become established within the region of the Danelaw as part of the treaty between King Alfred of Wessex and the Norse ruler, Guthrum. [see Map 1].[8] Though peace was determined as part of this treaty, raiding continued and the peace did not last. Raiding and political turmoil contributed to the growing hostility between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons.

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[7] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793" in *The Viking Age: A Reader*, ed. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 232-234; Simon Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath or the People of God's Wrath? The Carolingian Theology of the Viking Invasions," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42, no. 4 (October 1991): 535-554.

[8] "The Treaty Between Alfred and Guthrum," in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin Group, 1983), 171-172; David Beard, "The Boundary of the Danelaw" (map), Viking Archaeology, http://viking.archeurope.info/index.php?page=the-danelaw-map.

During the ninth through eleventh centuries, the Norse adopted elements of Anglo-Saxon culture, but they were still widely regarded as an "Other." Challenging for the modern researcher, medieval authors were not clear or specific about the various terms they used to describe these populations. Though many authors used "Danes" as a catch-all term, it was likely that not all the people they were describing came from Denmark; some may have been from the areas that are now known as Sweden and Norway. Despite their possible differences in geographic origin, there was something about the Norse that was different enough from local Anglo-Saxon populations that warranted the distinction in the minds of medieval English authors. It is unclear what exactly made the Norse such a distinct group of people, even after settling in England and converting to Christianity, but perhaps it was a combination of differences in language, customs, dress, or other behaviors. Norse settlers had become part of the Anglo-Saxon world. They farmed the English land, established settlements at trading ports to expand commercial activity, intermarried with Anglo-Saxons, and left a mark on the English language. They became part of Anglo-Saxon life, but there was something still uniquely Norse about them. It is evident that although they adopted Anglo-Saxon culture, they retained distinct qualities that separated them from the Anglo-Saxons who also lived in those areas. From the perspective of Anglo-Saxons, although the Norse integrated into Anglo-Saxon society, the Norse had not been assimilated.

Historical Context

The Norse during the Viking Age (793 CE-1066 CE) were accomplished travelers. Traveling to different parts of the world, they visited lands eastward to Russia and Constantinople, south to the Mediterranean, and as far west as North America. For the majority of the Viking Age, many surviving records about Norse activity came from non-Scandinavian peoples. Many of these surviving texts of Norse contact with Britain were recorded by monks at Christian monasteries. In contemporary works by those in the British Isles such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, the Norse were depicted as ruthless killers and enemies of Christianity.[9] The violent nature of Norse raids accounted for this perception.

The Anglo-Saxons' misconceptions about the motives for Norse attacks began even at the first recorded raid in Britain. The first record of Norse contact with Anglo-Saxons in Britain appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, which was compiled by monks beginning in the late eighth century.[10] According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, in the year 793 CE, "heathen men destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne," off of the eastern coast of the isle of Britain.[11] This entry for the year 793 CE is fraught with apocalyptic descriptions of omens, such as whirlwinds and fiery dragons, culminating in the Norse attack at Lindisfarne. Although another interaction between the Norse and Anglo-Saxons, as noted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* in 789 CE, was the murder of an Anglo-

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[9] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 73.

[10] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 4. Alfred the Great of Wessex was known for many things including uniting the independent regions of Britain under one nation. He reigned as king of Wessex 871 CE-886 CE and as king of the Anglo-Saxons 886 CE-899 CE.

[11] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 73.

Saxon reeve, the 793 CE account portrayed a threat that went beyond an individual killing. As the medieval authors viewed it, the attack at the Lindisfarne monastery signaled a threat to the island as a whole and a greater threat to Christianity.

The difference in religious identity was a primary cause for religiously charged explanations of Norse violence. If the Norse at this time had also been Christian, they would not have been identified primarily as "heathens." In this and other early texts that note Norse attacks, Christian authors described them pejoratively as "heathens" or "pagans," indicating how medieval authors categorized people according to their religious views. Christian authors thought the Norsemen were primarily concerned with despoiling God's churches of religious relics and artifacts. Offering another interpretation, in a letter from the clergyman, Alcuin of York, to the king of Northumbria, he suggested that the Norse attack at the Lindisfarne monastery was a punishment from God for their sins, where the Norse acted as a vehicle for that punishment.[12] This concept was a common rationalization among authors in the ninth century as Simon Coupland notes in his article, "Rod of God's Wrath."[13] Despite what these sources indicated as the cause of the Norse attacks, it is unlikely that the Norse were motivated to destroy Christian sites simply for the sake of destroying Christian sites. In actuality, it is unlikely the Norsemen knew the extent of the spiritual and religious value of the objects. Since the Norse were pagan at this time of early contacts

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[12] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 232-234.
[13] Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath," 535-554.

with Britain, they would not know much, if anything, about Christianity.[14] It is very

possible that the Norse simply took the objects because they were beautifully decorated

and something they could use to make money.

As interactions between the Norse and Anglo-Saxons continued and increased,

some Norsemen tried to smooth over some of these conflicts. Religion was a key

method for this appeasement. Many Norse traders converted to Christianity to make

trade interactions easier because Christians at this time were more likely to trade with

someone who ascribed to their same religion. Other Norse people began to convert to

Christianity as a result of settling in the British Isles and the continued contact with

Anglo-Saxons.

The first record of Norse settlement on the island comes from the *Anglo-Saxon*

Chronicles when in 851 CE, a group of Norse warriors stayed the winter in Canterbury

after fighting a battle with a group of Anglo-Saxons.[15] After these initial winter camps,

which occurred regularly, groups of Norse settlers established settlements throughout a

large area of the island. Since medieval authors were inexact in quantifying the sizes of

these settlements, researchers are left to read between the lines to unearth small

details about life during this period. As raiding and trading interactions between Anglo-

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[14] Before the introduction of Christianity, Norse religion was polytheistic, meaning they worshiped multiple gods. Because of the traditional oral culture of Norse society, not much about pre-Christian Norse religion was documented during the time it was practiced. Today's understanding of this pre-Christian religion is primarily based on later sources, such as the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, which were compiled several hundred years after the introduction to Christianity in Iceland. Because of this distance in time of practice and documentation, there was an inherent Christian influence on the record of pre-Christian Norse religion.

[15] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 88.

Saxons and the Norse continued, the establishment of the Danelaw as part of the

"Alfred-Guthrum Treaty" in 878 CE signified the increase of Norse settlement in Britain.

Before 927 CE, Britain was comprised of many independent kingdoms, all with

different rulers, politics, and social climates. [see Map 2][16] These regions of the island

competed with each other for control of sects of land. Norse raids put tensions on these

complex relationships. While raiding increased, Norse leaders defeated Anglo-Saxon

kings to gain control of Northumbria in 867 CE, East Anglia in 869 CE, and most of

Mercia in the 870s. Following the Battle of Edington in 878 CE between the Norse and

Anglo-Saxon forces, King Alfred of Wessex and the Norse ruler, Guthrum, signed the

treaty establishing the boundaries of the area known as the Danelaw. Through the end

of the ninth century and into the beginning of the tenth century, Anglo-Saxons

continued to fight with the Norse. In 927 CE, Æthelstan united the region under one

kingdom—England.

Norse invasions continued throughout the rest of the century, and Anglo-Saxon

rulers began to pay Danegeld to the Norse as a preventive measure of Norse attacks.

However, this system was not sustainable since several groups of Norsemen raided

England around the same time. Paying off one of the Norse raiding parties did nothing

to ward off attacks from another. Because these violent interactions continued, Anglo-

Saxon power over England was weakening. By 1016 CE, Cnut, a Danish-born Norseman

became king of England, and the country was forever changed.

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[16] Cristian Ionita, "The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, ca. 800" (map), edmaps.com, https://www.edmaps.com/html/world-history-maps.html.

Historiography

Over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, the study of Anglo-Saxon and Norse British Isles has changed to emphasize different aspects of the interactions between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons. By breaking down the scholarship on Anglo-Norse England, one can uncover related approaches, methodologies, and trends of scholarship on this topic. Considering the historiography of Anglo-Saxon England in the Viking Age (793 CE-1066 CE), in current scholarship, historians no longer view vikings as primitive, and many scholars have embraced a more anthropological approach to medieval history. There is a great need for interdisciplinary approaches to this topic since solely textual analyses no longer measure up; medieval historians studying Norse settlement in Anglo-Saxon England now incorporate techniques and processes from other fields such as archaeology and anthropology. This research project will draw heavily on archaeological findings and anthropological approaches to explore notions of medieval identity in Anglo-Norse England.

Politics and political circumstances are widely discussed topics in Anglo-Norse historiography from the earliest days of Anglo-Saxon scholarship into the twenty-first century. One such historian, F.M. Stenton emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. In his 1947 book, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Stenton provides an in-depth account of Anglo-Saxon England.[17] Stenton drew most of his source material from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, of which he was by and large uncritical. In his view of the invading Norse who later became rulers in England, he saw them more like a minor nuisance in

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[17] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*.

the grand scope of English history. He did not believe that the Norse had a significant impact on Anglo-Saxon society, beyond some lasting place names. Stenton had a large influence on the field of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, and because of his long career and many writings, scholars today still thoughtfully incorporate his research into their own writings. However, Stenton's lack of criticism of medieval texts gives reason for pause. Rather than taking the medieval sources at face value like many earlier Anglo-Saxon scholars, this thesis will be skeptical of what sources convey as factual information. However, since the sources are laden with bias, these perspectives from the medieval authors have become central to the analysis in this project. Though this thesis will incorporate political elements of Anglo-Saxon England and analyze medieval political texts, the research project will explore beyond the upper levels of society in the British Isles to uncover perspectives at multiple levels in society.

Norse settlement and influence in Anglo-Saxon England has also become widely debated among scholars. Prominent British historian, Peter Sawyer, published some of the most influential works on viking age England in the middle of the twentieth century. His 1958 paper, "The Density of the Danish Settlement in England," established the continuing debate about the effects of Norse settlement in England.[18] His paper in addition to his book *The Age of the Vikings*, first published in 1962, sparked the conversation, prompting more scholars to rethink how historians had previously

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[18] Sawyer, "The Density of the Danish Settlement in England;" Simon Trafford, "Ethnicity, Migrations Theory, and the Historiography of the Scandinavian Settlement of England," in *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 18.

approached Norse history during this period.[19] Sawyer's analysis highlighted the

economically motivated trading viking, which placed vikings on a similar level to those

who are thought of as the ancestors of the English and the French. Thus, Sawyer implied

that the vikings were not as barbaric and primitive as scholars had previously thought.

Peter Sawyer's *The Age of the Vikings* greatly influenced the scholarship on Anglo-Norse

history and viking history more broadly.

Archaeological evidence is one of the most convincing forms of evidence for

Norse settlement in England during the Anglo-Saxon period. In the 1960s and 1970s,

major archaeological excavations in England provided a wealth of material culture

representative of the Anglo-Saxon period. These excavations created opportunities for

further research into Norse settlements in these areas. Prominent archaeologist,

Richard Hall, discussed the findings at the excavations at York in his 1984 book, *The*

Viking Dig.[20] Hall asserted that York was able to become this commercial center during

the ninth century largely thanks to the settlement and trading culture of the Norse.[21]

Because of the wealth of material culture related to the Norse interactions with York, it

is clear that they had a profound impact on the area to develop York as a commercial

center. Through his discussions of the findings at York, Hall built upon Sawyer's

emphasis on the trading Norseman as opposed to the raiding Norseman. Hall, as an

archaeologist, provided needed insight into the material culture of Anglo-Saxon and

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[19] Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*.

[20] Richard Hall, *The Viking Dig: Excavations at York.* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1984). The excavations at Jorvik at Coppergate occurred between 1976-1981.

[21] Hall, *The Viking Dig,* 49-66.

Norse life during this period. With physical evidence of trading activities, Sawyer's ideas

were even more solidified. In this project, Hall's interpretations of the findings at York

have been crucial to understanding the material culture of the commercial center and

how the Anglo-Saxons and the Norse interacted with each other.

The most relevant discussions for this research project are related to notions of

medieval identity and ethnicity. Apart from Romantic and Nationalist movements in the

19th century, scholarly considerations about medieval ethnicity are relatively recent.

Reinhard Wenskus began the discussion about late antique and medieval ethnicity

during the mid-twentieth century with his book, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*,

1961.[22] In this book, Wenskus, a German historian, explored the ethnic identity of

medieval Germanic peoples and asserted that rather than being connected through a

biological common origin, their sense of collective identity was based on elite political

leaders who maintained a set of traditions; this idea countered previous Aryan

ideology.[23] From Wenskus' jumping-off point, other scholars including Walter Pohl

joined this conversation to form a school of revisionist thought known as the Vienna

School.[24] Pohl and Wenskus were both interested in an interdisciplinary approach to

history, especially considering ethnicity, so they utilized approaches from other fields

such as anthropology, sociology, and archaeology. Incorporating ideas from other

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[22] Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* (Köln: Böhlau, 1961).

[23] Francesco Filotico, "Reinhard Wenskus and the Concept of Ethnicity in the Age of Barbarian Invasions," in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 95, no. 3 (September 2011): 787-826, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291860396_Reinhard_Wenskus_and_the_concept_of_ethnicity_in_the_age_of_barbarian_invasions.

[24] Walter Pohl, "Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response," in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Andrew Gillett (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002), 221-239.

disciplines strengthens the analysis and helps the researcher become more critical of their primary sources since often with medieval texts, the archaeological evidence from more recent discussion suggests different outcomes than what the medieval authors wrote.

For some scholars, the conversation of ethnic identity highlighted aspects of the continued conversations about Norse settlement in the British Isles. Historian Simon Trafford published an essay within the *Cultures in Contact* anthology of 2000 titled "Ethnicity, Migrations Theory, and the Historiography of the Scandinavian Settlement of England."[25] Trafford argued that early medieval ethnicity is very complex, but historians have been stuck in a binary mode of thinking about this topic that promotes rigid ethnic boundaries.[26] In reality, the ethnic identities would have been more fluid. Trafford critiques historians for asserting that there were harsh boundaries between Anglo-Saxons and the Norse in terms of ethnicity as expressed in early medieval questions of ethnogenesis.[27] He explains that scholarship about Norse settlement in England has not developed to explore this fluidity; the past fifty years of scholarship on Norse settlement in England since Sawyer's 1958 paper has failed to progress or move forward to explore new ideas surrounding ethnicity and migration theory.[28] According to Trafford, to actively pursue new scholarship and thoroughly develop this field, there needs to be a

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[25] Trafford, "Ethnicity, Migrations Theory, and the Historiography of the Scandinavian Settlement of England," 17-33.

[26] Trafford, "Ethnicity, Migrations Theory, and the Historiography of the Scandinavian Settlement of England," 17.

[27] For more, see Wenskus.

[28] Trafford, "Ethnicity, Migrations Theory, and the Historiography of the Scandinavian Settlement of England," 18.

wider interdisciplinary approach with open communication across disciplines. Trafford's thoughts regarding the complexities of medieval identity have become an important lens when researching this project. By understanding the many layers and factors that contribute to Anglo-Norse identities, this project can provide a more rounded account of medieval texts.

This discussion on medieval ethnic identity has become more and more discussed in Anglo-Saxon historiography as it catches up to the discussion in other medieval topics. Historian Dawn Hadley also explored medieval identity in Anglo-Saxon England in her article "In Search of the Vikings" published in the *Vikings in the Danelaw* anthology of 2001.[29] Hadley provides a thoughtful discussion on the evolution of scholarly thought regarding Norse ethnicity in medieval England. She explores group identities of Norse settlers and suggests that more relevant questions for this evaluation of medieval ethnicity would assess the ways Norse settlers were accommodated and/or assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society.

Hadley also notes that the best way to explore these research questions about ethnicity in medieval England is to utilize an interdisciplinary approach. In a more recent article of 2017, "Ethnicity on the Move: New Evidence from Viking Winter Camps," published in *Entangled Identities and Otherness in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe*, Hadley explores the past scholarship on "Anglo-Scandinavian" notions of

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[29] D.M. Hadley, "In Search of the Vikings," in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21-30 August 1997*, ed. James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch and David N. Parsons (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), 13-30.

ethnicity.[30] By bringing in new evidence from viking winter camps of the 860s and 870s,

she highlights the ongoing need for an overall interdisciplinary approach to medieval

ethnicity to better understand the obscured history.[31] Hadley argues that the first

generations of viking settlers were very adaptable and flexible with their

identity/practices to fit in with the Anglo-Saxon majority. This theory makes it more

challenging to determine the influence and change in identities of later waves of Norse

settlers because it indicates that the viking settlers were able to change the way they

expressed their identity depending on their situation. Hadley in particular has greatly

influenced this research project; specifically, her approach to medieval ethnicity through

interdisciplinary research has shaped the approach to this paper.

Regarding the current state of scholarship of Anglo-Norse England, it becomes

clear that the questions scholars were addressing for the better half of the twentieth

century are questions scholars are still addressing today. Many recent scholars have

incorporated the use of documents in concordance with material culture in their

analyses, especially in conversations of identity. This thesis project will attempt to

incorporate an interdisciplinary approach, but it will mostly rely on secondary

scholarship as expressed through archaeologists such as Richard Hall. Scholars like

Trafford and Hadley's ideas about diffusion and the evolution of identity are particularly

influential to the discussions in this project. From the many years of scholarship on

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[30] Dawn Hadley, "Ethnicity on the Move: New Evidence from Viking Winter Camps," in *Entangled Identities and Otherness in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe*, ed. J.L. Quiroga, M. Kazanski, and V. Ivanišević (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017): 1-17 http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/115083/.
[31] Hadley, "Ethnicity on the Move," 2.

Anglo-Saxon England, this research will contribute to the ongoing discussion of medieval

Anglo-Norse identities by exploring how those notions of identity changed over time.

Norse Raiding and Trading in Britain

Because early Norse interactions in the British Isles were based around raiding, it

was difficult for the Anglo-Saxons to see the potential for trading relationships, which

developed during the ninth century. Misunderstandings and a lack of awareness of the

other's culture and religious identity characterized the interpretations of these early

interactions between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons. As interactions between the

Norse and Anglo-Saxons continued through the eleventh century, more cooperative

trading relationships developed, which expanded England's trading network and

boosted the economy in major medieval trading cities like York. Eventually, Anglo-Saxon

and Norse commercial relationships beyond raiding became a significant aspect of the

cultural climate in the British Isles; however, Norse raids fundamentally shaped how

Anglo-Saxons understood the Norsemen.

Because medieval authors in the British Isles were influenced by their own

experiences with the Norse as violent non-Christians, most of the surviving texts from

this period offer a distorted view of Norse intentions and causality. Since the Norse

travelers during the early period of raiding were not Christian, contemporary Anglo-

Saxon authors, who were primarily monks, found this difference in religious identity to

be a distinguishing quality of Norse raiding and Anglo-Norse relationships more broadly.

Some of the Anglo-Saxon documents understood the Norse raids as the Norse wanting

to destroy Christians and Christianity itself. In his letter to the king Æthelred I of

Northumbria, Alcuin of York responded to the Norse raid at Lindisfarne in 793 CE.[32]

Alcuin, a clergyman and scholar, blamed the viking attack on the Anglo-Saxons' sins

throughout the kingdom.[33] Being from Northumbria, Alcuin had personal ties to the

area, signifying that he was not just distressed that there was an attack at a monastery;

Alcuin was dismayed that this raid happened at a place he cared deeply about. He

criticized Æthelred for being too prideful and greedy, for not caring about those who

were poor.[34] Alcuin shamed Æthelred because he had allowed his people to style their

hair like the Norse.[35] His solution to prevent another attack from the Norse was for the

Anglo-Saxons to uphold good Christian virtues.[36] He suggested that the Norse attack at

Lindisfarne monastery was a punishment from God for Northumbrian sins, where the

Norse acted as a vehicle for that punishment.[37] By repenting for their sins, reforming

their habits, and caring for the poor, Alcuin argued that they can prevent another attack

from the Norse.[38]

Additionally, in Alcuin's letter to Bishop Higbald and the entire monastic

community at Lindisfarne, he similarly criticized the monks there for their way of dress,

drunkenness, and immoral behavior.[39] Again, Alcuin's solution was to repent and reform

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[32] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 232-234.

[33] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 232-234.

[34] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 233.

[35] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 233.

[36] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 234.

[37] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 232-234.

[38] Alcuin of York, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred 793," 234.

[39] Alcuin of York, "On the Sack of Lindisfarne by the Northmen in 793," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton (Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 2004) 123-125.

their habits to prevent another Norse raid, or as he saw it, prevent punishment from God.[40] This concept was a common rationalization among ninth-century authors as Simon Coupland notes in his article, "Rod of God's Wrath."[41] Alcuin was not alone in this rationalization. According to Coupland, other medieval authors suggested that God was angry with the impious Christian people on whom hardship befell; in Frankia, medieval Carolingian authors believed God sent Norse raiders as a terrible punishment for sin "in fulfillment of biblical prophecy."[42] Despite what these sources indicated as the cause of the Norse attacks, it is unlikely that the Norse were vengeful pagans motivated to destroy Christian sites simply for the sake of destroying Christian sites. This discrepancy on the part of Anglo-Saxon authors demonstrates how they were frightened by the threat of Norse attacks on Christianity. Religious belief was central to these monks' identity, and to them, the possibility that Norse raids would weaken their system of faith was alarming.

Anglo-Saxon texts that portrayed the Norse in an extremely negative light due to their non-Christian identity contributed to the growing fear of the Norse. For example, some religious texts took advantage of the fact that the Norse were pagan to teach lessons about Christian morality. Abbo of Fleury, a French monk who lived in England from 985 CE-987 CE, wrote the *vita*, "Life of St. Edmund, King of East Anglia before 870."[43] This hagiography tells the life of Saint Edmund, or Edmund the Martyr, who,

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[40] Alcuin of York, "On the Sack of Lindisfarne by the Northmen in 793."

[41] Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath," 535-554.

[42] Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath," 535.

[43] Abbo of Fleury, "Life of St. Edmund, King of East Anglia before 870," *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/870abbo-edmund.asp.

according to the source, was murdered by Norse pirates.[44] The text notes that because

Edmund would not forsake Christ and submit to Ivar, the Norse pirate leader, Ivar and

the other "heathens" decapitated him.[45] They threw Edmund's head into the woods

where it was discovered and retrieved by a peaceful wolf because the head continued to

talk.[46] The local people "erected a marker" there and noted the significance of St.

Edmund who died at the hands of the Norse pagans in immovable devotion to the

Christian God.[47] The church that was established at this site had become one of the

most prominent pilgrimage sites in England in the Middle Ages.

      Due to the nature of hagiographies, one must consider how Christian bias

affected this portrayal of the Norse. Thomas Head explains that "the aim of

hagiographers was not to produce biography in the modern sense, but rather sought to

portray a saint as an exemplar of Christian life."[48] Therefore it is likely not everything in

a given vita is entirely historically accurate. Because the hagiographers were trying to

convey moral messages, the saints were portrayed as models of Christian behavior to

give lay and clerical audiences something to try to aspire to. Missionaries and clergymen

used these stories to inspire non-Christians, including the Norse, to convert to

Christianity or to inspire Christians to uphold certain virtues. Medieval saints showcase

significant and evolving aspects of morality in the Middle Ages. While it may be

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[44] Abbo of Fleury, "Life of St. Edmund."
[45] Abbo of Fleury, "Life of St. Edmund."
[46] Abbo of Fleury, "Life of St. Edmund."
[47] Abbo of Fleury, "Life of St. Edmund."
[48] Thomas Head, "Hagiography," *The ORB. The On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies,* College of Staten Island, City University of New York, http://the-orb.arlima.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/hagio.htm.

challenging to determine what is factually accurate and what is not, sources of this

genre demonstrate very well the moral values of the author and the culture in which

they lived.[49] *Vitae* can uncover not only what was considered a moral ideal but also

what medieval clerical authors considered grounds for moral condemnation. Used

primarily as a teaching tool for Christians (and potential converts), the audiences would

have been aware of Norse activity and were probably scared of further attacks. This

hagiography added to that sense of fear and created animosity to foster more

xenophobia towards the Norse. The source showcases both the Anglo-Saxon and French

anxieties about the Norse since they were also invading areas of mainland Europe,

including Frankia and the Low Countries. Sources like this hagiography that

dehumanized the Norse fostered apprehension, distrust, and hostility towards the

Norse.

Once trading relationships developed between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons,

there was more cooperation between them so they could both benefit from commerce.

After the Norse captured York in 866, they expanded the town and centered it as the

capital of that region, which lasted through 954 under Danish and Norwegian rule. Even

after York was incorporated into the newly established kingdom of England under

Aethelstan in 927 CE, York retained the strong Norse element in population past the

Norman period.[50] The reason why York became such a significant holding for the Norse

is clear; the Norse developed York to become a successful trading port, connecting York

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[49] Head, "Hagiography."
[50] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 7.

to trade networks that stretched thousands of miles. Archaeologist Richard Hall

participated in the Coppergate excavations at York 1976-1981 where the team of

archaeologists, students, and volunteers uncovered many interesting finds dating back

to the Norse settlement at York.[51] In Hall's *The Viking Dig*, he notes that there are

striking contrasts between layers of deposit, which indicates that before and after 910

CE there were significant changes in the occupations and activities of those living there.

This change in activity, Hall suggests, was "most likely to have been the creation of what

we know today as Coppergate."[52] Hall pointed out that even under different rulers,

whether they were Norse or Anglo-Saxon, "The overall picture was one of prosperity . . .

it was business as usual at York's commercial heart."[53]

Coinage is one of the most widely discussed types of evidence of material

culture, and the archaeological digs in towns like York were not devoid of this evidence

or other physical indications of commerce. Some of the coins uncovered there

demonstrated a connection to Norse interactions in a trading, commercial context. Hall

indicated that the coins, after they were minted, could have been transported over long

distances for trade, looting, or extortion as Danegeld payments.[54] Among the findings

was a penny struck from a Coppergate Aethelstan die head, which matches another coin

in the national coin collection in Copenhagen, Denmark; evidence of this style of coin

existing in both places demonstrates the Norse naval mobility during the Viking Age.[55]

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[51] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 6-7.
[52] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 51.
[53] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 66.
[54] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 63.
[55] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 63.

Hall also argued that the existence of objects such as amber and silk were further indications of the interconnectivity of York as a commercial, mercantile center.[56] As York became exposed to goods from different areas, the Anglo-Saxons faced a diverse range of identities and an exchange of culture.

During the later period of Anglo-Norse contact, raiding and trading continued, which created a complex relationship between Norse and Anglo-Saxon people. Ethelred's "Treaty with the Viking Army" from 991 CE demonstrates these complicated interactions. King Ethelred, or Æthelred the Unready, was the king of the English twice. Once from 978 CE to 1013 CE and the second time from 1014 CE until he died in 1016 CE. Much of Ethelred's reign was categorized by the dealings with the Norse who began to increase invasions during this period. Because of the increase in Norse raiding of England by boat, this treaty has specific laws for "harrying" vessels and trading vessels apart from reparations and punishment for murder and theft. Due to the distinction between vessels of invasion and trading vessels, it implies that there was also an increase in peaceful trade between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons, especially since the treaty offered certain protections for trading ships. As a treaty, this set of rules was to be agreed upon by both parties. Though it was probably not entirely written by Ethelred, he was trying to smooth over contact between the people of both areas to continue trading. The treaty suggests that the Norse were also interested in more peaceful contact with the Anglo-Saxons for trade purposes. By creating this treaty with Olaf Tryggvason, Ethelred intended to limit Norse invasions while still sustaining trade

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[56] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 88.

between his people and the Norse traders.[57] To limit invasions and to maintain trade, Ethelred prohibited his people from giving harrying vessels provisions and offered peace and protection for trading vessels. Originally intended for Anglo-Saxons and Norse living in England and the Norse coming from abroad, this treaty reflects the duality of the nature of the interaction between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons.

On one hand, the Anglo-Saxons wanted to limit Norse influence on their society as much as possible, but on the other hand, the Anglo-Saxons wanted to preserve what had become a fruitful trade relationship with the Norse. Ultimately, this treaty demonstrates how through sustained contact between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons, they had become more tolerant of each other, especially with the incentive to expand the economy through trade.

Norse Settlement in Britain

As Norse and Anglo-Saxon interactions continued and Norse people developed settlements in the British Isles, the Anglo-Saxons were confronted with a different culture. This presence of Norse people in England brought changes to Anglo-Saxon society. From political developments, religious responses, and material culture, Norse behavior, in many cases, was distinctly different from Anglo-Saxon culture. Some Anglo-Saxons wanted to make the Norse fit into their Anglo-Saxon society; some Anglo-Saxons wanted nothing to do with the Norse; and some Anglo-Saxons wanted to incorporate

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[57] Olaf Tryggvason was a Norwegian leader, and although he did not ascend to the throne of the Kingdom of Norway until 995 CE, he is significantly credited with establishing Christianity in Norway.

some elements of Norse culture into Anglo-Saxon culture. Despite these varying degrees of Norse acceptance or rejection, Anglo-Saxons came to terms with how they lived their own lives. The Norse settlement in the British Isles and subsequent displays of Norse culture forced the Anglo-Saxons to determine their own sense of self juxtaposed against a culture they viewed as so different from their own.

Political motivations were one reason some Anglo-Saxons such as King Alfred of Wessex, wanted to have the Norse adopt elements of Anglo-Saxon culture. One fundamental document, finalized in c. 886 CE, that signified a shift in Anglo-Saxon society was the treaty between King Alfred of Wessex and the Norse ruler, Guthrum.[58] The treaty established peace and defined the boundaries between their territories, thus establishing the Danelaw.[59] Drafted following a battle between King Alfred's forces and King Guthrum's forces in 878 CE, this treaty followed Guthrum's surrender. As part of these terms, Guthrum was baptized, and he adopted Christianity as his new faith in that same year.[60] Guthrum's conversion reflected what many other Norse settlers did to become more accepted in Anglo-Saxon society. In this case, it was not just the Anglo-Saxons who wanted the Norse to become more Anglo-Saxon, the Norse also wanted to take action to ensure cordial future interactions. To smooth over contacts and potential relationships, Guthrum submitted to Alfred's condition of adopting a new faith. As was the case with Guthrum, conversion was sometimes a political tool. This political

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[58] "The Treaty Between Alfred and Guthrum," 171.

[59] "The Treaty Between Alfred and Guthrum," 171.

[60] Asser, "Life of King Alfred," in *Alfred the Great,* trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), 85.

agreement accommodated Guthrum and later Norse people in Britain because it established defined areas of Norse control. In this region, the Norse established settlements in coastal, urban, and rural areas. This treaty was a precursor to what came in the late tenth century: Danish rule over England as a whole.

The most significant aspect of the treaty aside from the establishment of the Danelaw was Guthrum's conversion to Christianity and the further implications of Norse conversion in Britain. Although the treaty itself does not indicate this change of faith, Asser's "Life of King Alfred" explained the connection between Guthrum's baptism and the Anglo-Saxon victory in 878 CE.[61] According to Asser, Alfred agreed to let Guthrum and the other Norse warriors live if they agreed to receive baptism and leave the kingdom.[62] This interaction is one of the first acts of directly confronting Norse identity in medieval Britain. In this event, Alfred showed a level of compassion for Guthrum and the other Norsemen in his party. Rather than killing the men on sight, Alfred offered them an opportunity to wash away their sins and become Christian, which was a highly significant declaration of religious identity.

However, Guthrum's baptism only demonstrates conversion at the top of Norse society, and this baptism did not signify an immediate adoption of Christianity for all Norse people. As Lesley Abrams explains, even at lower levels of society, where mass baptisms took place, these baptisms were not enough to transform the Norse settlers

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[61] Asser, "Life of King Alfred," 85.
[62] Asser, "Life of King Alfred," 85.

into full-fledged Christians since paganism lingered following conversion.[63] One minor

reason Abrams notes that it took longer for these conversions to take place was because

of Norse raids at monasteries, which caused some of the diocese to disappear; without

bishops or priests, there could be no baptism, religious instruction, or proper Christian

burial.[64] Though the process of conversion and Christianization took a long time, it was

an attempt to change the Norse and make them ascribe to the practices of Anglo-Saxon

society. The motives for conversion were centered around social unity to ensure the

adherence to church authority in Britain. Abrams explains that religion "was not simply

a personal concern, but an element of a group's identity—initially an aspect of authority

and allegiance, rather than spiritual conviction."[65] Along with baptism and adhering to

Christianity came an entire set of behaviors that people were expected to follow.

Religion was not only about belief, but it was also about conduct, who someone was

with, what they did, and where they did it.[66] Christianity for both the Anglo-Saxons and

the Norse converts was a communal recollection of behaviors that contributed to a

sense of group identity, and influences at the personal level affected how people were

viewed in society. For the Norse who did not have an inherent guide for these

behaviors, they were automatically differentiated from the Anglo-Saxons who deeply

understood these Christian models of behavior.

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[63] Lesley Abrams, "Conversion and Assimilation," *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 136.

[64] Abrams, "Conversion and Assimilation," 142.

[65] Abrams, "Conversion and Assimilation," 137.

[66] Abrams, "Conversion and Assimilation," 137.

During the tenth-century Danelaw settlement period, some Anglo-Saxons continued to define the Norse through negative stereotypes, highlighting traits that were distinctly Norse and were, therefore, deemed reprehensible. Some of this resentment was expressed through a vernacular, Old English letter between "brothers" that likely dates from the tenth century after the establishment of some Norse settlements and the Danelaw.[67] The fragment of this letter is not long, but it does make some interesting commentaries on Norse settlement in England. Though the author of the source is unknown, there has been speculation about the relationship between the author and the recipient, including the possibility that they were fellow monks or that they were biological siblings.[68] The letter was intended for the author's "brother," whom he criticized for his way of dress.[69] The author shamed his brother for dressing in "Danish fashion" and for abandoning "the English practices."[70] He said that by dressing like the Norse, his brother was practicing evil habits and brought dishonor onto his race.[71]

Much like Alcuin's letter from 793 CE, this letter illustrates the author's personal opinions about the increasing settlement of Norse in England and characterized the

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[67] Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents Volume 1: c. 500-1042*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 825.

[68] Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 825. Throughout the letter fragment, the author refers to the intended reader as "brother," and this detail has caused scholars to consider whether these people were biological siblings or if perhaps they were both monks. Monks often refer to each other as brothers even though they are not related by blood. Because the source was written in Old English rather than Latin, it suggests the secularity of the letter; however, it is likely that the letter was simply meant between two brothers at a monastery.

[69] "Fragment of an Old English letter," in *English Historical Documents Volume 1: c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 825.

[70] "Fragment of an Old English letter," 825.

[71] "Fragment of an Old English letter," 825.

Norse by their physical appearance. At this time, there had been the establishment of larger waves of Norse settlements. Therefore, this source was a response to the kind of xenophobia that emerged when the new population group interacted with Anglo-Saxons and settled in Anglo-Saxon inhabited areas. By condemning the way the "brother" dressed and comparing the style to the Norse, the author implied that the way the Norse settlers dressed was improper and that the Norse themselves were wicked or unpleasant. For an Anglo-Saxon, even being compared to the Norse was a grave insult in the author's eyes. These stereotypes about Norse customs were considered abhorrent to at least some Anglo-Saxons, while at the same time other Anglo-Saxons adopted the Norse customs, pointing toward a complicated picture of tradition versus trend.

Despite an apparent dislike of Norse culture, some Anglo-Saxons were interested in adopting aspects of it. An interesting, yet seemingly mundane example, provides insight into what kinds of people lived in York at Coppergate and how they influenced Anglo-Saxon culture there. Archaeologists found several dozen ice-skates among the materials at Coppergate; however, these were a specific type of ice-skate used primarily in Scandinavia.[72] This unique skating practice was used in Norway until the nineteenth century, and even after the end of Norse rule in England, these kinds of skates were used on the island.[73] In fact, during the twelfth century, William fitz Stephen, a Norman writer, noticed how the youth liked to skate on the frozen water

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[72] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 113.
[73] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 113.

outside of London.[74] Even during the Norman period, those living in England still utilized skates of this Norse origin, which also indicates that the skates were popularized beyond York and beyond Norse influence. This feature of Norse culture, even as a mode of transportation or pastime, demonstrates how the Norse influenced Anglo-Saxon culture. Adopting new styles of ice-skates, by itself, did not necessarily indicate a shift in identity, however, it did suggest that the Anglo-Saxons did not have a rigid, unwavering sense of self, indicating the fluidity of cultural practices.

Once Norse culture became a more prominent feature of Anglo-Saxon society, the Anglo-Saxons were forced to confront this conception of foreigners. With different behaviors, styles of dress, customs, and beliefs, the Norse presence threatened Anglo-Saxon tradition. Juxtaposed against this foreign culture, the Anglo-Saxons faced impending changes to their own culture.

Norse Integration in Britain

Identity is not static; it changes, develops, and adapts over time, and for the Norse and Anglo-Saxons, their identities transformed through cultural interaction. It is not clear how connected in daily life the Anglo-Saxon and Norse laity were, but in places like York, where there were frequent exchanges of culture, these interactions must have occurred regularly. The Anglo-Saxons adopted aspects of Norse culture and the Norse adopted aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture, but it is challenging to determine the degree to

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[74] Hall, *The Viking Dig*, 113.

which their sense of self was changed. Some may argue that the Norsemen were

assimilated into Anglo-Saxon culture, removing their Norse identity in an attempt to

become more Anglo-Saxon-like. On the contrary, the Norse retained their distinct

identities even through processes of conversion and the adoption of Anglo-Saxon

culture. Despite continued tension, the Norse still integrated into Anglo-Saxon society.

Through settlement in Britain and continued interactions with Anglo-Saxons, the Norse

became integrated into Anglo-Saxon society, challenging notions of identity.

Integration was a part of Norse life even at the political level. The Danish-born

King Cnut came to power in England in 1016 CE, later becoming the king of both

Denmark and Norway, serving simultaneously as the king of three different kingdoms at

one time until his death in 1035 CE.[75] Before gaining the throne in 1016 CE, control of

England passed through Danish and Anglo-Saxon hands several times in a relatively

short period, creating a sense of instability within the kingdom. When King Cnut came to

rule England, he invoked the Christian God in important documents, including his law

code of 1020 that was to be observed by all people in England and solidified his political

rule of Denmark.[76] In this law code, King Cnut ruled that they "earnestly forbid every

heathenism," meaning worship of anything or anyone other than Christ.[77] Similarly,

Alfred of Wessex's law code also condemned pagan practices, showing continuity of

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[75] It should be noted that King Cnut was a Christian, though at the time he was considered somewhat unorthodox. Facing some criticism from the Church because of his multiple marriages, Cnut still asserted that he was a devout Christian. His grandfather, Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark and Norway (r. 958 CE/970 CE-986 CE), had been one of the first Norse kings to receive baptism and convert to Christianity.

[76] King Cnut, "Laws of Cnut," in *Medieval England 1000-1500: A Reader*, ed. Emile Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 21.

[77] King Cnut, "Laws of Cnut," 21.

laws that relied on Christian norms.[78] As a Norse king, he still represented all of the

years of violence that was associated with the heathens who raided and attacked

monasteries in the eyes of the medieval English authors. Perhaps this condemnation of

heathenism was a way for him to compensate for his foreign birthright and its automatic

connotation with paganism, in order to demonstrate his Christianity to the rest of the

Anglo-Saxons who may have been skeptical of his rule. After more than two hundred

years of Norse invasions, it is understandable that the Anglo-Saxons may have felt

uneasy about having a Norse king as their ruler. By establishing his faith in God and

condemning heathenism, Cnut was demonstrating to his subjects that he was

trustworthy and shared their religious interests.

Other documents from Cnut's reign indicated his interest in demonstrating his

Christianness. In Cnut's letter to the English people, he described his journey to Rome

where he met Pope John XIX and other important European political figures including

the Roman Emperor, Conrad.[79] There, the European nobles honored him with gifts, and

Emperor Conrad met with him in for Cnut to request safe passage and the elimination of

tolls from England to Rome for his subjects.[80] Through this conversation, Cnut ensured

that his people could safely travel on religious pilgrimage to Rome without added costs.

Not only did Cnut's trip to Rome signal his role as a Christian king to the rest of Western

Europe, but he also demonstrated to his people, through this letter, that the Pope and

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[78] Alfred the Great of Wessex, "The Laws of Alfred (871-899)," in *English Historical Documents Volume 1: c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 373.
[79] King Cnut, "Cnut's Letter of 1027," 417.
[80] King Cnut, "Cnut's Letter of 1027," 417.

these European powers respected him and validated him as king. While Cnut was in

Rome, he visited the sacred places including the Apostles, Peter and Paul; Cnut

emphasized that he learned the most from the Apostle Peter, whom Cnut identified

"had received from the Lord great power to bind and to loose."[81] In the early church,

Peter was one of the first leaders, and he was one of the most prominent of Jesus's

Apostles. By accentuating his affinity for the Apostle Peter, Cnut drew a comparison

between himself and the Apostle. Through this connection, Cnut was suggesting that he

had an almost divine authority to govern England, Denmark, and Norway, binding them

together under one ruler.

Additionally, in many of King Cnut's laws, one can draw connections to other

Anglo-Saxon texts, including King Alfred the Great's (r. 871 CE-899 CE) law code.

According to Dorothy Whitelock, this version of the Laws of Alfred probably belonged to

the middle of his reign, and they were later used in Saxon law codes.[82] Alfred's law code

drew from past Saxon codes: "I, King Alfred, collected these together and ordered to be

written many of them which our forefathers observed, those which I liked; and many of

those which I did not like, I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and ordered them

to be differently observed."[83] By creating this set of laws, Alfred contributed something

that would have been shocking to Anglo-Saxons at the time. Before Alfred, kings did not

make their own laws. Instead, most kings accepted the customary laws of the people.

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[81] King Cnut, "Cnut's Letter of 1027," 417.
[82] Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 372.
[83] Alfred the Great of Wessex, "The Laws of Alfred (871-899)," 373.

Interestingly, Cnut also took from past law codes to create his laws.[84] He not only drew

from law codes of the past but also included the customary laws that were established

in different areas of England, which were formerly independent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Along with this Christian political association, Cnut established a native political

strategy where people living in certain regions would follow the customary law as it was

already established in that area. For example, Cnut did not change the laws as they were

observed in regions like Mercia and established specific yet similar laws for Danes.[85]

King Cnut approached his laws this way to ensure his status as king of England and

encase his political stability through a sense of continuity. These laws were a way to

create a unified identity under King Cnut even if some of the laws were specific to

certain areas, save for those that specified that they applied to Danes. Cnut chose the

laws that were most appropriate for his subjects and defined how they should be

applied to the different regions. Cnut allowed these regions to keep their established

practices to ensure cooperation to include components of culture and tradition. As a

Norse king, Cnut knew that he had to earn the trust of the Anglo-Saxon populace. By

using past Anglo-Saxon law codes as a mold, King Cnut was able to accommodate his

subjects under his reign. Throughout his reign, Cnut wanted to retain his Norse identity

while incorporating aspects of Anglo-Saxon customs.

Lower levels of English society also saw a blend between Anglo-Saxon and Norse

cultures. It is evident in some examples of art from this period that there was an

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[84] King Cnut, "Laws of Cnut," 20.
[85] King Cnut, "Laws of Cnut," 22.

intersection of art styles between the Anglo-Saxons and the Norse. In an article by

Gabor Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork from the Danelaw: Exploring Social and

Cultural Interaction," Thomas examines the integration of Norse settlement through the

analysis of uncovered metalwork.[86] In this study, Thomas explored how personal items

such as jewelry, in this case, brooches and strap-ends reflected not wider social or

regional notions of identity but rather reflected self-identification through "localized

patterns of social expression."[87] By examining these artistic trends in metalwork,

Thomas uncovered possibilities for individualized notions of identity, which, as a topic of

study, has been largely unexplored.

   While there were similarities between some of the artistic elements of the Norse

and Anglo-Saxon traditions as part of the milieu, there were elements of both traditions

that distinguished them from each other. These differences are what allowed

archaeologists to attribute specific artifacts to these different cultures. To understand

what Norse artistic traditions in Britain were like during this period, scholars turn to the

areas of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden where archeological excavations uncovered

artifacts that drew striking stylistic comparisons to artifacts found in England. For

example, one of the most widely used elements from Norse artistic styles was the

Borre-style animal heads.[88] In a group of tounge-shaped strap-ends, the metal work

combined both Borre-style ring-chain and a "cat-like" animal mask.[89] While both

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[86] Gabor Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork from the Danelaw: Exploring Social and Cultural Interaction," *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 237-255.
[87] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 238.
[88] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 241-242.
[89] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 244.

elements were common on Norse metalwork, this kind of animal mask was more widely used on convex disc-brooches.[90] The inclusion of both elements on a strap-end, Thomas suggests, was a Anglo-Norse "artistic innovation" from East Anglia.[91] Examples such as this strap-end indicate the blending of indicating the adoption of artistic culture between the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons in England.

Thomas indicated that it is acceptable to identify and classify artifacts as Anglo-Saxon, Norse, or Anglo-Norse based on certain stylistic characteristics; however, "it may not be so appropriate to classify people in this manner."[92] Though people living in Britain during this period were either Anglo-Saxons or Norsemen, some adopted the artistic styles of the other culture. Therefore, just because there was a brooch from Denmark in a grave in Britain, it does not mean that the deceased was necessarily Norse; other factors should be considered before trying to determine the cultural identity of the buried. Thomas indicated that in certain areas, people had a choice of which style they preferred to wear.[93] Additionally, Thomas asserted that in some cases, these craft traditions fused to create what they consider "Anglo-Scandinavian metalwork."[94] Thomas demonstrated this idea by examining metal strap-ends, which were a common accessory in Northern Europe in the Middle Ages. In the examples of strap-ends, Thomas noted how sometimes the shape of the strap-end would denote one culture while the design would represent the other culture.[95] Through these

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[90] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 244.
[91] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 244.
[92] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 240.
[93] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 240.
[94] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 242.
[95] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 244.

examples, Thomas emphasized the reality of cultural integration, "at least in terms of jewelry . . . over a relatively short period."[96]

On the other hand, Thomas also revealed that the Norse possibly abandoned some of the aspects of dress that represented an unfamiliar or foreign identity to embrace features of material culture that would have indicated cultural likeness or even unity.[97] These examples of Anglo-Norse metalwork show a blending of culture as well as the desire for a homogeneous identity. However, this possible desire for a homogeneous identity would not have been either Anglo-Saxon or Norse. Instead, in this case, the homogeneous identity would have reflected a syncretized blending of Anglo-Saxon and Norse culture to create an entirely new identity.

People at all levels of Anglo-Norse society witnessed this exchange and intermix of culture. If the Norse were completely assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society, archaeologists and other scholars would not have been able to identify examples of Norse art in the material culture of the later period of Norse settlement in Britain. Since these scholars have been able to differentiate between elements of Anglo-Saxon and Norse artistic styles, it indicates that Norse culture was not erased and was instead diffused into Anglo-Saxon culture. Even in the political landscape of the upper levels of Anglo-Norse society, Cnut wanted to blend Anglo-Saxon and Norse cultures while still maintaining his identity as a Danish king. In a significant way, the Norse retained their cultural identity, making them a distinct identity group in Anglo-Saxon England.

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[96] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 252.
[97] Thomas, "Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork," 252.

Conclusion

Since their first recorded raid in 793 CE, the Norse invaded, traded, settled, fought, farmed, reigned, and integrated with the Anglo-Saxons. This variety of activities and experiences left an indelible mark on English history. Beginning their legacy as heathens, the Norse in England changed their own identities as they adapted their lives to their new environment. Conversion became a central piece of their new identity; however, the Anglo-Saxons still regarded them as an unfamiliar group even after generations of settlement. Perhaps not so different from the 21st century, the pre-established population felt challenged and uncomfortable with new foreign people migrating and settling in their already inhabited areas. Through this process, there was certainly an exchange of culture, yet the Norse never lost all of their cultural traditions. In the 8th through 11th centuries the Anglo-Saxon authors continued to distinguish Norse in England as a distinct population group. Though the Norse left a visible impact on Anglo-Saxon culture through language, laws, art, and placenames, they also challenged the Anglo-Saxons' sense of identity.

In the 21st century, it is difficult to distinguish between these groups of people with evolving identities, but by analyzing archaeological evidence and textual sources from the period, scholars can attempt to understand what signaled these differences. Careless approaches to population groups such as the Anglo-Saxons or the Norse can lead to distorted notions that these groups were homogeneous. There were large differences in personal experience, which meant that each person had a different perspective about their own ethnicity or identity. Cnut's letter to his subjects from 1027

CE illustrates a Norse king who wanted to demonstrate his ability to be Anglo-Saxon, which showcases the fluidity of individual identities within Anglo-Norse England.

It is possible that if the Anglo-Saxons were actively trying to assimilate the Norse, they would have tried harder to destroy these unique aspects of Norse culture, which would result in little to no surviving records of this material culture. If the Norse were trying to assimilate themselves to Anglo-Saxon culture to become a part of society and smooth over interactions in their new homes, the Norse may have worked harder to abandon their cultural practices. Still, there are examples of Norse traditions existing through material culture and as allusions in Anglo-Saxon texts. Although Anglo-Saxon's daily life was governed by Christian norms and monks, those who worked to convert the Norse or acted as missionaries were not interested in helping the Norse adapt to life in Britain. These people wanted to ensure that the Norse held allegiance to the authority of the Church. While conversion can be seen as an act of assimilation, this was one piece of Anglo-Saxon culture, albeit a large piece, that contributed to Anglo-Saxon identities in the Middle Ages. Though Norse settlers in England converted to Christianity, it did not mean they were Christianized or adopted all characteristic behaviors and customs of the Anglo-Saxons. There were possibly isolated instances of Norse attempts towards assimilation to Anglo-Saxon culture and society, but on the whole, evidence of this suggests otherwise.
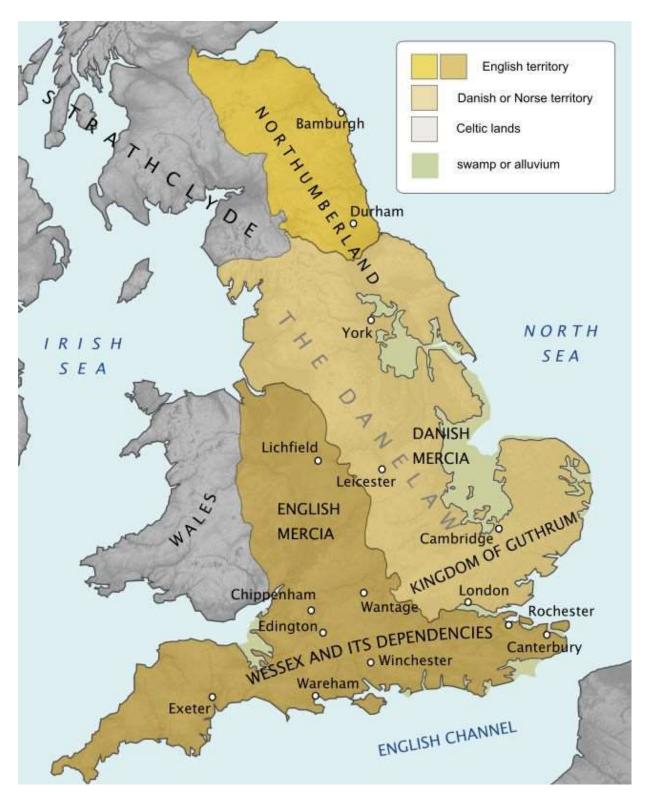
In 1002 CE, Ethelred the Unready, Anglo-Saxon king of England, ordered the extermination of all Danes in England to occur on November 13, St. Brice's Day. While it is unclear just how many people were killed from this decree, there have been recent

excavations that uncovered a mass gravesite. A gravesite of thirty-seven individuals was uncovered and attributed to this event, but there are not many lasting indications that the decree was carried out in the way Ethelred envisioned.[98] The results of the St. Brice's Day massacre are uncertain; however, the mere creation of the decree reflected how some Anglo-Saxons, especially those of political power who had greater stakes in losing that power to the Norse, would have been hostile towards the threat of upheaval. The Anglo-Saxons were afraid of the change brought about by Norse invasions but were interested in including aspects of Norse culture into their lives. Juxtaposed against Norse behavior and customs, the Anglo-Saxons grappled with tradition. On one hand, some Anglo-Saxons abhorred the Norse because they posed a threat to the Anglo-Saxon norm. On the other hand, Anglo-Saxons diffused elements of Norse culture into Anglo-Saxon culture. Through the progression of Anglo-Norse interactions from raiding to settlement and integration, the Anglo-Saxons questioned their sense of self when confronted with Norse culture.

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[98] Nadia Durrani, "Vengeance: on the Vikings," in *Archaeology*, 66, no. 6 (November/December 2013): 47-51, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24363769. Radiocarbon analysis dated the bones to 960 CE-1020 CE. The skeletons appear to have been killed in a violent attack and are structurally similar to Norse skeletons from this period. They are taller than the Anglo-Saxon average height for the attributed ages of the skeletons during this time.

[Map 1] "The Boundary of the Danelaw"

[Map 2] "The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, ca. 800"

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