

Translation, Interpretation and the Danish Conquest of England, 1016

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Cnut of Denmark conquered England in 1016 after nearly forty years of persistent Danish raids. In many ways, this was a momentous instance of discontinuity: it was the first time in 500 years of English history, since the reign of Cerdic of Wessex (d. 534), that a man who did not belong to the West Saxon dynasty became king. This event permanently changed dynastic expectations for rule in England, and created new possibilities for foreign rule and enterprising bids for the throne. By some accounts, it entirely changed the power structure of the nobility in England, bringing new families like the Godwines to the fore.¹ Yet in other ways, Cnut's conquest could be viewed as expansion and continuity in the reach of Scandinavian influence in the northern world. From one continental perspective, it was part of a bigger story of righting a wrong in a Danish empire. From another, it was but the latest episode in England's multi-century battle against paganism, and one which proved a far more destructive and disruptive event even than the Norman Conquest of 1066.

There is precedent for examining continental perceptions of the Norman Conquest of England,² but perceptions of the Danish Conquest stand in need of exploration. As one disruption in the eleventh century, and although relatively poorly documented, its import to commentators was at least equal to that of the Norman Conquest. English historians in the twelfth century embraced and owned the disruption, integrating it into the received story of their past. They acknowledged King Cnut as one of their own, rewriting their sources so as to

isolate him from the invading enemy force, inuring his legacy against lament. Their shared perception that 1016 was a pivotal moment in English history is evident in the dexterity with which they use language to redraw boundaries around the events, personalities and motivations surrounding the Conquest. Commentators from abroad did one of two things: in the eleventh century, they used the Danish Conquest to showcase Norman or Danish power and values; in the twelfth, Orderic Vitalis casted the event as the most grievous disruption in eleventh-century English history. In all cases, the Conquest was used as a powerful defining moment in the construction of identity, whether English, Norman, Anglo-Norman or Christian. This is noteworthy: the 1016 conquest was over a century in the past for twelfth-century commentators.

How and why did twelfth-century commentators explain and interpret the Danish Conquest of England in 1016 and what made it such a fulcrum in their versions of the past? The Danish Conquest of England mattered on both sides of the channel, but for different reasons. A shared shift in perception occurred between the eleventh and twelfth centuries: over time, it was perceived less as a disruption, and more as a case of continuity. On the continent it reflected a continuation of Danish imperial pretensions over England. But in England, it came to reflect a continuation of English control over its own fate, and of distinguished kingship.

The significant feature of the later versions is a particular aspect of translation: the micro-level. Their versions drew new boundaries in time, in space and around groups of individuals. In her analysis of one such later version of events—the early twelfth-century Latin and English version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS F from Canterbury—Alice Jorgensen has shown how these types of changes produced a significantly different narrative with a heightened awareness of English identity.³ More important than the language of translation is how language itself was used, at the level of basic grammatical elements like

number, person and case, and rhetorical elements like tone. The changes which have the most dramatic impact on the story happened at this level.

This volume asks an important question: ‘What impact, if any, do abruptly-changing circumstances have on matters of accuracy, fidelity and/or writing style?’ In the central Middle Ages, the impact of crises on historical writing was considerable and wide-ranging, crossing boundaries between kingdoms. As a contribution to a volume on translation, it is my hope that this chapter may provide useful material not just for medievalists, but for studies of translation and of rendering in narrative. I wish to draw particular attention to the word ‘version’, derived from the Latin word ‘*uersio*’, which could mean translation, version or turning. When compared with eleventh-century accounts of 1016, twelfth-century versions offer insights into an intriguing phenomenon: the turning of a turning point.

The Eleventh Century: The Original Stories

The twelfth-century historians under discussion - Orderic Vitalis, William of Malmesbury, John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon and Geffrei Gaimar⁴ - knew different written and oral sources about the Danish Conquest, with considerable overlap. These included the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (hereafter ASC), William of Jumièges, William of Poitiers and stylistic models including the works of Bede, classical Latin writers and oral traditions. John, Henry and Gaimar are comparable in their close reliance on ASC for material. The most important ideas from several of these eleventh-century sources enable us to compare the effects of the later versions.

In the period leading up to and including the Danish Conquest, according to eleventh-century accounts, the English did not look well, masterful, or in control of their own fate.

This applied whether the accounts were written in England, Normandy or Flanders. ASC (1014) records that the kingdom's leading men outlawed all Danish kings ('*ælcne Dænisce cyning*') forever; Cnut's conquest, two years later, thus makes them look pathetic and ineffectual. ASC laments Cnut's betrayal of the English, and casts the duplicity of a foreign conqueror as the direct cause of their wretchedness and trials in 1014: 'Cnut himself went out with his fleet - and thus the wretched people were betrayed through him - and then turned southwards until he came to Sandwich, and there put ashore the hostages which were granted to his father, and cut off their hands and noses.'⁵ Cnut's accession comes amidst - literally and figuratively - Eadric's betrayal and the death of England's leading men. The description of Cnut's victory and possession of all England ('*Pær hæfde Cnut sige 7 gefeaht him eall Englaland*') occurs in the text between two remarks: a lament that Eadric betrayed his lord and the land, and a report of the deaths of all the leading English ('*eall se dugod on Angelcinne*').⁶ Only then does ASC refer to Cnut as 'king'. In context, it is more an indictment than an affirmation.

William of Jumièges, the Norman chronicler who wrote a version of the deeds of the Norman dukes (*Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, hereafter GND), discusses the Danish invasions of England in Æthelred's reign only insofar as they helped to display Duke Richard II's generosity.⁷ William had no incentive to redeem the defeated English in the eyes of his audience. In his piece, the barbaric manners of the English and their king provide a foil for highlighting the civilized, regal behaviour of Duke Richard. The duke offered welcome to both Æthelred⁸ (despite William's remarks that Æthelred previously sought enmity with Richard)⁹ and Æthelred's enemy, Swein.¹⁰ Æthelred's alleged cruelty, incompetence and desperation, as well as Swein's need for an alliance, make Richard appear munificent and politically savvy, courting all potential allies.

But even the invading Danes emerge from the story as more civilized than the English. Æthelred's orders to put Danish residents in England to death on St Brice's Day were described by William as so offensive that even heathens decried the king's actions. William's prime accusation was that the king did not charge the Danes with any crime before attacking them,¹¹ as a civilized king should. William scorned Æthelred's readiness to retreat when defeated by Swein at London in 1013. ASC's Æthelred at least remained with his troops before removing to the Isle of Wight and later to Normandy.¹² William's Æthelred fled immediately after the defeat - directly into the arms of Norman protection. William implicated the English in the atrocities ordered by their king and claimed that Swein justly resolved to take revenge on the English.¹³ The Londoners, unable to resist Swein, he likened to beasts.¹⁴ Finally, he accused the English of disloyalty: 'Æthelred ... found himself utterly abandoned by the English.'¹⁵ The great degree of disgrace the English incurred is evident in the damning adverb '*funditus*': the desertion is complete, and irredeemable.

This Norman writer is perhaps not so far from his Scandinavian heritage, and the legendary origins of the Norman dukes under Rollo, whom Dudo of St Quentin - William's predecessor in recounting the deeds of the Normans - claimed was Danish.¹⁶ In Dudo's account, England was the competitor; the Danish realm was the progenitor. Yet the idea of supporting or endorsing the heathen Danes as a conquering force remained absent. William of Jumièges was careful to accuse the English and their king of specific deeds of injustice or cruelty which merited punishment—by the Danes. Even from this continental point of view, disruption did not represent *clades*, or uncontrollable disaster: it occurred because of sinful behaviour.

The *Encomium Emmae* was written in Flanders during the reign of Harthacnut, circa 1040-1042, by a Flemish monk of St. Omer in praise of Emma, a Norman woman, wife of Æthelred II and later of Cnut. This work informed Gaimar, John and William's accounts of

the Danish Conquest. It offered grounds on which to praise Cnut, but the passive role of the English provided them with an incentive to redeem the English past. Writing from a continental perspective in praise of the Danish-Norman ruling family, the encomiast - like William of Jumièges - did not find the shame of the English to be a problem which required explanation. This is perhaps unsurprising. But although this writer endorsed the Danish Conquest, he avoided confronting the idea of conquest itself. Instead, he presented the Danish invasion as within the bounds of proper law and lordship, including England in his wider geographic view of where Danish hegemony should be felt.

In the *Encomium*, the central narrative problem concerning the Danish Conquest is the failure to follow the chain of command, and to fulfil an obligation due to one's lord and king. The best illustration thereof is the encomiast's account of the initial decision to conquer England: Swein's soldiers decided to persuade Swein (who was already planning an invasion) to invade England and thereby to increase the empire. What is illuminating is the strategy of persuasion which the encomiast's nobles employed. They began by pointing out to Swein that the Danish earl Thorkell had gone to England with Swein's permission:

Your military commander Thorkell, having been granted a license by you, has gone [to England] to avenge his brother ... now an ally of the English, whom he conquered through your power, he now prefers enjoying his own glory over leading his army back, submitting to you, and crediting you [rightly] with his victory.¹⁷

The author highlighted, above all, the submission due to the king. Because the soldiers claimed that the English were Thorkell's allies, the soldiers could now accuse the English of being accessory in Thorkell's treachery. Indeed, the author went on to describe the planned invasion as an attempt to right a wrong. The soldiers expressed certainty of victory: if their

countrymen did not come over to their side, 'they shall pay the penalty among the foremost enemies of the king.'¹⁸ The punishment for high treason could have been death or outlawry, which itself may have made killing more acceptable.¹⁹

According to the encomiast, the nominal intent of the invasion was to punish a breach of authority and lordship bonds among the Danish hierarchy. But the mission was also explicitly directed at the English: because they were in league with the treacherous Thorkell, they too had to be subdued. This narrative style has two interesting implications as an account of disruption. First, the English people were presented as already conquered: Swein and his army were now plotting to add '*terram Anglicam*' - a place, not a people - to their empire. Second, the author used the soldiers' words to cast the English as in the wrong, party to Thorkell's betrayal. The result is that Swein, even with his imperial ambitions, was not wronging the English: rather, the English have already wronged him by siding with those Danes who stepped outside justice and lordship bonds. Swein broke no concord, explicit or implicit, with the English people.

This passage reconciled territorial ambition and expansion with a just war to right a wrong, managing to render the victims of conquest as accessories to injustice. The terms of the dispute underwent a significant change: this reported discussion casted the Danish Conquest of England as part of an internal, Danish dispute about lordship duties within the Danish army and with the king. In claiming that the only thing that was to be conquered was land, the encomiast obscured the fact that Swein and Cnut proposed to challenge another people's autonomy, identity and sense of royal hierarchy. The hiding of this inconvenient fact suggests that the rhetoric of agreement mattered more as a response to disruption in this kind of history than did the idea of right of conquest.

Twelfth-century versions of the Danish Conquest

In their attention to rewriting the Danish presence in England, the twelfth-century narrators have several important features in common. William, Henry, John, Gaimar and Orderic were originally from England; Orderic, William and Henry had mixed parentage; all appear to have travelled; all had experience with a common Anglo-Norman ruler, Henry I. This shared Anglo-Norman milieu certainly shaped their perceptions of disruption and their expectations for royal behaviour therein. They recounted the Danish Conquest of England in manners independent of their sources: their versions, more so than earlier accounts, highlighted the king's power and ability to influence events.²⁰ The difference is in what they admired most in a leader: the English writers held defence of the English kingdom paramount; Orderic, writing from a Norman monastery, admired the Christian king who defeated paganism on a wider stage. Despite the disruption of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, none of the histories categorically vilified either Norman or English leaders.²¹ The real cross-Channel divide is not clearest in accounts of the Norman Conquest of 1066, even though it was more recent, but rather in those of the Danish Conquest of 1016.

Why might this be the case? Although it is sometimes argued that the more distant past is a 'safer' place for translation and change, where neutrality is not an option,²² the reverse may be true in Europe in the central Middle Ages. In a world where a lofty family pedigree could determine identity, kingship and legacy, it was in many ways more risky to change the distant past. For realms like England, northern Europe and Scandinavia, undergoing rapid dynastic and political change, it was more important to venture a new version of that past, in order to secure an impressive heritage free from disruption and crisis. Into this world came the Vikings, who challenged existing dynasties, established their own - as they did in Normandy in the early tenth century - and left a powerful aristocratic and legal

legacy in England after 1016. In the wake of these clashes between dynasty and enterprise, the nature of disruption itself was reimagined, in creative ways, in accounts of 1016. These twelfth-century narratives did not convey neutrality, but their versions did bring a new sense of control, consistency and reframing to existing accounts of the past.

In the twelfth century, a strong collective English identity emerged in response to disruption: local accounts diverged then from both earlier and overseas accounts. The difference cannot be explained by differing genres (evident in the case of John of Worcester, an annalist like ASC's authors) nor by the Latin language (evident in the case of Geffrei Gaimar, writing in Anglo-Norman French). The twelfth-century English sources uniquely accorded Cnut with personal legitimacy as an English king, dissociating him from pagan origins and barbaric behaviour in order to redeem England's history under his rule. The writers accomplished this change not primarily by translating the language of the original, but, as we shall see, by altering the timing of events as well as the grammatical and numerical relationships between individuals and groups.

John of Worcester and numbers

John of Worcester modified ASC to make the English appear honourable and loyal. He did not depict the English nobles as explicitly forbidding Cnut from becoming king of England, which permitted them to accept Cnut's legitimacy without the shame of breaking a promise. He wrote that the nobles outlawed the Danish king ('*Danicum regem*'), crucially not 'all Danish kings', and omitted the temporal universal of 'forever'.²³ By changing the prohibition from plural to singular, John had the men direct their vow only at Swein, not Cnut. This slight change made Cnut's eventual kingship of England look legitimate, as he was not the object of the prohibition. It further made the nobles appear dramatically less naïve and victimized: their

unanimous resolution was not pathetically and ironically reversed twice in a row as in ASC. Although they faced the prospect of conquest, the English remained in control of their own future.

John emphasized Cnut's concessions, not his conquering, in rewriting ASC (1014). Both narratives referred to Cnut's mutilation of hostages, but John omitted the comments that the English were wretched and betrayed by him, thereby relieving Cnut of blame. Whereas ASC's hostages were simply put ashore, John added details which stress the one merciful element of the situation: Cnut permitted them to depart (*'abire permisit'*).²⁴ Jay Paul Gates has argued that in Anglo-Saxon England, bodily mutilation was a way of punishing a criminal for a failed contribution to society;²⁵ in England after the Norman Conquest, mutilation was sometimes viewed as a merciful alternative to capital punishment:²⁶ here, John implied that whereas Cnut could have killed them, he let them go. This Cnut was a more acceptable English leader than ASC's treacherous Cnut. John was deeply aware of the implications of word choice, number, order and omission. His language effected subtle changes to ASC, creating a new version of history wherein disruption seems less devastating for the English.

William of Malmesbury and time

William of Malmesbury portrayed Cnut as a barbarian who flaunted wrongdoing before he became king of England, so it is important to consider the grounds on which William ultimately accepted and even praised Cnut as king of the English. William's initial criticism accentuates ASC's point that Cnut was an outsider and had no legitimate authority in England.²⁷ William wrote that Cnut acted in contempt of human and divine law (*'humano et diuino iure contempto'*) and boasted about his egregious deeds. He added castration to the list

of mutilations on Cnut's orders.²⁸ By adding a further detail, that Cnut then returned to his native land (*'patriam petiit'*), Denmark, William reminded readers that Cnut was still a foreigner: he was not yet of England.²⁹

William made an omission with important dynastic implications: despite Cnut's brutality as a foreign invader, Cnut's reign in England was not damned before it began. William did not have the nobles ban Danish kings from England forever.³⁰ Like John, William had no wish to preserve an injunction which would make Cnut's subsequent reign look illegitimate and unsupported, and the nobles appear weak and unable to enforce their own decrees. William made room for Cnut to become a king of England who possessed legitimate power despite his Danish origins and his conquest.

In his version of King Edmund Ironside (d. 1016) and Cnut's dispute over the crown, William permitted Cnut to redeem himself by taking actions of command on behalf of peace, and thus to earn the kingship.³¹ According to William, Edmund proposed the duel initially on the grounds that his and Cnut's worldly ambitions would make them responsible - and reprehensible - for the deaths of their subjects in pursuit of these ambitions. Edmund claimed that it would be praiseworthy for a king to obtain the kingdom by endangering only himself, rather than others.³² Cnut refused, which William suggested was in part because Cnut did not consider himself physically a match for Edmund. But William casted Cnut's refusal of single combat as a gesture on behalf of peace, and as such an even better solution than engaging in a duel:³³

Surely, since both not without reason were demanding a kingdom which had been held by the parents of both, it would be sensible to lay aside their enmity and divide England between them. This remark was taken up by both armies and ratified with massive agreement, as both consonant with justice and a benign step

towards peace among mortals who were already exhausted by so much misery... Edmund, overwhelmed by the unanimous and universal shouts of approval, gave in to peace, and made a treaty with Cnut which assigned himself Wessex, and the other Mercia.³⁴

Cnut appears to act with both reason and collective support, acknowledging both his and Edmund's claims of heritage. English, Danes and Edmund himself enthusiastically recognized Cnut's '*prudencia*' as just progress towards the peace which all desire. William made it appear that single combat, although less destructive than battle, would have been more fighting nonetheless. Edmund proposed to decide the fate of the kingdom by testing fortune, but Cnut's solution commanded fortune, seeking a guaranteed outcome of shared peace.

William's rendering emphasized Cnut's rational intent and the positive reaction to Cnut's actions. William did not think that Cnut was not doomed to inadequacy for English kingship on account of his earlier behaviour as an invader or his Danish heritage. Because he progressed from barbarism to advocacy of peace and justice, the Danish king could now belong to England.

Henry of Huntingdon and space

Henry's geographic proximity to the events he described, although they happened a century earlier, is worth noting as he may have been drawing on regional and local memory.

Huntingdon is fifty miles from Lindsey, and in the heart of the former Danelaw.³⁵ Henry's work was among the most condensed of the five versions, yet the only one to offer such

sympathy with Cnut. It is almost a direct translation of ASC, with two important differences. The first is that, in giving Cnut a conscience, Henry attempted to extract Cnut from his damning Danish heritage. The language of legitimacy required an account of an individual's intentions and behaviour. In ASC, the people of Lindsey initiated a peace agreement with Cnut, but in Henry's version, Cnut initiated the treaty: he stayed in Gainsborough and made an agreement with the men of Lindsey ('*Cnut uero cum exercitu suo ... cum hominibus Lindeseige concordatus est*').³⁶

Henry's translation made space for Cnut to prove himself worthy of kingship because it shifted the stress from his actions to those of the English. This enabled Henry to suggest that Cnut's behaviour befitted a king of the English more than it did an enemy. There was no implication that the men of Lindsey were coerced or forced to make peace with Cnut; the only destructive force was the English king Æthelred. As in ASC, Cnut punished and released English hostages in 1014, but Henry anticipated Cnut's role as king of England by suggesting that he was motivated by his sense of responsibility for the English. The real evil ('*malum*') was Æthelred's decision to kill nearly all of Lindsey's inhabitants when he learnt they had made an agreement with Cnut. Henry, uniquely, ascribed to Cnut a feeling of remorse on learning of this tragedy: 'Cnut, truly grieving that this people had been destroyed on his account, went with ships to Sandwich'.³⁷ Henry's version proposed an insight into Cnut's character and reasons for his behaviour: grief and the desire to avenge the deaths of the people of Lindsey.

The second key difference lies in how the revision of time produced a new and different attitude towards the Danish Conquest. Cnut's victory in conquest in 1016 did not represent the subjugation of England to his arbitrary will. Rather, his assumption of royal authority marked a change from a story of betrayal and death. Henry's tone changed here: prior to assuming the throne, Cnut was inferior in glory to English kings; after it, Cnut

became the most glorious of English kings.³⁸ Henry re-ordered events to make Cnut's accession to the throne, after his victory in Essex, not as a disastrous, but as a momentous event. Henry wrote that King Cnut ('*rex ... Cnut*') took up the royal sceptre in London, supported by his victory at *Assandun*, after and not between Eadric's treachery and the deaths of the English.³⁹ This is the first sentence wherein Henry named Cnut king not only of the Danes, but also of the English. The narrative effect is greater than a relocation of time: his rulership indicates the start of a peaceful era. Henry's proximity in space to the events he described appears to have heightened for him the emotional quality of the past.

Gaimar and the individual

The context of Gaimar's account of the Danish Conquest is particularly important because his *Estoire des Engleis* provides a strong precedent for Danish rule in England. Gaimar wrote a sustained narrative of the Dane Haveloc earlier in the *Estoire*.⁴⁰ For Gaimar, however, it was not enough that Cnut claimed right to rule in England based on Danish precedent: Cnut had to earn English kingship.⁴¹ Gaimar's remarks about Cnut are about legitimizing him through acclaim, and his quality for rule.

Gaimar first referred to Cnut as king only when the people acclaimed him as such. Gaimar stated that Cnut returned with his fleet when he learnt that King Æthelred was in Lindsey, then added: 'and the whole of that part of the country went over to him. The English flocked from all directions and joined with king Cnut.'⁴² Gaimar conveyed Cnut's legitimacy here in two ways: the English both gave him loyalty and physically entered into his presence. John called Cnut 'king' only on death of Edmund Ironside - not after Cnut's victory in conquest, as in ASC. For Gaimar, the will of the English had primacy.⁴³ The context of Æthelred's violence, which Gaimar also described, made the English choice here seem

rational.⁴⁴ Cnut was behaving more like a king: as such, he was more deserving of the title. Indeed, once Cnut received approval, he reigned over what he had conquered despite Edmund's defence: '*E Cnuht regnout si out conquis / de plusurs parz tut le pais*'.⁴⁵

When Gaimar recounted the division of the kingdom between Cnut and Edmund Ironside, he made the point that, in kingship, heredity is less important than behaviour. The quality of the brotherly relationship between the two kings mattered more than the absence of real kinship: 'What am I to say about the two kingdoms? Each one comprised estates of considerable power. The two kings [Cnut and Edmund] now reigned with more quality than brothers or blood relations would have enjoyed, and the love they had for each other was greater, in my view, than of one brother for another.'⁴⁶ This was quite a statement: Gaimar did not present invasion and conquest as problems. His rhetorical question was not meant to be answerable; rather, it implied that nothing more was to be said on the subject. But Gaimar's emphasis on peace hid something: it was the Danish invasion that brought about all the trouble in the first place. He rewrote the events of 1014–1016 to endorse Cnut, and to minimize the very invasion which ASC lamented consistently in the annals for the late tenth century through 1016.

Orderic: A continental comparison

Orderic Vitalis, writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica* in Normandy, offered a version of the Danish Conquest which differs from that of his contemporaries in England in three key ways. He emphasized collective sin as the primary cause of invasion; he suggested that the king's most important duty was his Christian opposition to pagan influence and infiltration; and he maintained that dynasty was a more important consideration in determining legitimate rulership than was individual behaviour. He retold the Danish invasions as part of his

narrative about King William I and his passion for reform in England. The invasions were less a historical event in their own right; rather, they provided for him an explanation for a civilizing force, led by William, to enter England and defeat paganism. Orderic effected this particular retelling by going back in time and choosing the fifth-century Augustinian mission to England as the starting point of his story. His account thenceforward centred on conflict between pagan forces, and resolution of this conflict centred on the restoration of Christianity in England, especially in the monastic tradition.⁴⁷ Orderic's narrative decisions are understandable in light of his exile from England at age ten, his subsequent training as a child oblate in Normandy, his candid interest in emulating Bede, and his use of the monastery of St-Evroul as the foundation of his overarching story.⁴⁸ Orderic's interest in the Danish Conquest of England was only in the context of a wider story about the fight between Christianity and paganism in England in the years leading up to William I's reign.

Orderic's priority was not to detail Cnut's rule or personality: he was a commentator writing from a Norman perspective, at some distance from England both in time and space. But his silence on Cnut is striking because Orderic actually perceived the Danish Conquest as more detrimental, more disruptive and with more long-term consequences for England than the Norman Conquest. To present Cnut as a defender of the faith and pilgrim to Rome would have disrupted the uniform story which Orderic wished to tell of the Danes in England.

Orderic's description of Cnut's accession is a case in point, for it reveals Orderic's interest in characterizing the Danish dynasty (a group), but not Cnut (an individual): 'Finally, after much carnage, on the death of King Æthelred, and his son, Edmund Ironside, [Cnut] conquered England, which he and his sons Harold and Harthacnut ruled for more than forty years.'⁴⁹ Orderic identified the collective reign of Cnut and his sons, the combined Danish presence in England. He did not provide any details on Cnut's conquest, nor did he evaluate Cnut's reign. Dynasty was of paramount importance to Orderic. Chibnall has argued that

primogeniture and inheritance mattered to him greatly.⁵⁰ Not only did he think that the eldest son should succeed the father, but he also frequently mistook an inheriting second son for an eldest.⁵¹ Throughout *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Cnut and his sons are not individuals; they are part of a dynasty shaped by their Danish origins.

In making the significant event in England's history not a conquest by a man, but rather the transplanting of a Danish dynasty to English soil - what might seem a minor shift of emphasis - Orderic could almost immediately link this event with the Norman Conquest of England. He claimed that the pagan, Danish invasions were the cause of the Norman Conquest:

I have digressed at length, but not I hope in vain, and have summarized notes taken from earlier annals so that the patient reader may clearly understand why the Normans found the English a rustic and nearly illiterate people, although they had once been fully instructed in the best customs by the Roman pontiffs.⁵²

Even in 1066, it is not the Normans who are the enemy, but the Danes. What the Normans found, apparently, was a civilization destroyed by pagan influence, and a subdued people in need of their help.

Orderic forcefully defended the Norman campaign, but entirely omitted military motives and the sense that the Normans caused an even larger disruption in England than the Danes. He could not defend them based on right of conquest because, in his view, only those who inherited could rule rightly. His view of rightful inheritance, however, allowed for both blood and faith as determining factors in kingship. Legitimate rulers either inherited the throne through a rightful bloodline (like Æthelred), or were Christians who had inherited a pagan problem and must resolve it (like William in England):

So by the just decree of almighty God, after the elect had left this transitory world for their eternal home, when the Danes—as I have already related—had long raged through England showing no respect for things human or divine, the law of God began to be shamelessly disregarded. Human activities always tend towards evil; and if rulers with power to enforce the law are removed, appalling acts and shocking desecrations are committed.⁵³

The removal of legitimate, law-enforcing kings - the plural suggesting the kings of the House of Wessex - produced disasters, which Orderic never assigned to an individual perpetrator. A Danish king cannot distinguish himself in this version of the story, wherein the singular is so decisively written out of the past.

The Danes were foremost a threat because they were pagans who disregarded God's law. Cnut did not belong to any redeeming force: he was a conqueror from the wrong direction. Cnut was no English king standing before God, humbly relinquishing command of the waves;⁵⁴ rather, Cnut's identity remained submerged in this sea of pagan, Danish iniquity. William, appearing in direct contrast to Cnut,⁵⁵ excelled as a Christian king in that he decisively defeated this long-standing pagan influence in England. Orderic gave credit to William for his piety, and his restoration of Christian faith, rituals and structures—in other words, those accomplishments most significant within Orderic's historical project, an ecclesiastical history. Despite William's many faults,⁵⁶ Orderic's famous 'Norman yoke' was not of William's making. Rather, the English suffered because the Norman lords failed to respect their king ('But meanwhile the English were groaning under the Norman yoke, and suffering oppressions from the proud lords who ignored the king's injunctions').⁵⁷

Even in acknowledging Norman oppression, Orderic's lament about English dependence on foreign rule was most barbed not at the relations between English and Normans, but between English and Danes. Orderic, preserving the words of William of Poitiers, claimed that some of the English thought that the way to throw off the Norman yoke was to exchange it for another yoke - the Danes:

And so the English groaned aloud for their lost liberty and plotted ceaselessly to find some way of shaking off a yoke that was so intolerable and unaccustomed. Some sent to Swein, king of Denmark, and urged him to lay claim to the kingdom of England, which his ancestors Swein and Cnut had won by the sword.⁵⁸

In the context of Orderic's story of the Danish invasions, there is a deep irony in these words. In tone they are reminiscent of Gildas and Bede in describing the Britons' spineless and fruitless entreaties for Roman protection.⁵⁹ The English were in a state so abject that instead of asserting themselves, some sought the same pagan rule which, as Orderic asserted, created the moral decline which brought about the Norman Conquest in the first place. His is hardly an absolution for the English; it may reflect Orderic's feeling that he was an exile from England, and that his relationship with England was peripheral to his own task.

Conclusions

In twelfth-century revisions of the eleventh-century Danish Conquest of England, translations between languages are less significant than grammatical and syntactic changes. Seemingly minor alterations in a version effected a transformation in the received picture of the past and in the nature of the disruption. One emergent theme across versions of the Danish Conquest is

the interest in recording or rewriting the past as though it were characterized more by mediation than by violence. We could read this as evidence of a desire to affirm the diplomatic processes that were also at work, or of a desire to minimize the sense of crisis. Disruption itself did not vanish: the narrators of history moved it, changed emphases, and included different individual or group participants in order to convey their historical messages.

Orderic's version shares several elements with the twelfth-century English writers. He praised William I as a legitimate ruler in England for his piety, although he condemned the king for some Christian failings. He attributed the decline he identified in late eleventh-century England in part to the absence of royal leadership, which suggests that he shared with his contemporaries in England high expectations for a king's behaviour and belief in his ability to influence events. But Orderic did not credit Cnut with a transformation into an English king: as part of the Danish dynasty, he remained part of the negative pagan influence on England.

Orderic offered a different overall picture of history from his contemporaries, and went furthest in explaining the Conquest by collective sin, which reflects his intellectual affinity with Bede. But Orderic wrote at a distance from eleventh- and twelfth-century England, and from St-Evroul outwards: his story of England's invasions belonged to a larger story about the development of Christianity and the challenges which the faith faced, whether in England, Normandy or on crusade. Although he was more sympathetic to the English than were his predecessors in Normandy,⁶⁰ Orderic was foremost a Norman writer in that he viewed the Normans as intercessors on England's behalf, justifying William's claim to the English throne. The English had no autonomy over their own fate and, even fifty years after 1016, were at the mercy of the long-term effects of Cnut's conquest.⁶¹

For the English writers, foreign rule was not necessarily a shameful matter. They did not group Swein and Cnut in the same sense (or indeed, the same sentence) as a dynasty. Instead, they made sharp distinctions between the characters of each as part of their projects to glorify England's past under those whom they considered England's legitimate kings. In their versions, ethnic and religious origins became less significant than national and religious identities; the Danish or pagan origins of their rulers were not sources of concern. In distinguishing Cnut from his Scandinavian origins, they made the case for his legitimacy as an English king.

In taking this approach to rewriting the past, the historians writing in England avoided explaining the Danish Conquest with reference to collective sin. Instead, they made the disruption look planned (by making changes to the prohibitions against Danish kings), rational (by describing Cnut's transformations and suing for peace) and seamless (by re-ordering events and choosing significant moments in which to call Cnut king of England). The twelfth-century histories of a twice-conquered people related the same events as did their sources; but, through creating new versions, they achieved a version which rendered the English less abject.

What the twelfth-century English accounts have in common, across genre, is a desire to make the English the authors of their own destiny. Unlike Orderic, who was at ten years of age sent into exile, they were not victims of fate. Herein we find a nascent national identity. A consistent view of Cnut emerged from the different versions of English chronicles. In reframing their sources to make Cnut look legitimate, they suggested a new solidification of identity in England which departed from the mode of explaining invasion as punishment for sin. Distinguishing individual motivations and merits was much more important to the twelfth-century historians in England than was characterizing disruption as part of a larger phenomenon of politics, dynastic nature or even the war of Christianity against paganism.

The twelfth-century English writers shared with their continental counterparts in both centuries an interest in avoiding right of conquest as the reason for the Danish victory in 1016. The terms on which the conquest supposedly happened mattered, regardless of distance and perspective. The Conquest, in all continental cases, was viewed as both disruptive and restorative - the view of the aggressor. What the English writers did was to adapt a bit of both: they wrote in the best of the change, but without sacrificing the dignity of the English. Small-scale changes to person, number and order effected sea changes in how disruption in the past was conveyed and felt. On both sides of the Channel, twelfth-century historians shared assumptions about invasion, but the relative importance of these manifested itself in different ways according to the objectives each author had in narrating the past as a whole.

Writing the history of England's Danish Conquest over the ensuing century was as much about orienting and re-orienting ideas as it was about retelling them. The effect of these historians' textual arguments permits us to see why they made certain changes in translation, and how they reframed accounts of events in order to direct their implications to new purposes. The past was disputed territory: navigating it required precision and dexterity. Crises became continuations, but of different phenomena. These varied views of the Danish Conquest offer an important reminder of how useful it is to remember the effect that words, phrases and stories have on our perceptions of the past. We, as historians of any period, should continue to be aware of the extent to which translation shapes, directs and ultimately has the power to change ideas.

Notes

¹ For explorations of these themes, see R. Fleming (1991) *Kings and Lords in Conquest England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); I. Howard (2005) 'Harold II: a Throne-worthy King' in G.R. Owen-Crocker (ed.) *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer), pp. 35–52; S. Baxter (2007) *The Earls of Mercia: Lordship and Power in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

² E. van Houts (1995) 'The Norman Conquest through European Eyes', *English Historical Review*, CX, 843–53; see also D. Bates (2006) 'William the Conqueror and his Wider Western European World', *Haskins Society Journal*, XV, 73–87.

³ A. Jorgensen (2010) 'Rewriting the Æthelredian Chronicle: Narrative Style and Identity in Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS F' in A. Jorgensen (ed.) *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature, History* (Turnhout: Brepols), pp. 113–38.

⁴ Hereafter, respectively: Orderic, William (unless referring to William of Jumièges), John, Henry, Gaimar.

⁵ 'Se Cnut gewende him ut mid his flotan. 7 wearð þæt earme folc þus beswican þurh hine. 7 wænde þa suðweard oð þæt he com to Sandwic. 7 let þær up þa gislas þe his fæder gesealde wæron. 7 cearf of heora handa 7 heora nosa.' ASC (versions C: Abingdon Chronicle II - manuscript Cotton Tiberius B.i, D: Worcester Chronicle - manuscript Cotton Tiberius B. iv, D: Peterborough (or Laud) Chronicle, manuscript Laud misc. 636; hereafter all these versions cited as CDE) 1014. This and subsequent ASC quotations from J. M. Bately et al (eds.) (1996–2004) *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, 8 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), V–VII; translations from M. Swanton (ed. and transl.) (2000) *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, revised edn. (London: Phoenix Press), p. 145.

⁶ ASC (CDE) 1016.

⁷ E. M. C. van Houts (ed. and transl.) (1992–1995) *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford

University Press) II, 5–7, pp. 14–19 (hereafter cited as *GND*); see also E. van Houts (2015) ‘Normandy’s View of the Anglo-Saxon Past in the Twelfth Century’ in M. Brett and D. A. Woodman, *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp. 125–6.

⁸ *GND*, II, 7, pp. 18–19.

⁹ *GND*, II, 4, pp. 10–13.

¹⁰ *GND*, II, 6–7, pp. 16–17.

¹¹ ‘*Nullis criminum existentibus culpis*’, *GND*, II, 6, pp. 14–17. William of Jumièges is the first writer to allege and describe the day’s atrocities: see *GND*, II, p. 16 n.1.

¹² ASC (CDE) 1013; *GND*, II, 7, pp. 18–19.

¹³ *GND*, II, 7, pp. 16–17.

¹⁴ ‘*Cuius impetum Londonienses non ualentes ferre illius seruitutis iugo colla ferina inuiti subposuere*’, *GND*, II, 7, pp. 18–19.

¹⁵ ‘*Adelredus ... ab Anglis se uidit funditus destitui*’, *GND*, II, 7, pp. 18–19.

¹⁶ E. Christiansen (ed. and transl.) (1998) *Dudo of St Quentin: History of the Normans*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press), pp. 25–6. On William of Jumièges’s project to revise Dudo, recording the rise of Normandy through the deeds of its dukes, see E. van Houts (2003) ‘Historical Writing’ in C. Harper-Bill and E. van Houts (eds) *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer), pp. 105–7.

¹⁷ ‘[Swein], *domine rex, licentia a te accepta abiit, ut fratrem suum inibi interfectum ulcisceretur ... ac mauult ibi exul degens amicusque factus Anglorum, quos tua manu uicit, gloriari, quam exercitum reducens tibi subdi tibi que uictoriam ascribi,*’ in A. Campbell (ed.) (1949) *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society), pp. 10–11.

¹⁸ ‘*Hac illaque patria priuati inter primos hostes regis paenas luent*’, *Encomium Emmae*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁹ Cnut does eventually outlaw Thorkell, which the encomiast would have known: ASC (CDE) 1021.

²⁰ E. A. Winkler (2013) ‘England’s Defending Kings in Twelfth-Century Historical Writing’, *Haskins Society Journal*, XXV, 147–63; E. A. Winkler (2013) ‘Royal Responsibility in Post-Conquest Invasion Narratives’, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford.

²¹ Compare, for example, J. Gillingham (2000) *The English in the twelfth century: imperialism, national identity and political values* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer), pp. 6–7 and pp. 128–9.

²² M. Salama-Carr (2007) ‘Introduction’ in M. Salama-Carr (ed.) *Translating and Interpreting Conflict* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), p. 7.

²³ R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk (eds.) (transl. J. Bray and P. McGurk) (1995–) *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), II [1014], pp. 478–9 (hereafter cited as JW).

²⁴ JW [1014], II, pp. 478–9; ASC (CDE) 1014.

²⁵ J. P. Gates (2013) ‘The *Fulmannod* Society: Social Valuing of the (Male) Legal Subject’ in L. Tracy (ed.) *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 132–4, 141–3, 147–8.

²⁶ Compare the blindings in ASC (CDE) 993, 1006; for the view that these would probably not have appeared arbitrarily violent to its audience, see S. Keynes (1986) ‘A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, XXXVI, 195–217, at 212–13; see also: D. Whitelock (1968) ‘Wulfstan Cantor and Anglo-Saxon law’ in A. H. Orrick (ed.) *Nordica et Anglica* (The Hague: Mouton), pp. 83–7. See also K. van Eickels (2004) ‘Gendered Violence: Castration and Blinding as

Punishment for Treason in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England’, *Gender & History*, XVI, 588–602, esp. at 588–90; L. Tracy (2013) ‘A History of Calamities? The Culture of Castration’ in L. Tracy (ed.) *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 19–24.

²⁷ ASC (CDE) 1014; as in note 5 above ‘Cnut himself ... hands and noses.’

²⁸ The addition of this detail could be an attempt to not only enhance the vivid picture of Cnut’s grave actions, but also to show Cnut asserting dynastic superiority over the English: see Tracy, ‘A History of Calamities?’, pp. 19–22.

²⁹ R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, M. Winterbottom (eds. and transl.) (1998–1999) *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press), I, pp. 310–11, II, p. 179 (hereafter cited as *GR*); compare ASC (CDE) 1014. See also J. Gillingham (2001) ‘Civilizing the English? The English Histories of William of Malmesbury and David Hume’, *Historical Research*, LXXIV, 17–43, at 37. On the significance of Scandinavian practice in the punishments, see also van Eickels, ‘Gendered Violence’, 100–1; compare E. Z. Tabuteau (2003) ‘Punishments in Eleventh-Century Normandy’ in W. C. Brown and P. Górecki (eds) *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 131–49.

³⁰ Compare ASC (CDE) 1014; see note 23 above for ASC (1014) ‘records that ... forever’.

³¹ The story (not in ASC or JW) is first recorded by Henry of Huntingdon; it may originate from oral tradition: see C. E. Wright (1939) *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd), pp. 191–7; compare Henry of Huntingdon, below in note 36 ‘but in Henry’s version ... *concordatus est*’ and with I. Short (ed. and transl.) (2009) *Estoire des Engleis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 232–3 (hereafter cited as *Estoire*).

³² *GR*, I, pp. 316–19, II, pp.180-8.

³³ See M. Strickland (1998) 'Provoking or Avoiding Battle? Challenge, Duel and Single Combat in Warfare of the High Middle Ages' in M. Strickland (ed.) *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford: Paul Watkins), p. 329.

³⁴ '*Uerum quia ambo non indebite regnum efflagitent quod patres amborum tenuerint, conuenire prudentiae ut depositis animositatibus Angliam partiantur. Susceptum est hoc dictum ab utroque exercitu magnoque assensu firmatum, quod et aequitati conquadret, et mortalium paci tot miseris defatigatorum placide consuleret ... Ita Edmundus unanimi clamore omnium superatus concordiae indulisit, fedusque cum Cnutone percussit, sibi Westsaxonum, illi concedens Mertiam*', *GR*, I, pp. 318–9, II, pp. 180–9.

³⁵ See D. Roffe (2010) 'The Danes and the Making of the Kingdom of the English' in H. Tsurushima (ed.) *Nations in Medieval Britain* (Donington: Shaun Tyas), pp. 40–1; see also D. M. Hadley (2008) 'The Creation of the Danelaw' in S. Brink and N. Price (eds.) *The Viking World* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 375–8. On identity and integration in the Danelaw, see D. M. Hadley (2002) 'Viking and Native: Re-thinking Identity in the Danelaw', *Early Medieval Europe*, XI, 45–70, esp. at 46–53.

³⁶ D. Greenway (ed.) (1996) *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 352–5 (hereafter cited as *HA*); compare ASC (CDE) 1014.

³⁷ '*Cnut uero intime dolens, gentem illam sui causa destructam, perrexit cum nauibus ad Sandwic*', *HA*, pp. 352–5; compare ASC (CDE) 1014.

³⁸ *HA*, pp. 366–71 and pp. 410–11.

³⁹ *HA*, pp. 360–1; compare ASC (CDE) 1016.

⁴⁰ See for example *Estoire*, p. 40 and pp. 114–15.

⁴¹ Compare S. Crane (1999) 'Anglo-Norman Cultures in England, 1066–1460' in David Wallace (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press), p. 40; A. Bell (1950) “Gaimar’s Early ‘Danish’ Kings”, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXV, 601–40.

⁴² ‘*Tut cel país a sei turnad. / De tutes parz vindrent Engleis / si se pristent a Cnuth li reis,*’ *Estoire*, pp. 228–31.

⁴³ Genre and Gaimar’s aristocratic audience are reflected here. On these themes, see for example P. Dalton (2007) “Geffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*, Peacemaking, and the ‘Twelfth-Century Revival of the English Nation’”, *Studies in Philology*, CIV, 427–54.

⁴⁴ *Estoire*, pp.

⁴⁵ *Estoire*, pp. 228–31.

⁴⁶ ‘*Ke dirraie des dous regnez? / Chescons fu richement chasiez. / Ore regnouent plus üeement / ke ne funt frere ne parent, / e plus s’entreamerent [c]il dui / ke ne funt frere, ço qui*’, *Estoire*, pp. 238–41.

⁴⁷ M. Chibnall (ed. and transl.) (1969–80) *Ecclesiastical History*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), II, pp. 184–9, 238–41, 248–9 (hereafter cited as *HE*).

⁴⁸ See e.g. D. Roach (2016) ‘Orderic Vitalis and the First Crusade’, *Journal of Medieval History*, XLII, 177–201.

⁴⁹ ‘*Denique post multas strages defuncto Egelredo rege et Edmundo Irnside filio eius Angliam optinuit, et ipse postmodum filiique eius Heraldus et Hardecunutus plus quam xl annis possedit,*’ *HE*, II, pp. 244–5.

⁵⁰ M. Chibnall (1978) ‘Feudal society in Orderic Vitalis’, *Anglo-Norman Studies*, I, 35–48; M. Chibnall (1970) ‘Les droits d’héritage selon Orderic Vital’, *Revue historique de droit français et étranger*, 4 série, XLVIII, 347; M. Chibnall (1996) *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer).

⁵¹ *HE*, II, ‘Introduction’, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

⁵² *‘Prolixam digressionem sed nisi fallor non inutilem protelaui, ed de priscis annalibus collecta recensui, ut causa manifeste pateat studioso lectori, cur Anglos agrestes et pene illitteratos inuenerint Normanni, quos olim optimis institutionibus sollerter instruxerunt pontifices Romani,’* HE, II, p. 207 and pp. 246–7.

⁵³ *‘Sic omnipotentis Dei iusto nutu postquam electi de transitoriis ad æterna migrarunt, dum Daci ut iam descripsimus diuino et humano metu carentes per Angliam diu debachati sunt. Humana exercitia quæ semper ad nefas prona sunt, subtractis rectoribus cum uirga disciplinæ per infandos actus abominabilia facta sunt,’* HE, II, pp. 246–7.

⁵⁴ HA, pp. 366–9.

⁵⁵ Compare R. H. C. Davis and M. Chibnall (eds. and transl.) (1998) *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 2–3.

⁵⁶ HE, IV, pp. 80–97.

⁵⁷ *‘Interea Normannico fastu Angli opprimuntur, et præsidibus superbis qui regis monitus spernebant admodum iniuriabantur,’* HE, II, pp. 202–3.

⁵⁸ *‘Amissa itaque libertate Angli uehementer ingemiscunt, et uicissim qualiter intolerabile iugum sibi hactenus insolitum excutiant subtiliter inquirunt. Igitur ad Suenum regem Danorum dirigunt, adque ut regnum Angliæ quod Suenus et Chunutus aui eius armis optinuerunt reposcat expetunt,’* HE, II, pp. 202–3.

⁵⁹ Orderic ‘knew and loved’ Bede’s works: Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis*, pp. 9–10.

⁶⁰ For the view that Orderic gave a voice to the victimized English, see van Houts, ‘Normandy’s View of the Anglo-Saxon Past’, pp. 127–30, 137, 140.

⁶¹ Compare William of Jumièges and Dudo of St Quentin, above in notes 7 to 16, and with van Houts, ‘Normandy’s View of the Anglo-Saxon Past’, pp. 124–6, 137.

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