



How significant are the Scandinavian migrations for the creation of identities in the early middle ages?

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The significance of Scandinavian migration to the British Isles, for the identities of both the indigenous people and the Scandinavian settlers during the early middle ages, is dichotomous and complex. Identity is not one dimensional and fixed; it is multiple and fluid. Ethnic identity might be expressed through language, religion and culture, but could arguably be defined by history, geographical origin or parentage. National identity can be undermined by regional identities. Social roles, for example mother, farmer and earl, imply other identities. It is clearly impossible to define what underpins identity. Indeed, the Vikings have several 'labels' in medieval texts which suggest several assigned identities. The scholar Alcuin wrote from the court of Charlemagne to Bishop Higeald, following the first recorded Viking raid in 793 on the monastery at Lindisfarne. Outraged, he describes the Vikings as 'heathens [who] desecrated god's sanctuaries'.¹ Despite conflict between tribes in Ireland, the Irish sense of shared polity and Christianity set the non-Christian Vikings in such striking opposition that they are repeatedly referred to as 'Gaill' or foreigners in *The Annals of Ulster*. In contrast, in *Orkneyinga Saga*, Svein Asleifarson, a prolific Viking is described as 'the greatest man the western world has ever seen'.² The word 'Viking', is in itself not an 'ethnic label, but is descriptive of what they did'.³ It refers to the act of travelling to raid, steal and plunder. These are clearly broadly different identities of Scandinavians (a blanket term referring to the peoples of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and indeed another identity), assigned to them by others in response to their raiding and migrating activities.

The concept of fluid multiple identities, when applied to the context of Anglo-Saxon England at the time of Viking raiding and invasion, develops our understanding of how identities were formed and most importantly, the motivation which lay behind the acquisition. Consideration of these motivations reveals how politically driven public identities were imposed by the kings of Wessex in the pursuit of national unity and control. In parallel, identities were performed as strategies by Scandinavian settlers to form allegiances and successfully assimilate with their new English neighbours within the area of the Danelaw.

There was no 'ethnic purity'⁴ in the British Isles during the middle ages; it was a composite of many migrant peoples. Boundaries delineating landownership and control were 'blurred'.⁵ Pressure from the Scots and Picts, extension into Celtic Wales and threats of

¹ R.I. Page. *Chronicles of the Vikings. Records, Memorials and Myths*, (London: The British Museum Press, 1995), p. 79.

² *Orkneyinga Saga*, ed. & trans. H. Pálsson & P. Edwards, (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p.218.

³ James Graham-Campbell & Colleen E. Bately, *Vikings in Scotland. An Archaeological Survey*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 1.

⁴ Alfred P. Smyth. 'The Emergence of English Identity, 700-1000', in *Medieval Europeans*, ed Alfred P. Smyth, (Basingstoke, & London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), p.24.

⁵ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest, A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, (London, New York, Melbourne & Auckland, 1989), p.114.

invasion by the Vikings in conjunction with conflict between the kingdoms, of what has come to be known as England, created unstable notions of identity.

At the time of Alfred's accession as king of Wessex in 871, the 'Great Army' of Vikings had established overwinter camps on the Isle of Thanet (851), began settling within East Anglia (865), and captured York (866).⁶ As the conflict continued Scandinavian settlement became established. Contemporary evidence suggesting such activity is found in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. For the year 876 it states: 'And that year Halfdan divided up the land of Northumbria and they [the raiding army] were ploughing and providing for themselves.'⁷ The English people were becoming overwhelmed by the threat of Viking migration, but amidst the threat, Alfred posited a vision of unity amongst the English people. Alfred commenced the 'making of Anglecynn' (English); a process of identity construction, of which the Viking raiding and migration was to become an essential component.

Alfred sought to create a 'common heritage, one faith, and a shared history'⁸, through a programme of language and literature, laws and Christianity. The word 'Anglecynn', appears with more frequency in texts during the 'last two decades of the ninth century'.⁹ These texts were chosen by Alfred and formed part of a canon to be used during his education of the 'free-born young men among the *Anglecynn*;¹⁰ thus demonstrating a conscious attempt to shape English identities through politically biased texts. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was commissioned by Alfred not only to record current events, but to re-articulate history since the beginning of time according to the *Old Testament*. Shared identities would be reformed through a common English history which would remind the English people of their once close relationship with God. The significance of re-articulating history as a way of creating memories is expressed by Zoe Devlin, who asserts, 'The way people remember the past has repercussions for their lives in the present, most especially in terms of their identity'.¹¹ King Athelstan, grandson of Alfred, continued his grandfather's legacy in creating a shared sense of nation amongst the English. Athelstan and his warriors are celebrated in defeating the Hiberno-Norse Vikings from Ireland, at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937. A poem depicting the battle can be read in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. The Vikings are described fleeing the battle scene.

The Norsemen put out in their rivet-studded ships,
Bloodied survivors of spears, towards *Dingesmere*,
Making for Dublin across the deep,
The land of Irish, humiliated.¹²

The poem which is believed to have been a later addition to the Chronicle, and possibly not contemporary, has a propagandist tone. Whilst the Scottish enemy is mentioned the emphasis is on the humiliating defeat of the Vikings. References to Athelstan's ancestors, express a shared heroic history – the 'Angles' and the 'Saxons' who, as 'Valiant fighting-men' were, (unlike the Vikings at Brunanburh), successful warriors, as they 'overcame the Britons'.¹³ The poem clearly is an example of creating historic memory from which identity can be

⁶ Katherine Holman, *The Northern Conquest. Vikings in Britain and Ireland*, (Oxford: Signal Books Ltd, 2007), pp258-259.

⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in Holman, *The Northern Conquest. Vikings in Britain and Ireland*, p.47.

⁸ Foot, 'The Making of Anglecynn', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series. Vol.6.* (1996), p.28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3678228>

⁹ Foot, 'The Making of the Anglecynn', p.30

¹⁰ Foot, 'The Making of the Anglecynn', p.30.

¹¹ Zoe Devlin, *Remembering the Dead in Anglo-Saxon England: memory theory in archaeology and history*, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), p.6.

¹² Brunanburh, in Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings*, p.137.

¹³ Brunanburh, in Page. *Chronicles of the Vikings*, p.138.

conceived. The Vikings are vital to the composition. In opposition they emphasise a common purpose and collective identity to Athelstan and his Anglecynn warriors.

Smyth claims that ‘Outsiders... were defined in terms of what they were not’.¹⁴ It was, what the Vikings were not, in opposition to the Anglecynn, which Alfred focused on to emphasise his construction of English identity. The most striking difference between the Vikings and the English was religion. Asser, Alfred’s biographer refers to the earliest Viking invaders as ‘pagani’¹⁵ their opposition is clearly expressed. The words of Alcuin in his response to the Viking raid on Lindisfarne, written almost one hundred years before the reign of Alfred, expresses a similar enduring sentiment which is echoed in the texts of Alfred, Wulfstan and beyond the Viking age into the later middle ages. The Vikings were not only the ‘heathen’ perpetrators of terrible events; they were the consequence of the people’s sin, which they had ‘brought upon themselves’.¹⁶ Wulfstan II, the statesman and Archbishop of York wrote great sermons at the beginning of the eleventh century when England was under immense pressure and threat from the Danes. His message is directed at the English and those successfully evangelised Scandinavian settlers from earlier invasion. He warns that because ‘God’s dues have for too long dwindled away in every region within this nation, and the laws of the people have deteriorated all too much, and sanctuaries are commonly violated’¹⁷ they are consequently besieged with ‘pirates so strong with God’s consent’.¹⁸ The Danish Vikings which threatened the authority and power of Æthelred II and the church, are portrayed here as rightful punishment from God for the sins of the English.

The notion of English identity is clearly reliant on the Scandinavian presence. The Treaty of Wedmore presented an event which promoted Alfred’s vision of Englishness. Indeed, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry in 886 commenting on the treaty state that ‘all the English people (Anglecynn) that were not under subjection to the Danes submitted to him’.¹⁹ Alfred and his West Saxon warriors had enjoyed victory over Guthrum and his army at Edington in 878. In negotiations with Guthrum, Alfred assumed the role of head of ‘councillors of all the English race (ealles Anglecynnnes witan)’.²⁰ Boundaries marking areas of English and Danish control were agreed. Smyth suggests that events at the Treaty of Wedmore prompted a cohesion between the people of the Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish kingdoms, as there was now a ‘nation of Danish, conquerors – turned – colonists’²¹; the Scandinavians became the ‘Other’, officially standing in direct opposition to the Anglecynn, from which a new Englishness could be defined.

Negotiations at the Treaty of Wedmore established a border which is believed to have created the boundary between England and the area of the Danelaw, believed to be the area to the north of Watling Street. The Danelaw came into being during the ninth century. York was captured in 865 and became the centre for Norse and latterly Hiberno-Norse kings. Rule however was not maintained by a king, but a ‘body politic’²² within the five boroughs of the Danelaw established at Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham, Leicester and Derby, as centres of administration. It is recognised as the area of England which underwent the highest concentration of Scandinavian settlement. At this point the focus switches from the impact of

¹⁴ Smyth, *Medieval Europeans*, p. 28.

¹⁵ Smyth, *Medieval Europeans*, p. 29.

¹⁶ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings*, p.79.

¹⁷ The Sermon of ‘Wolf’. Ed. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, 1975, p. 179. as presented in the ‘Burning Desires’ 2008/09 module booklet.

¹⁸ The Sermon of ‘Wolf’. Ed. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, 1975, p. 181. as presented in the ‘Burning Desires’ 2008/09 module booklet.

¹⁹ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in Smyth, *Medieval Europeans*, p.40.

²⁰ Smyth, *Medieval Europeans*, p.40.

²¹ Smyth, *Medieval Europeans*, p.40.

²² P. Sawyer, *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.64.

Scandinavian migration on the identity of the English, to the impact of migration on the identities of the Scandinavian settlers.

The construction of the 'Anglecynn' and the opposing Vikings can be traced through texts such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as a rather prescriptive and politically driven process. In contrast the shaping of both the Scandinavians and the indigenous people's identities within the area of the Danelaw is far more ambiguous. Contemporary written evidence of life within the Danelaw is sparse and is written from within the context of the English. Assumptions about the nature of ethnic identities within the Danelaw rely heavily on archaeological artefacts, place and personal names, and burial sites.

The very idea of an area named the Danelaw suggests a place and people immersed in Scandinavian culture, where Scandinavian ethnicity would dominate. Creation of such an area placed geographically, politically and ideologically in opposition to England reinforced the kings of Wessex's sense of English nationalism; a case of Englishness versus Danishness had been conceived in conjunction with the Danelaw. The reality of this would be dependent however, on the level of Scandinavian settlement, an issue pertinent to the creation of identities in the Danelaw. It is a topic which continues to prompt disagreement amongst scholars. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports large armies and acquisition of land. In the entry for 880 it states: 'Here the raiding army went from Cirencester into East Anglia and settled that land and divided it up'.²³ Such reports may give the impression of large swathes of invaders, but consideration must be given to the possibility that the extent of invasion may have been exaggerated in line with maintaining the Vikings as the antagonistic and foreboding 'Other'.

The most obvious evidence of Scandinavian settlement is the number and distribution of place-names. Tania Styles warns however, against the 'mapability' of place-names as evidence of Scandinavian settlement.²⁴ Variation in the distribution of Scandinavian place-names does not give a simple representation of the levels of concentration of Scandinavian people. A single Scandinavian could settle on unpopulated land and assign his name to it. Large groups of Scandinavians could settle and merge into an already populated area and have no impact on the naming of settlements or land. Wormwald suggests that this possibility accounts for the lack of Scandinavian place-names in East Anglia, given that records in the *Domesday Book* from 1086 suggest that the region was the most densely populated area in England during the early middle ages. This is in contrast with the abundance of Scandinavian place-names across Lincolnshire and Yorkshire,²⁵ which were relatively sparsely populated. An assimilation of English and Scandinavian attitudes to place-naming practices is demonstrated by using a personal given name, plus 'by' (Old Norse for farmstead or village) - this was common in England but rare in Denmark.²⁶ This could indicate ownership or some association with the land. Applying your name to a piece of land is in a sense marking the landscape with your identity; a symbol possibly of success in invasion, or of wealth and power. However caution should be exercised when considering the significance of place-names. The assigning of Scandinavian personal given names remained popular into the thirteenth century amongst the Anglicised population of East Anglia, and demonstrates how a name alone cannot be regarded as an indicator of Scandinavian ethnicity.

²³The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in Holman, *The Northern Conquest*, p.47.

²⁴ Tania Styles, 'Scandinavian elements in English place-names: some semantic problems.' In *Vikings in the Danelaw. Select papers from the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham & York, 21-30 August 1997*. Ed. James Graham-Campbell, Judith Jesch and David N. Parsons, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), p. 296.

²⁵ P. Wormwald, 'Scandinavian Settlement' in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Eric John, Patrick Wormwald & James Campbell, (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.162-163.

²⁶ D. Hadley, 'Viking & native: re-thinking identity in the Danelaw'. p.58.

Language is an essential element of identity, the means by which we communicate and express who we are. However evaluation of the use of Scandinavian language within the Danelaw leaves many questions unanswered. Identification of around nine hundred Scandinavian derived words within Standard English indicates mutual language exchange.²⁷ Many words are associated with seafaring and administration. More significantly, 'happy', 'ill', 'tight', 'rugged', 'birth' and 'dirt', are words of Norse origin which suggest that oral communication occurred between Scandinavian and English people during the ordinary events of their daily lives. This contrasts with the French loan words which came into use following the Norman Conquest and are predominantly associated with prestige and administrative topics.²⁸ Archaeological evidence strongly indicates that the cities of York and Lincoln were bustling trade settlements where communication between the Scandinavians and English would have been vital. Evidence suggesting the longevity of Scandinavian language in the Danelaw is non-conclusive, though intermarriage, thinly distributed Scandinavian populations and the need to communicate with the indigenous English would have contributed to its disappearance.

Excavation of burials from the Viking period in the area of the Danelaw prompts questions regarding what has been described as the Scandinavian's rapid conversion to Christianity. Maintenance of faith may rely heavily on a sense of community. Consider the solidarity within the congregations which would have gathered for a sermon written by Wulfstan. Once the Scandinavians had left their communities in the homelands, and lacking the authoritative structures of Christianity, pagan rituals may have been lost. New solidarity and acceptance by the English could be quickly gained through acculturation into the Christian church community. Discovery of 'unusual graves' from the period, for example a late Anglo-Saxon female skeleton found buried with a horse in a Christian graveyard in Norfolk and a solitary burial at Wicken Fen, are suggestive of an Anglo-Scandinavian presence. A burial has as much significance for those who bury the dead, as for those they bury. Major life events are times when memories are stirred. These graves therefore, may not necessarily be indicative of continued paganism under the guise of Christianity. Alternatively they may represent identities expressed through the memory and enactment of past traditions. Evidence of material culture within the Danelaw is 'elusive'.²⁹ Sawyer asserts that the lack of material culture reflects that the settlers 'became effectively indistinguishable'.³⁰ There are however, items of material culture that represent assimilation of culture, religion and economic practices. Coinage was adopted by the Scandinavians within the Danelaw, which had not been practiced within their homelands, with the exception of the trading settlement at Hedeby.³¹ Several mints were established producing coins with Christian symbols combined with Scandinavian iconography.³²

Tenth and eleventh century decorated stone grave covers have been located in churches in Lincoln. The grave covers from St.Marks in Wigford in the lower part of the city are decorated with the Borre-style, and believed to be either produced or transported from York, or are copies of grave covers manufactured in York. The grave covers from the upper city are not decorated in this style. David Stocker and Paul Everson claim that the decorative grave covers suggest the presence of a Scandinavian elite in Lincoln who may have had affiliations with York.³³ What is perhaps more significant in terms of identities within the

²⁷ Holman, *The Northern Conquest*, p.72.

²⁸ Holman, *The Northern Conquest*, p.72.

²⁹ P. Sawyer, *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.67.

³⁰ P. Sawyer, *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, p.67.

³¹ Mark Blackburn, 'Expansion and control: aspects of Anglo-Scandinavian minting south of the Humber', in *Vikings in the Danelaw*, p.138.

³² Mark Blackburn, in *Vikings in the Danelaw*, p. 139.

³³ David Stocker & Paul Everson. 'Five towns funerals: decoding diversity in Danelaw stone sculpture', in *Vikings in the Danelaw*, p.241.

Danelaw, is the possibility that markers of social status were at times more salient in asserting identity than any expression of Scandinavian ethnicity.

King Alfred's desire to unite the 'Anglecynn' and shape a new English identity was motivated by power and political gain. Viking conflict and migration enabled Alfred to imagine and promote an opposing 'Other', first in the 'heathen' raiders and then in the people of the Danish, against which Englishness could be defined. However, identities within the Danelaw did not represent the fixed notion of Danishness, upon which Alfred's vision of a united English people was dependent. Material culture, place-names and signs of Christianity suggest assimilation of English and Scandinavian language, religion and cultural practice. In reality the Danelaw was a place of hybridity, a place where at times identities expressing social status and allegiances were of greater importance than identities expressing Scandinavian or indeed English ethnicity.

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