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'Westward I came across the Sea': Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

Susanne Kries

The co-existence of Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in the Anglo-Saxon period has traditionally been evaluated on the basis of Anglo-Saxon written sources, and above all by recourse to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.¹ The *Chronicle* is significant as an ideological work in creating cultural identity and defining national culture. Martin Irvine² and Janet Thormann³ convincingly presented the tenth-century poems incorporated in the various manuscripts of the *Chronicle* as promoting an 'Englishness' constituted through West Saxon rule.⁴ Those scholars who have turned to Scandinavian poetic records have, however, generally been sceptical about the 'historical' content that skaldic testimony might provide.⁵ The wider cultural-historical implications of the Scandinavian sources have largely been ignored and their status as testimony to a specifically 'Scandinavian' point of view neglected.

This paper seeks to provide a re-evaluation of the question of Anglo-Scandinavian inter-cultural communication by examining a fragmentary poem of the tenth century, Egill Skallagrímsson's *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, which was composed in praise of the West-Saxon King Æthelstan. The poem is a potentially valuable witness since its origin can be traced back to an English context. *Aðalsteinsdrápa* might thus invite us to examine how Scandinavians and English negotiated their identities against a backdrop of ongoing competition. 'Westwards I came across the sea' translates the first line of another poem that is attributed to Egill, *Hofuðlausn*. The poem's geographic reference to England has been appropriated for the title of this article to encourage us to include a Scandinavian perspective in our efforts to understand Anglo-Scandinavian co-existence in ninth- to eleventh-century England.

At this point, it is necessary to give some explanation of the ethnic terminology used in this paper. I am, of course, aware that attributing a 'Scandinavian' perspective to a text like *Aðalsteinsdrápa* is a dangerous venture. I have no wish to project the idea of a modern Scandinavian nation state onto a medieval situation. The term 'Scandinavian' is used here rather as a relative term, defined in reference to the 'English' population of the territory which from the end of the tenth century came to be referred to as England. Expressions of English self-identification can be detected from the late ninth century onward. They are to begin with principally associated with the West-Saxon King Alfred the Great (871–99), who has been credited with promoting the use of the term *Angelcynn* 'English kin' in the vernacular writings associated with his court, including the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.⁶ The use of the label 'English' in this article thus renders that specific identity. The term 'Scandinavian' is used essentially to describe both the Norwegian and Danish population of England, the two ethnic groups that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* identifies by the terms of *Dene* and *Northmen* in its narrative. This general term will give way to a more specific ethnic distinction where the sources justify such a perspective. That medieval Scandinavia, and here especially Iceland, placed a strong premium on individual and collective identities is especially evident in the saga literature that recounts the stories of Norwegian kings and Icelandic farmers, poets and adventurers. Similar traits can be discovered in medieval Icelandic skaldic poetry that, in contrast to the anonymous *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, is usually accompanied by an authorial signifier, a name that evokes certain expectations in the audience — expectations which anonymously transmitted texts would not have evoked. In the case of *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, the credited author is the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson whose poetry is transmitted, mainly if not exclusively, within *Egils saga*, the text that recounts his life.

The following discussion about the specific value of *Aðalsteinsdrápa* as a witness to the competitive interests in Anglo-Scandinavian England will focus very much on the figure of Ælle, an English king, whose identity can be inferred both from Scandinavian as well as English sources. In the first instance we shall see which English and Scandinavian sources deal with 'King Ælle'. As will become evident, the figure of the king has been very differently inscribed into the shared history of the two ethnic groups. Secondly, we shall discuss how the occurrence of the name Ælle in *Aðalsteinsdrápa* influences the interpretation of the text and will analyse how a Scandinavian audience might have understood the poem. While Scandinavian tradition apparently knew only one English King

Ælle, English sources recognise three kings of that name. It will thus be suggested that the different identification of 'King Ælle' in English and Scandinavian tradition allows for a double reading of *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, satisfying both an English as well as a Scandinavian audience. The final section of this paper deals with the consequences of our interpretation in the wider perspective of Anglo-Scandinavian co-existence and identifies the poem as an important witness for the competitive nature of English-Scandinavian relations.

'King Ælle' in Scandinavian and English sources

As Matthew Townend remarks, the name Ella repeatedly occurs in Old Norse poetry, 'making its bearer by far the most frequently named Anglo-Saxon in skaldic verse'.⁷ However, while Ella/Ælle acquired a prominent role in Scandinavian medieval literature beyond that of any other English king, the English sources seem overwhelmingly to discredit his reputation and his status as a legitimate royal representative.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions three kings with the name Ælle: a South Saxon one of the last quarter of the fifth century (cf. entries for 477, 485 and 491), a Deiran one of the later sixth century who much later even made it into the writings of Gower and Chaucer⁸ (cf. entries for 560 and 588) and a Northumbrian king of the ninth century. This last king is also found in Scandinavian sources, where he occurs as part of the literary tradition associated with King Ragnarr loðbrók and his sons. We shall first turn to the Scandinavian sources and then to the English ones to see how they each deal with this historic king, before we address the interpretation of *Aðalsteinsdrápa* and the function of Ælle in the poem.

The literary sources for Ragnarr's career are two Icelandic prose works — the thirteenth-century *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and the slightly later *Ragnarssona þátr* — and the skaldic poem *Krákumál*, which is believed to have been composed in the late twelfth century. All of these sources deal with Ragnarr's death in King Ælle's snake pit in Northumbria, an unhappy end which is also recounted in the work of the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, who devotes book nine of his *Gesta Danorum* to the life and death of the legendary hero. And Saxo's text even presents the raid of the Scandinavian army on England in 866/67 as an act of vengeance on the part of Ragnarr's sons against King Ælle of Northumbria.⁹ Alfred P. Smyth attributes a similar ideological intent to

Krákumál. From the outset, Ragnarr's mission to attack England is presented in the poem as doomed to failure, so that Smyth interprets Ragnarr's loss of the battle and of his life as follows:

The entire episode presents the reader with the strong impression that it was created solely to account for the subsequent invasion of Northumbria by the sons of Ragnarr loðbrók, and for their slaying of King Ælla, in A.D. 867.¹⁰

The question as to whether the snake pit episode has any historical basis need not detain us here, nor its similarity to Gunnarr's death in a snake pit in *Völsunga saga*.¹¹ It is of more relevance to see how the death of Ælle is presented in English and Scandinavian sources respectively.

The story of Ælle's death at the hands of Ragnarr's sons also features in the skaldic poetry of Scandinavia before *Krákumál*. Nine poems mention the eponymous English king.¹² They are Egill Skallagrímsson's *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*, Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Víkingarvísur* and his *Knútsdrápa*, Hallvarðr háreksblesi's *Knútsdrápa*, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Magnúsflokkur*, *Háttalykill* by Hallr Þórarinsson and Jarl Rögnvaldr, Einarr Skúlason's *Haraldsdrápa II* and the anonymous *Krákumál*. Of these poems, five clearly have an English context, even though not all of them were necessarily composed and/or performed in England:¹³ the two *Knútsdrápur* and the *Víkingarvísur* belong to a set of texts dealing with the eleventh-century conquest of England, while the fragmentary *Aðalsteinsdrápa* is a praise poem on the English King Æthelstan. The reference to Ælle in *Magnúsflokkur* also belongs to this group, but will be discussed later. The origins of *Háttalykill* and *Krákumál* are generally associated with the Orkney Islands.¹⁴

Turning first to the three poems associated with Knútr's and Ólafur's conquest of England, we see the following uses of the name Ælle: Hallvarðr's *Knútsdrápa* calls England *Ellu ættleifð* 'Ælle's family inheritance'¹⁵ and the *Víkingarvísur* refer to the English as *Ellu kind*, 'Ælle's kin'.¹⁶ The eponymous King Ælle is thus presented in these sources as the fulcrum for any Scandinavian definition of 'Englishness'. Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*, generally assumed to have been composed between the late 1020s and 1038,¹⁷ offers information as to the killing of Ælle. Here we read in stanza one:

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

Ok Ellu bak,
at, lét, hinn's sat,
Ívarr, ara,
Jórvík, skorit.¹⁸

[And Ívarr, he who resided in York, had Ælle's back cut
by/with an eagle/sword.]

I will leave aside here the question of whether this is a description of the so-called rite of the blood-eagle¹⁹ or whether Roberta Frank is right in assuming that it is an expression for an eagle, a beast of battle, devouring the remains of the slain king.²⁰ A third possible interpretation has been advanced by Rory McTurk, who dismisses both readings of the stanza and instead suggests that *ari*, which is related to the semantically similar *örn* 'eagle', should be taken as meaning 'sword'.²¹ For the time being, suffice it to say here that we have at least one skaldic statement for the confrontation of Ælle and Ívarr, resulting in the latter's victory over the English king.

It becomes clear in the second stanza of Sighvatr's *Knútsdrápa* that the pair Ívarr – Ælle serves as a parallel case for Knútr and his English opponent King Æthelred. Both stanzas also share stylistic similarities, since they are in fact half stanzas, each introduced by the word *ok*, 'and':

Ok senn sonu
sló, hvern ok þó,
Aðalráðs, eða
út flæmði, Knútr.²²

[And Knútr went on to slay Æthelred's sons, and each one to
boot, or chased them out (of the country).]

As Roberta Frank²³ and Alfred Smyth²⁴ have already pointed out, Knútr's Scandinavian conquest thus appears as a re-enactment of former conquest, a reclaiming of 'inherited' property, based on the killing of King Ælle of Northumberland by the *micel here* 'great army', as the *Chronicle* calls the Scandinavian army that landed in England in 866, under Ívarr the Boneless in 867. And it might be added, that the form of the stanza, which is composed in a metre called *tøglag*, gave the verses a specific Cnutian ring, since this metrical form is particularly associated with Knútr's Anglo-Scandinavian court.²⁵ We might thus agree with Matthew Townend that the contexts in which the English

name occurs is usually defined by 'Anglo-Scandinavian confrontations in England'.²⁶ And this is especially apparent in *Magnúsflokkur*, generally thought to have been composed in 1045. Here, the Norwegian King Magnús góði is called *Ellu konr*, 'kinsman of Ella',²⁷ which Matthew Townend convincingly interprets as emphasizing the king's claim to the English throne.²⁸

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* agrees with the Scandinavian sources in maintaining that the *micel here* was responsible for King Ælle's death in York in 867 (MSS A, B, C, D, E).²⁹ However, the *Chronicle* does not mention any connection between Ívarr the Boneless, who was the Scandinavian leader on this venture, and Ragnarr loðbrók.³⁰ In fact, neither Ívarr nor Ragnarr are mentioned in the annals for 867 at all, while most interestingly it is only in the early twelfth-century bilingual MS F of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that Ingware (that is, Ívarr) is explicitly mentioned as the killer, not of Ælle, but of King Edmund the Martyr (s.a. 870). For Ragnarr, whose very existence depends on legend, this might not come as a surprise, but for Ívarr, who is known from several sources outside Scandinavia, this is indeed worthy of notice.

Other sources, including both Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest English texts, recount the story of the death of King Ælle at the hands of the Danes as well, even though the presentations differ. These texts are the late tenth-century *Chronicle* of Æþelweard, the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, Geffrei Gaimar's twelfth-century *L'Estoire des Engleis*³¹ and a Latin account dating from the thirteenth century, the *Narratio de Uxore Aernulfi ab Ella Rege Deirorum Violata*. None of the texts, however, names Ragnarr loðbrók in this context, while Æþelweard's *Chronicle* is the first English source to mention Ívarr in connection with the Scandinavian army fighting against the English in Northumbria in 866/67.³²

Egill's *Aðalsteinsdrápa*

Whereas the two *Knútsdrápur* and the *Víkingarvísur* are clearly set against the backdrop of the Scandinavian conquest of England, Egill Skallagrímsson's *Aðalsteinsdrápa* contextualises itself in a very different situation. The text is a praise poem on the English King Æþelstan who ruled the kingdom of Wessex between 924/5 and 939, during which time he managed to conquer some of the territories under Scandinavian rule, including York. *Egils saga* states that Egill fought on King Æþelstan's side in the battle of the Vínheiði. That battle has often

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

been identified with the battle at Brunanburh, recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 937.³³ The skald spent some time at Æthelstan's court during which — according to *Egils saga* chapter 55 — Egill composed his praise poem on the English king. The saga further states that Egill was rewarded for the poem by the king with two gold bracelets and a valuable cloak that had been worn by the king himself.

Admittedly, only one stanza of *Aðalsteinsdrápa* and the *stef* — or refrain — have survived. The poem thus reads as follows:

Nú hefr foldgnárr fellda,
fells jörð und nið Ellu,
hjaldrsnerandi, harra
höfuðbaðmr, þrjá jöfra;
Aðalsteinn of vann annat,
all's lægra kynfrægjum
hér sverjum þess, hyrjar
hrannbrjótr, konungmanni.³⁴

[Now has the battle-increaser (= warrior = Æthelstan), the lord's/king's³⁵ most important offspring (= Æthelstan), the *foldgnárr* (= he who towers above the earth (?) = Æthelstan) cut down three princes; the land submits to the descendant of Ælle (= Æthelstan). Æthelstan won more, everything/everybody is lower than the king of famous descent — this we swear here(by), breaker of the wave-fire (= gold; 'breaker of the gold' = generous lord = Æthelstan).]

This is followed by the *stef*:

Nú liggr hæst und hraustum
hreinbraut Aðalsteini.³⁶

[Now the highest reindeer-way (= the moor = northern England) belongs to the bold Æthelstan.]

Judith Jesch regards *Aðalsteinsdrápa* as among those skaldic verses that were most probably performed in England and thus renders the historical situation in which the poem is set as authentic.³⁷ We therefore have to assume that both an English and Scandinavian audience was present when the poem was recited.

Aðalsteinsdrápa praises the military success of the English king and calls him 'battle-increaser' and 'breaker of the wave-fire'. These two kennings belong to the standard repertoire of the skalds, describing the one praised as bold and generous. Much more unusual is the kenning *foldgnárr*. And its interpretation has posed enormous difficulties to scholars past and present.

The second element of this kenning seems to echo the name of Gná, a messenger of the goddess Frigg, known for riding a horse that can gallop across the sea and sky. *Foldgnárr* has therefore either been read as a noun expressing something that is aloft — with *fold*, 'earth', describing something that rises above the earth³⁸ — or as a kenning for somebody who moves through the sky, like a valkyrie, and thus an expression for 'battle'.³⁹ The latter interpretation, however, is only possible by a change of the first element *fold*- 'land' to *folk*- 'people, battle, army' (cf. other kennings as *folk-Rán* 'valkyrie') or *fald*- 'head-dress, helmet' ('head-dress of Gná' = 'head-dress of the flying one' = 'head-dress of a valkyrie' = 'helmet' = 'battle'). Since the stanza is transmitted only in the *Egils saga* version in *Möðruvallabók*, which clearly reads *fol(l)dgnarr*, I shall follow the first interpretation in assuming that the kenning refers to something that is aloft, i. e. the elevated status of King Æthelstan.

Aðalsteinsdrápa clearly touches on expressions of hierarchy, both with respect to actual space as well as royal authority as defined by genealogical descent. The first kenning for Æthelstan, *foldgnárr*, designates the spheres of heaven and earth. Further hierarchical expressions are provided by the description that Æthelstan cut *down* three princes and laid *low* a country that in the poem's refrain is referred to as *hæst* 'the highest'. Moreover, *Aðalsteinsdrápa* stresses Æthelstan's descent three times: he is a descendant of Ælle, the king's/lord's most important offspring and he is *kynfrægjum* 'of a famous family' — everybody is lower than the king. And with this in mind we shall revert to our starting point, King Ælle.

Æthelstan, genealogy and royal authority (1):

Aðalsteinsdrápa and the ninth-century English King Ælle

Gabriel M. Spiegel defines the purpose of genealogical constructs as praising a line and legitimising its power; more specifically she argues that a medieval genealogy 'displays a family's intention to affirm and extend its place in political life'.⁴⁰ Genealogy constructs history as a series of biographies linked by 'the

principle of hereditary succession',⁴¹ in which the passing of time is marked by a name — personal history in the true sense of the term. She further observes about the dynastic measuring of time that genealogy 'functioned to secularise time by grounding it in biology, transforming the connection between past and present into a real one, seminally imparted from generation to generation'.⁴² Genealogical (pro)creation thus becomes the very essence of shaping history. Since Æthelstan's power is fatally qualified by his ancestry we will now examine the reputation of the ninth-century King Ælle — whom *Aðalsteinsdrápa* presents as Æthelstan's ancestor — in both English and Scandinavian sources.

The English sources very much doubt the validity of Ælle's rule in Northumberland and thus his role in Anglo-Scandinavian history. They do this essentially by questioning his ancestry and thus his very legitimacy to rule the kingdom. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls Ælle an *ungecyndne cyning* 'unnatural king' (MS A)⁴³ and the *Life of Alfred* adds that he was a tyrant and did not belong to the royal line of Northumbrian kings.⁴⁴ From a purely English perspective, a king surrounded by such reservations will hardly have been an appropriate role model for King Æthelstan, who from 931 onwards assumed titles that not only claimed power over the English, but lordship over all of Britain and who generally adopted a remarkably imperial style in his diplomas and correspondence.⁴⁵ We thus find the motto *Rex to(tius) Brit(anniae)* 'king of the whole of Britain' on Æthelstan's coins after the conquest of York in 927.⁴⁶ Although Æthelweard's late tenth-century *Chronicle* does not mention Ælle by name, it states that the Northumbrians 'pariter omnes quondam sibi ignobilem eligunt regem'⁴⁷ [(they) all unanimously elected an ignoble king]. It is generally assumed that this passage is based on a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* close to MS A. However, we also find independent information. Thus, unlike the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the text names Iguuar (that is, Ívarr) as the leader of the *micl here*. A later source, the twelfth-century *Historia Regum* attributed to Symeon of Durham, confirms the description of the Northumbrian King advanced in the previous sources by calling him a 'tyrannum quendam Ella nomine, non de regali prosapia progenitum'⁴⁸ [a certain tyrant called Ella, not born of royal lineage]. Moreover, Ubbi, Ívarr and Halfdan are mentioned as the leaders of the Scandinavian army.⁴⁹

Contrary to the rather lowly and illegal status attributed to Ælle in the English sources, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* calls him king of England,⁵⁰ while the *þáttr* more accurately describes him as king of Northumbria.⁵¹ De Vries has already argued that the legend of Ragnarr loðbrók and his sons was first created

among Scandinavians in England in the eleventh century, who, with the recent conquest of England by Svein Forkbeard and Knútr the Great, were anxious to justify their ancestors' deeds in ninth-century England.⁵² Part of that strategy might have involved recasting the images of Ívarr and Ælle by associating Ívarr with more heroic motifs and Ælle with more negative attributes, including greed. At the same time the description of Ælle's power remained unchanged, thus providing the Scandinavian imagination with a useful touchstone against which Scandinavian military success could be measured.

What in the *Knútsdrápur* can be interpreted as references to a successful previous conquest situation (Ívarr – Knútr) has a very different ring in a poem that is dedicated not to a Danish, but an English king. By referring to King Æthelstan as of Ælle's stem, *Aðalsteinsdrápa* creates a point of origin for English royalty: the reign of Ælle the Northumbrian king, slain by Ívarr. English history as seen through Scandinavian eyes thus starts in the ninth century, in a situation of mutual conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. This conflict is, however, resolved in favour of the Scandinavians who appear as successors of Ívarr, while Æthelstan's genealogical straitjacket is the unsuccessful King Ælle. The reference to Ælle thus interprets Æthelstan's royal power as depending on Scandinavian supremacy. Read in this way, *Aðalsteinsdrápa* does *not* establish the English king's authority, but rather shows that his authority is challenged by Scandinavian prowess. And since Ælle is made an ancestor of Æthelstan, contested hierarchies are resolved in favour of Scandinavian rule in England. Since Æthelstan continued his West-Saxon predecessors' conquest of Scandinavian controlled territories in England, the fact that the poem reminds the king of previous failure puts an interesting gloss on the ventures of the present.

At this point it is worthwhile to recall Egill's *Hofuðlausn*, which also has an Anglo-Scandinavian context. *Egils saga* chapter 60 recounts the origin of its composition as follows. Egill, on his third voyage to King Æthelstan of England, is shipwrecked at the mouth of the Humber. He decides to surrender himself to Eiríkr Bloodaxe, the Norwegian ruler of the Scandinavian kingdom of York, who back in Norway had proclaimed Egill an outlaw. Egill's death at the hands of the angry king is prevented by his composing and reciting a *drápa* on Eiríkr, *Hofuðlausn* 'Head Ransom'. In this way, and with the help and mediation of his friend Arinbjörn, the poet manages to save himself from death. Thus both *Aðalsteinsdrápa* and *Hofuðlausn* place themselves in an Anglo-Scandinavian context in that they claim to be performed in England by an Icelandic poet.

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

John Hines interprets the specific Scandinavian cultural world evoked in *Höfuðlausn* as being in stark contrast to what we perceive as the cultural and political climate of Anglo-Scandinavian England. He notes:

Both politically and culturally, assimilation between invader and native had been going on for several generations; in the middle of the tenth century this was a strong and continuing process, against which the uncompromisingly Viking character of Egill's poem stands in sharp contrast.⁵³

The point that John Hines here makes about *Höfuðlausn* is also interesting for our interpretation of *Aðalsteinsdrápa*. Images of the assimilation of the resident Scandinavians into a tenth-century English culture are most strongly evoked by numismatic and archaeological evidence, at least if we take the production of stone crosses in Scandinavian fashion as indicative of the adoption of at least the cultural icons of Christianity. However, we also have evidence suggesting that English-Scandinavian competition did not cease to exist despite the claims of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as to the political integration (by conquest) of the Scandinavian parts of England into the sphere of influence of the kings of Wessex. The Scandinavian rulers of York, for example, not only issued coins that resembled the iconography of their English rivals,⁵⁴ but also those bearing signs of a strong Scandinavian identity. A striking example of the latter is offered by some of Olaf Guthfriðson's (939–41) coins which were struck in the name of 'Olaf cunung' and portrayed a raven 'with outstretched wings signifying victory'.⁵⁵ Whilst the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* paints a picture of steady, uninterrupted West Saxon conquest, first of the Danish areas of Mercia and then of Norwegian Northumberland, *Aðalsteinsdrápa* clearly interrupts this success story by challenging the very basis of Æthelstan's authority, reminding him — at least to the ears of his Scandinavian audience — of the unsuccessful outcome of a previous English-Scandinavian conflict.

It is thus especially interesting to note that *Egils saga* makes Eiríkr Bloodaxe, the exiled son of Haraldr Fairhair and the last Norwegian ruler of York, a contemporary of Æthelstan. Although the saga renders Eiríkr's position as that of a sub-king, Egill's poetry clearly presents him as a dangerous and violent person and Egill's own visit to York as an especially risky venture. In *Arinbjarnarkviða*, a poem that Egill dedicated to his friend Arinbjörn who stood up for the skald at King Eiríkr's court in York, the skald reflects on his visit to

York and the performance of *Hqfuðlausn*. Here, Eiríkr is described as 'ynglings burr' [Yngling's son] (stanza 3.2), as 'allvaldr' (stanza 4.1) [omnipotent] and 'ljóðfrömuðr' [patron of the people] (stanza 4.3), who 'und ýgs hjalmi...at landi sat' [ruled the land under the helm of terror] (stanza 4.2-4), 'við stirðan hug' [with a severe mind] (stanza 4.6). We might therefore argue that within the saga context, the competitive nature of English and Scandinavian rule in England was expressed by two kings, Æthelstan and Eiríkr,⁵⁶ both of whom became subjects of Egill's creative talent.⁵⁷

Saxo Grammaticus seems to expand the revenge motif by having Hame, father of Ælle, slain by Ragnarr first before Ælle murders Ragnarr and is in return killed by Ívarr and his brothers. Smyth might well be right in dismissing Saxo's account. He suggests that Saxo transgressed here beyond his saga sources and that his predating of the Scandinavian-English conflict by a generation is exceptional and outside Scandinavian tradition.⁵⁸ He concludes:

We shall see from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that Ælla was a newcomer to the Northumbrian kingship at the time when the sons of Ragnarr descended upon Northumbria in 867, and that he was, furthermore, a usurper.⁵⁹

While Smyth thus rejects Saxo's account, he elevates the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the preferred source for the *historical* rendering of Ælle. This interpretation of the *Chronicle* neglects, however, their specific ideological imperative characterised by the creation of a national community under the kings' of Wessex auspices.

There is another English source that challenges Smyth's interpretation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the most reliable 'historical' record of the events. Rory McTurk⁶⁰ — and Jan de Vries⁶¹ before him — point to this interesting, if somewhat isolated, text that changes the appearance of Ælle slightly but with significant consequences for our present discussion. The source is the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*, anonymously compiled in either the tenth or eleventh centuries. The important change deals with the royal status and background of the king. Whereas the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Life of Alfred* vehemently deny Ælle's legal rights to kingship, the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* presents him as the lawful successor to his brother Osberhtus, King of Northumbria. Ælle's death is still presented as just, occurring as the result of his greediness. He is killed by Danes who in the text assume the role of those sent by God to punish the

sinner.⁶² While the Scandinavian sources embed Ælle in their mytho-historical narrative about the conquest of England, his death receives an altogether different context in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* and is devoid of any historical explanation:

Post haec Osbertus rex abstulit sancto Cuthberto duas uillas, Werceworthe et Tyllemuth. Sed post spacium unius anni, eripuit Deus ab eo uitam et regnum. Cui successit rex Ælle, qui bene promisit sancto confessori sed male egit. Nam abstulit ab eo Billingham, et Illeclif, et Wigeclif, et Creca. Et ideo ira Dei et sancti confessoris accensa est super eum. Nam Ubba dux Fresciorum cum magno Danorum exercitu in regnum eius uenit, et in sancto die palmarum apud Eboracam ciuitatem applicuit. Quod cum audisset Ælle, qui tunc propter odium sancti Cuthberti in Creca morabatur, cum magna superbia surrexit, exercitum cum fratre suo Osberto congregauit, in hostem irruit, sed mox ira Dei et sancti confessoris perterritus, ceso exercitu fugit et corrui, uitamque et regnum perdidit, sicut olim contigit Sauli regi filio Cis, qui cum bene promississet Deo et Samueli prophetae mentitus est et male egit, et iccirco in pugna contra Philisteos cum filio suo Ionathan et melioribus filiorum Israel cecidit.

[After this King Osberht (d. 867) stole from St Cuthbert two villas, Warkworth and Tillmouth. But after the space of one year, God took from him (his) life and kingdom. He was succeeded by King Ælle, who made good promises to the holy confessor but acted badly. For he stole from him Billingham and Cliffe and Wycliffe and Crayke. And this ignited the wrath of God and of the holy confessor against him. For Ubba, duke of the Frisians, entered his kingdom with a great army of Danes and approached the city of York on Palm Sunday. When this news reached Ælle who, out of hatred for St Cuthbert, was then staying at Crayke, he rose up with great arrogance, gathered an army with his brother Osberht, and rushed upon the enemy; but soon, terrified by the wrath of God and St Cuthbert, (his) army having been struck down, he fled, and fell, and lost life and kingdom, just

as once happened to King Saul the son of Kish who, when he had made good promises to God and the prophet Samuel, lied and acted badly, and in consequence fell in battle against the Philistines with his son Jonathan and the best of the sons of Israel.]⁶³

The episode is turned into an ahistorical exemplar that serves as a warning to greedy monarchs, reminding them to obey their promises to God and His representatives.

The community of St. Cuthbert that produced this Latin text was, of course, concerned about maintaining its monastery's independence from the Northumbrian kings. And as South writes in the introduction to his edition of the *Historia*, 'the power and influence of the monks of St Cuthbert seems to have increased as that of the Northumbrian kings declined'.⁶⁴ He thus points out that in the 880s, 'it was the community, rather than the high reeve at Bamburgh, which apparently came to terms with the Danes of York and secured the election of King Guthred' as recounted in paragraph thirteen of the *Historia*. And he adds that the very reason for writing the *Historia* might have been to record the property owned by the monastic community. Cataloguing monastic property seems to have been particularly important in the tenth century, when West Saxon hegemony and the monastic reform could be seen as threatening the independence of St Cuthbert's monastic community.⁶⁵

Whether the text is, as South prefers, a product of the eleventh century, produced during or shortly after the Danish reign in England or whether it originated in the later tenth century, is beyond our scope here. Both possibilities have found favour.⁶⁶ What this text clearly shows, however, is that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Life of Alfred* do not offer the only English versions of the historic conflict between Ælle and the Danes. But where the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* installs Ælle as legal claimant to the throne of Northumbria, it does not mention Ívarr, but adds a new name: Ubba (or Ubbi). This Ubba is apparently not recorded in English sources before the late tenth century, but he is very much a feature of later texts. He thus also appears in the *Annales Lindisfarnensis*, compiled in the late eleventh or early twelfth century and in MS F, one of the two twelfth-century manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In both the annals and the *Chronicle* version F, Ubba is a leader of the Danish army associated with Ívarr and Hálfðan. Moreover, the twelfth-century *Annals of St Neots*⁶⁷ call him Ívarr's brother and a son of Ragnarr loðbrók.⁶⁸ Abbo of Fleury

further mentions in his late tenth-century *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* that both Ívarr and Ubba took part in the conquest of Northumbria. The consensus of opinion thus seems to be that Ubba was part of the Danish army more prominently associated with Ívarr the Boneless. It is interesting, however, that Ubba is called a *Frisian* duke both in the *Annales Lindisfarnensis* (s. a. 858) and the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*. Both texts therefore counter in a different way, but with similar results, any Scandinavian claims to English territory, by making the leader of this venture not Danish, as in the earlier *Chronicle* of Æthelweard, but Frisian.

It thus seems that at different times different strategies have been devised in England that apparently served the same purpose, namely to rid Anglo-Scandinavian competition of this celebrated case of English royal failure. While the *Chronicle* and the *Life of Alfred* doubt the validity of Ælle's authority by disqualifying an important aspect of his royal identity, namely his descent, the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* and the *Annales Lindisfarnensis* change the ethnicity, and thus the identity, of his opponent. However, where the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* avoids giving any prominence to Ælle, the usurper and man without lineage, and while Æthelweard's *Chronicle* does not even mention his name, the Scandinavian sources ascribe to him a much more prominent role. But significantly, and here I want to come to a more explicitly 'English' reading of the poem, *Aðalsteinsdrápa* offers, in addition to the one already discussed, another interpretation of the eponymous Ælle, one that is much more favourable to King Æthelstan.

**Æthelstan, genealogy and royal authority (2):
Aðalsteinsdrápa and King Ælle 'the Bretwalda'**

Dietrich Hofmann has already pointed out that a King Ælle is known from the list of those bearing the title *bretwalda* (MS A)/*brytenw(e)alda* (MSS B, D)⁶⁹ or 'overlords of Britain'.⁷⁰ The king appears here as the first ruler in the list, the historical fifth-century king of Sussex (477–91). A similar list of seven, presumably the chronicler's source, appears in Bede's eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, apart from introducing the term *bretwalda/brytenw(e)alda*, expands the list of seven monarchs to include an eighth king in the entry for 827: Ecgberht, King of Wessex and King Alfred the Great's grandfather:

& þy ilcan geare geeode Ecgbryht cyning Miercna rice & al þæt be suþan Humbre wæs, & he wæs se eahteþa cyning se þe bretwal'd'a wæs — ærest Elle Subseaxna cyning se þus micel rice hæfde, se æftera wæs Ceawlin Wesseaxna cyning, se þridda wæs Eþelbryht Cantwara cyning, se feorþa wæs Rēdwald Eastengla cyning, fifta was Eadwine Norþanhymbra cyning, siexta wæs Oswald se æfter him ricsode, seofoþa wæs Oswio Oswaldes broþur, eohtoþa wæs Ecgbryht Wesseaxna cyning.⁷¹

[And in that year King Ecgbryht secured the kingship of the Mercian kingdom and of all that was south of the Humber and he was the eighth king who was *bretwalda* [controller of Britain] — the first was Elle king of the South Saxons who had such a large realm, the one afterwards was Ceawlin king of the West Saxons. The third was Eþelbryht king of the Cantuaria, the fourth was Redwald king of the East Anglians. The fifth was Eadwine king of the Northumbrians, the sixth was Oswald, who ruled after him. The seventh was Oswiu, Oswald's brother, the eighth was Ecgbryht king of the West Saxons.]

King Æthelstan, the grandson of King Alfred, could see himself as very much a part of this *bretwalda* line. Whether a specific position of power associated with this term ever existed in Anglo-Saxon England need not concern us here. What matters is the idea of 'bretwaldship' conceptualised in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which built on and expanded Bede's specific group of kings.⁷² The concept of the *bretwalda* connects the Anglo-Saxon present of the *Chronicle* with the Anglian past of Bede and thus with an allegedly golden age in English history. Ian Walker has noted previously that this was achieved by ignoring the Mercian kings in the period between Oswiu (mid seventh century) and Ecgbryht (first half of the ninth century)⁷³ which seems to fit the overall 'pro-Wessex' sentiments expressed by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Simon Keynes, who prefers not to read the chronicler's silence with regard to the Mercian kings as a calculated activity, deflates the importance of Ecgbryht's inclusion into the list of seven by arguing,

Rather, the chronicler was honouring the achievements of his own West Saxon hero and to that end appropriated Bede's list

of Southumbrian overlords: it was an act of literary plagiarism, not a considered historical statement, and as such the question of the inclusion or omission of the Mercian overlords never arose.⁷⁴

It seems that Simon Keynes in fact redeems the chronicler's reputation⁷⁵ by replacing the question of 'historical credibility' with that of 'literary appropriateness'. Keynes' observations on the discussion about the meta-life of 'bretwaldship' in the scholarly literature since the end of the eighteenth century are very interesting and his desire to banish the misleading expression *bretwalda* once and for all in the light of past discussions understandable. By accusing the chronicler of uninformed literary plagiarism, Simon Keynes thus keeps 'history' undefiled.

The use of the term 'bretwalda' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 827 is indeed singular. It has been most explicitly commented upon since the renewed interest in the middle ages from the eighteenth century to the present day. It is quite likely that the chronicler's coinage was just as remarkable in his own times. And this is equally valid if the chronicler invented the term in the firm belief that it gave clearest expression to the position of the kings described in Bede's list.⁷⁶ Regardless of the adequacy of the term *bretwalda*, medieval reception shows that the concept of 'bretwaldship' retained importance throughout Anglo-Saxon times and also in post-Conquest England. The list's inclusion within Æthelweard's *Chronicle*⁷⁷ and its further expansion in Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*⁷⁸ both bear witness to the usefulness of this construct. What we can term *Wirkungsgeschichte* is thus transcending any question of historical validity. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as an expression of a specific cultural identity does not invite interpretations limited by historical accuracy.

Since no further name was added to the *Chronicle*'s list of eight monarchs, at least before the Norman Conquest, the supremacy of Wessex as recorded by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* still prevailed in the tenth century. Seen in this way, the English reading of the reference to Ælle will have differed markedly from the Scandinavian one — and allowed for a positively charged interpretation of the power and prestige of King Æthelstan.

Moreover, if we read the Old English loanword *harri* 'lord' in the poem as referring to God, then further praise is heaped on Æthelstan, 'God's most important offspring'. OE *hearra* is the comparative form deriving from OE *heah* 'high'. Interpreting ON *harri* as God is a specifically 'English' reading since its

equivalent, OE *hearra*, has strong religious connotations in Old English literature, where it most often appears in the Old English *Genesis*.⁷⁹ *Aðalsteinsdrápa* therefore constructs a strong link between English, and more specifically West-Saxon, kingship and Christianity.⁸⁰ In Scandinavian poetic sources, however, the word seems most often to refer to secular kings, as to the King of Scots in Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Pórfinnsdrápa* stanza 9, where Jarl Þórfinnr is described fighting *Skotlands harri*, 'Scotland's lord'.⁸¹ Where the Scandinavian use of the word invites us to read *harri* as another reference to Ælle, the much more religious 'English' reading avoids this association. This double interpretation becomes only possible through the use of an English loanword within the Scandinavian text.

Aðalsteinsdrápa is the earliest poetic source for Old Norse *harri* — and the word does not occur again in skaldic poetry before 1000, when it is used by poets who had contacts with England or the Anglo-Danish court of Knútr.⁸² Dietrich Hofmann assumed that the word was again imported from England after 1000 and that 'also kein direkter Einfluß von Egill, der das Wort nur im Zusammenhang mit dem angelsächsischen König verwendet, auf diese späteren Dichter besteht'⁸³ [Egill, who uses the word only with reference to the Anglo-Saxon king, does therefore not directly influence later poets].

The early English sources: a propagandist counterstrike?

We shall conclude our interpretation of the skaldic testimony by adding a last and necessarily quite speculative thought. Is it possible that already by the time of King Alfred the English — or rather the West Saxon court — had become aware of the propagandist potential of King Ælle for any Scandinavian claims to rule in England? This at least might be inferred from the distancing mechanisms evident in the descriptions of King Ælle in both the *Life of Alfred* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* quoted above. Since the *Life of Alfred* uses the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as its main source, it might only be expected that both texts share similar expressions. However, the *Life of Alfred* does not content itself with repeating the *Chronicle*'s statement, but expands the negative account of Ælle by adding that he was not only an 'unnatural' king, but also a tyrant.

In fact, the negative expression *ungecynd(n)e*, 'unnatural', is rarely recorded in Old English literature and seems generally to refer to inanimate objects or is used as a qualifier for describing unusual behaviour. Smyth translates the lexeme as 'a king with no hereditary right'.⁸⁴ The adjective occurs only once in

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but three times in Alfred's translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. The latter calls the plotting of the children against their father, resulting in his death, an 'ungewunelic & ungecyndelic yfel'⁸⁵ [very unusual and unnatural evil]. Moreover, an example from ancient history — presumably the slaying of Laius by Oedipus⁸⁶ — is evoked. Similarly, the text maintains that a plant that is placed *on ungecynde stowe*, 'in an unnatural spot', does not grow at all, but withers away.⁸⁷ It is thus preordained where plants can grow and — by analogy — humans can thrive. 'Unnatural' thus also embraces the notion of 'against God's design'.

Since the term *ungecynd(n)e* clearly incorporates the element *cynd/cynn*, 'origin, generation, race', Ælle's claim to the Northumbrian throne is thus not only illegal and he is not only a tyrant, as the *Life of Alfred* put it, but his very ancestry and his descent make him unfit to rule. However, although the term *ungecynd(n)e* thus verbally negates Ælle's political role and dynastic standing, it is possible that the term also incorporates more than just a statement about the legal nature of kingship. A close look at the English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* — the praise poem on King Æthelstan and his brother Edmund transmitted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* — seems to justify an even stronger reading of the term. As noted before by Janet Thormann,⁸⁸ Æthelstan's and Edmund's victory is explained here through their excellent pedigree: 'swa him geæþele wæs'⁸⁹ [as was in accord with their nature]. Their kingship is both justified by and generated through their descent. And that their kingship does not originate in the ninth century, the point of reference of *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, is clearly stated at the end of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, where with reference to the authority of written records by *ealde uðwitan*, 'old scholars', the Anglo-Saxon origin myth is evoked again:

Ne wearð wæl mare
on þis eighlande æfer gieta
folces gefylled beforan þissum
sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
ealde uðwitan, *sibþan eastan hider*
Engle & Seaxe up becoman,
ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
wlance wigsmiþas, Wealles ofercoman,
eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.⁹⁰

[Never before this was more slaughter in this island, of people killed by sword's edges, as books, old scholars, tell us,

since Angles and Saxons came here from the east, arrived over the broad ocean, sought out Britain, warriors eager for fame, proud battle-smiths, overcame the British, took the country.]

Moreover, it is important to note that no Anglo-Saxon source names both Ælle and Ívarr in the same context. Where Ívarr is mentioned, Ælle's name does not occur and *vice versa*. This is at least true for all English sources before the late eleventh or twelfth centuries. Judging by the English sources, therefore, the conflict stated in the Scandinavian sources never took place. Actively engaged in creating a royal lineage, the kings of Wessex could not afford a political defeat. Deflating Scandinavian claims to power in England must therefore have been of primary importance.

We have some indication that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was eager to identify the precise time at which Danish-English conflict began. As has been noted before, the arrival of the Danes in England, recorded in the *Chronicle* for 787, is characterised by its strikingly retrospective view: 'Pæt wæron þa ærestan scipu deniscra monna þe Angelcynnes lond gesohton' [That were the first ships of the Danish men that visited/sought out the land of the English].⁹¹ Those Danes are called 'Norþmanna' in the same entry a few lines above in MSS B, C and D, and are apparently even identified as Norwegian by MS D since they are said to have come from 'Hæreðalande' (i. e. Hörthaland in southwest Norway). This ethnic confusion is very unusual for the *Chronicle*, which otherwise is quite accurate in distinguishing between Norwegians and Danes.⁹² Alfred P. Smyth therefore supports Dorothy Whitelock's⁹³ view that the term 'Northmanna' was in the *Chronicle's* archetype, while the specific reference to the Danes was an addition by the *Chronicle's* later compilers.⁹⁴ The retrospective identification of the Scandinavian boats as Danish suggests that the precise ethnic identification of the ships' crews was especially important. Moreover, the *Chronicle's* entries make it clear that the first victim of Danish aggression was not a king, but the king's reeve, whose duty was to examine those entering the country.⁹⁵ English and Danish views about the historical dimension of their mutual conflict thus apparently differed. The interpretation of the *Chronicle's* retrospective comment shows that it became politically relevant to clarify this difference during the tenth century or maybe already by the end of the ninth century.

Deciphering *Aðalsteinsdrápa* cannot have been an easy task for an English audience, touching as it does on issues of performance, linguistic comprehension

and the understanding of poetic composition. What is clear, however, is that Scandinavian and English interests in the role of Ælle diverged where political interests were different. And that is even true in post-Conquest England, where Gaimar has his own rendering of the Danish conquest of Northumbria. Here, it is the moral wickedness of the English King Osbriht, who rapes the wife of a nobleman, Buern Bucecarle, that leads to the attack of the Danes, upon whom Buern, anxious to get his revenge on the king, has called for support. Ælle appears here as a knight who assumes the kingship over Northumbria once Osbriht has been driven out by Buern's relatives. When the Danes attack, Osbriht is slain and Ælle, who had resided elsewhere, is killed in the ensuing battle. The story had apparently moved from the time frame of Anglo-Scandinavian contact to the realm of Anglo-Norman politics, where both the Danish and Norman conquests of England are justified through the shortcomings of English moral behaviour. Gaimar's Anglo-Norman history of England thus shows how the figure of Ælle could once again be used as a touchstone for defining the limits of English power.⁹⁶

The thrust of this article has been to show that it is possible to read *Aðalsteinsdrápa* in two very different ways that may, each in their own manner, satisfy both an English and a Scandinavian audience. And this, indeed, reveals this fragmentary poem as an outstanding witness to the intricate ways in which identities were negotiated. The poem can therefore be seen as an important 'border guard',⁹⁷ a poetic statement that served as a demarcation between Scandinavian and English claims to power in England. History, and thus the dealings of King Ælle and the sons of Ragnarr loðbrók, appears as a competitive space in Anglo-Scandinavian England and as the battlefield for any statement of royal authority.

NOTES

¹ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is the name commonly given to that group of texts containing annals which record the history of Anglo-Saxon England. Individual versions of the *Chronicle* differ to a varying degree. In the present essay reference is made by the letters A–H to the following *Chronicle* manuscripts: Cambridge, MS Corpus Christi College 173 (MS A, also known as the *Parker Chronicle*), London, BL, MS Cotton Tiberius A. vi (MS B), London, BL, MS Cotton Tiberius B. i (MS C), London, BL, MS Cotton Tiberius B. iv (MS D), Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud 636 (MS E, also known as the *Peterborough Chronicle*), London, BL, MS Cotton Domitian A. viii (MS F), London, BL, MS Cotton Tiberius Otho B. xi, 2 (MS G), and London, BL, MS Cotton Domitian A ix, fol. 9 (MS H).

² Martin Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Culture', in *Speaking two Languages. Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 181–210.

³ Janet Thormann, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Poems and the Making of the English Nation', in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 60–85.

⁴ The four 'canonical' tenth-century poems of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are usually referred to as *The Battle of Brunanburh* (937–ABCD), *The Capture of the Five Boroughs* (942–ABCD), *The Coronation of Edgar* (973–ABC) and *The Death of Edgar* (975–ABC[DE]). The letters A–E, quoted behind the annal number, refer to the five main manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Since there is a shorter version of *The Death of Edgar* in MSS D and E, references to these two manuscripts have been put in brackets.

⁵ See E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. lxx, Alistair Campbell, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', *The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College London 17 March 1970* (London: Lewis, 1970) and Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009–1016', *Speculum*, 62 (1987), 265–98. The latter adds that 'on occasion, too, information in the skaldic verses, though not fully confirmed elsewhere, has a general plausibility that encourages acceptance and adds to our awareness of the deficiencies of our main source'. A discussion of the value of the skaldic testimony beyond the question of historical accuracy is, however, not offered by Poole.

⁶ See for example Sarah Foot, 'The Making of *Anglecynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser., 6 (1996), 25–49.

⁷ Matthew Townend, 'Ella: An Old English Name in Old Norse Poetry', *Nomina*, 20 (1997), 23–35 (p. 25).

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

⁸ For an interpretation of this admittedly rather peripheral figure in Gower and Chaucer see John Frankis, 'King Ælle and the conversion of the English: the development of a legend from Bede to Chaucer', in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 74–92.

⁹ See Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes. Books I–IX*, ed. and trans. by Hilda Ellis Davidson and Peter Fisher (Cambridge: Brewer, (1979–80) 1998), pp. 291–92. As has been observed previously, the stories of the deaths of Ælle and King Edmund of East Anglia — the later St Edmund — have much in common: see Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850–880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 206, 214 and Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 58. Both kings die at the hands of the Danish army under Ívarr. Later English and Scandinavian tradition remembered both kings in connection with the Loðbrók legend and in both cases the arrival of the Danish army is explained as an act of vengeance for the killing of Loðbrók: see Grant Loomis, 'Saint Edmund and the Lodbroc (Lothbroc) legend', *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 15 (1933), 1–23 and Jan de Vries, 'Die Entwicklung der Sage von den Lodbrokssöhnen in den historischen Quellen', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 44 (1928), 117–63 (pp. 158–63). The association of Ragnarr's death with Edmund does not, however, occur in literature before the chronicles of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris.

¹⁰ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 37. See also Jan de Vries, 'Die Wikingersaga', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 15 (1927), 81–100 (p. 82).

¹¹ For a discussion and further literature on these subjects see Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, pp. 38–53.

¹² This list goes back to Matthew Townend's record of instances of the name *Ella* in skaldic poetry ('*Ella*', pp. 26–28). I have also adopted his chronological sequence which is based on the traditional dating of the poems. Only Egill's poem is of a tenth-century origin, while *Pórsdrápa* is the next in line with an assumed composition around the year 1000. The subsequent poems up to and including *Magnúsflokkr* originated in the eleventh century, while *Krákumál* is the youngest text with a presumed origin of around 1200.

¹³ As to the question how likely it is that the skaldic poems with an English context were performed in England, see Judith Jesch, 'Skaldic Verse in Scandinavian England', in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21–30 August 1997*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), pp. 313–25.

¹⁴ Rudolf Simek and Hermann Pálsson, *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1987), p. 218a.

¹⁵ *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols, A I–II: *Tekst efter håndskrifterne*, B I–II: *Rettet tekst* (København: Gyldendal, 1912–15), B I 293.

¹⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 214.

¹⁷ See Roberta Frank, 'Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle', *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 332–43 (p. 334).

¹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 232. The stanza occurs in one manuscript of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (AM 147 4to) and in *Ragnarssona þáttur* transmitted in *Hauksbók*.

¹⁹ See Smyth, *King Alfred*, p. 58, Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, pp. 189–94 and Bjarni Einarsson, 'De Normannorum atrocitate, or on the execution of royalty by the aquiline method', *Saga-Book*, 22 (1986–89), 79–82.

²⁰ Roberta Frank, 'Viking Atrocity', and Roberta Frank, 'The Blood-Eagle again', *Saga-Book*, 22 (1986–89), 287–89.

²¹ Rory McTurk, 'William Morris, Gustav Storm and Alfred, Lord Tennyson', in *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents*, ed. by Inga-Stina Ewbank, Olav Lausund, and Bjørn Tysdahl (Norwich: Norvik Press, 1999), pp. 114–35. McTurk's interpretation has consequences for our interpretation in that Sighvatr's stanza might simply state that Ívarr 'the one who dwelt at York, had Ella's back cut with a sword' or — as McTurk puts it — had Ella put to flight (p. 130; the same interpretation is advanced earlier in Rory McTurk, 'Blóðörn eða blóðormur?' in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, ed. by Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran, and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994) II 539–41). However, the interpretation of *Aðalsteinsdrápa* as a poem that could be read as both praising and dismissing King Æthelstan is not changed by Rory McTurk's interesting solution to the 'blood-eagle problem', since Ælle's reputation remains problematic.

²² Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 232.

²³ Roberta Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. by Alexander R. Rumble (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), pp. 106–24 (pp. 110–11).

²⁴ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 193.

²⁵ See Frank, 'Viking Atrocity', p. 338.

²⁶ Townend, 'Ella', p. 33.

²⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 333.

²⁸ Townend, 'Ella', p. 32.

²⁹ Manuscripts C and B enter this episode for the year 868.

³⁰ Adam von Bremen states in his eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* that Ívarr was Loðbrók's son: see *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, ed. and trans. by Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), p. 208.

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

³¹ Gaimar's main witness is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Indeed, many parts of this Anglo-Norman text have been translated from the English source: see Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), p. 51. Gaimar's *L'Estoire des Engleis* presents the ruling king, Osberht, as of evil disposition and Ælle as a knight who takes over government after Osberht has been driven out for his misdeeds: *Lestorie des Engles solum La Translacion Maistre Geffrei Gaimar*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Duffus Hardy and Charles Trice Martin, 2 vols (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1888–89), I 111–17.

³² Most conspicuously, MSS A–E of the *Chronicle* mention Ívarr (Inwær) in their entries for the years 878 (MSS A, D, E) and 879 (MSS B and C) only indirectly by referring to the death of 'Inwæres broþur & Healfdenes' [the brother of Ívarr and Hálfðan] (cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 3: *MS A*, ed. by Janet M. Bately (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986), p. 50). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is here generally quoted from Bately's edition of MS A. Reference to other manuscript readings is given where it is important for our discussion.

³³ See *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. by Alistair Campbell (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. 68 with references to earlier literature.

³⁴ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), p. 146.

³⁵ Finnur Jónsson assumed that *harra* is a genitive singular referring to King Ælle (*Skjaldedigtning*, B I 30), while Sigurður Nordal interprets the form as a genitive plural and thus as a reference to 'kings' collectively (*Egils saga*, p. 146). Both interpretations are possible and Nordal's decision might have been influenced by his explicit disbelief in any connection of the lexeme with Ælle. As we will see later, the interpretation of the Old Norse form as a singular also offers the possibility of regarding the term as a reference to God.

³⁶ Nordal, *Egils saga*, p. 147.

³⁷ Judith Jesch, 'Skaldic Verse', pp. 315–17.

³⁸ See *Egil's Saga*, ed. and trans. by Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 130 and Nordal, *Egils saga*, p. 146 with reference to Jón Þorkelsson's identical interpretation.

³⁹ See Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 30.

⁴⁰ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'Genealogy: Form and Function in Medieval Historical Narrative', *History and Theory*, 22 (1983), 43–53 (p. 47).

⁴¹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography*, paperback edition of the 1997 edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 106.

⁴² Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, p. 107.

⁴³ Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 47. Also in MSS B, C, D and E (s. a. 867). In MS F, Ælle is only mentioned in the Latin entry.

⁴⁴ Chapter 27, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. by William Henry Stevenson. With an introductory article by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1959) 1998), p. 22.

⁴⁵ See Michael Wood, 'The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: an English Charlemagne?', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. by Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough, and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 250–72.

⁴⁶ See C. E. Blunt, 'The coinage of Athelstan, 924–939: A survey', *British Numismatic Journal*, 42 (1974), 35–158 (pp. 47–57). See also Eric John, "'Orbis Britanniae" and the Anglo-Saxon Kings', in his *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), pp. 1–63 (esp. pp. 48–54).

⁴⁷ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Alistair Campbell (London: Nelson and Sons, 1962), p. 36.

⁴⁸ *Symeonis Monachi opera omnia, Historia regum*, ed. by Thomas Arnold, 2 vols (Wiesbaden: Kraus, (1885) 1965), II 105.

⁴⁹ Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi opera omnia*, II 104.

⁵⁰ 'En konungr sá hét Ella, er þá réð Englandi' [The king was then called Ella, (and) he ruled over England]: *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943), p. 133.

⁵¹ Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, p. 157.

⁵² Vries, 'Wikingersaga', pp. 81–83.

⁵³ John Hines, 'Egill's *Hofuðlausn* in time and place', *Saga-Book*, 24 (1995), 83–104 (p. 99).

⁵⁴ As Mark Blackburn, 'Expansion and control: aspects of Anglo-Scandinavian minting south of the Humber', in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21–30 August 1997*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and others (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), pp. 125–42 (p. 136) points out, the inscriptions and motifs on the York coinage of Siefred and Cnut, c. 895–905, were overtly Christian and included, beside the symbol of a cross, liturgical phrases.

⁵⁵ Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin II: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 96. See also C. E. Blunt, B. H. I. H. Stewart, and C. S. S. Lyon, *Coinage in Tenth-Century England: From Edward the Elder to Edgar's Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 233–34.

⁵⁶ For an interpretation of *Hofuðlausn* as the poem that most prominently marks the climax in Egill's self stylisation as a poet and his artistic independence from royal authorities, see Susanne Kries and Thomas Krömmelbein, "'From the Hull of Laughter": Egill

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

Skallagrímsson's *Höfuðlausn* and its epodium in context', *Scandinavian Studies*, 74 (2002), 111–36.

⁵⁷ The stanzas of *Arinbjarnarkviða* are cited from Finnur Jónsson's edition of the poem (Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I 38–41).

⁵⁸ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, pp. 78–79.

⁵⁹ Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 79.

⁶⁰ Rory McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues* (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1991), pp. 214–15.

⁶¹ Vries, 'Entwicklung der Sage', p. 153.

⁶² A similar role is attributed to the Danes in the *Sermo lupi ad anglos*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1976), ll. 122–32. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* well known entry for 793, which tells of the portents of doom alongside the first major looting of a Viking army, has a similar apocalyptic ring.

⁶³ *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto: A History of Saint Cuthbert and a Record of His Patrimony*, ed. by Ted Johnson South (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), pp. 50–51.

⁶⁴ South, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, p. 3.

⁶⁵ South, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ See South, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, pp. 25–36 for a discussion of previous scholarship and the date of compilation of the *Historia*.

⁶⁷ It has long been thought that the author of the *Annals of St Neots* has drawn on a now lost version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* extending at least to the year 912: see *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 17: *The Annals of St Neots with Vita Prima Sancti Neoti*, ed. by David Dumville and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Brewer, 1984), p. xiii. The *Life of Alfred* has also been identified as one of the text's sources.

⁶⁸ Dumville and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 78. The editors remark that the source for the two sentences that refer to the Loðbrók legend has not yet been identified. The *Annals of St. Neots* are the earliest English source for the name *loðbrók* (McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, p. 110).

⁶⁹ MS B is quoted after *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A collaborative edition*, vol. 4: *MS B*, ed. by Simon Taylor (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), p. 30 and MS D after *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 6: *MS D*, ed. by G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), p. 20. The spellings in MSS C and E are different again: *bretenanwealda* (MS C; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 5: *MS C*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), p. 52) and *Bryten wealda* (MS E; *Two of the Saxon Chronicles parallel with supplementary extracts from the others. On the basis of an edition by John Earle*, ed. by Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) I 61).

⁷⁰ Dietrich Hofmann, *Nordisch-Englische Lehnbeziehungen der Wikingerzeit* (Kopenhagen: Munksgaard, 1955), pp. 24–25.

⁷¹ Bately, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 42.

⁷² As has been pointed out by Simon Keynes, 'Rædwald the Bretwalda', in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. by Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 103–23 (p. 109: 'it is simply impossible to believe, on the evidence available, that these kings [i.e. Bede's seven kings] were like unto each other, or that they exercised similar powers by virtue of holding a particular office'.) He thus concludes that choosing them had nothing to do with an existing office, but with Bede's personal preference.

⁷³ As Ian Walker, *Mercia and the Making of England* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 203, for example, points out, 'the Chronicle singularly fails to highlight the significance of their role [i.e. the Mercians] in a number of crucial events including the Battle of Tettenhall in 910'. The competitive nature of Wessex-Mercian relations does not mean that there was no co-operation between the two kingdoms. As Walker rightly stresses, the threat caused by the Scandinavians clearly fuelled the necessity for co-operation in the face of the political fate of their East Anglian and Northumbrian rivals (*Mercia and the Making of England*, p. 204).

⁷⁴ Keynes, 'Rædwald', p. 113.

⁷⁵ See F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 49, who called the inclusion of Egberht in the list of seven a 'mistake of an unintelligent annalist'. Stenton makes the interesting observation that the term *bretwalda* must have been reminiscent of poetic compounds such as *beah-gifa* 'bracelet giver' or *daedfruma*, 'deed doer'. Generally Stenton reads the word as encomiastic in nature (F.M. Stenton, 'The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings', in *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England: being the Collected Papers of Frank Merry Stenton*, ed. by Doris Mary Stenton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 34–35).

⁷⁶ Keynes, 'Rædwald', p. 112.

⁷⁷ Campbell, *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum. The History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 104–06. Henry added two names in the early twelfth century: Alfred and Edgar.

⁷⁹ However, as Hofmann, *Lehnbeziehungen*, p. 23 points out, the word also refers to secular leaders in Old English literature (cf. *Judith* 56, *Battle of Maldon* 204, *Death of Edward* 32).

⁸⁰ This strong tie between king and God and thus the sacerdotal aspect of Anglo-Saxon kingship is also visible in the Old English laws. See, for example, William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), pp. 174–220 and Mary P. Richards, 'Anglo-

Anglo-Scandinavian History through Scandinavian Eyes

Saxonism in the Old English Laws', in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 40-59 (p. 70). The royal patronage of the Benedictine community during the tenth-century monastic reform is also important in this context.

⁸¹ Diana Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld: An Edition and Study* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), p. 125.

⁸² Later the word is also used to designate Scandinavian princes.

⁸³ Hofmann, *Lehnbeziehungen*, pp. 23–24. Hofmann names as an exception a *lausavisa* by Hallfróðr vandræðaskáld where *harri* occurs in a Christian context and might thus — according to Hofmann — show the influence of Anglo-Saxon literature (*Lehnbeziehungen*, p. 24).

⁸⁴ Smyth, *King Alfred*, p. 23.

⁸⁵ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De consolatione philosophiae*, ed. by Walter John Sedgefield. Reprint of the edition Oxford 1899 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 70.

⁸⁶ The passage reads: 'ge furðon þæt wyrse wæs, we geheordon geo geara on ealdum spellum þæt sum sunu ofsloge his fæder; ic nat humela, buton we witon þæt hit unmennisclic dæd wæs' [and further, that was worse, we also heard in former times in old histories that a certain son slew his father; I do not know how, but we know that it was an inhuman deed] (Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 70).

⁸⁷ Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 91.21.

⁸⁸ Thormann, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Poems', pp. 64–65.

⁸⁹ Bately, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 70.

⁹⁰ Bately, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 72.

⁹¹ Bately, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 39.

⁹² Bately, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, p. 35.

⁹³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A revised translation*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas, and Susie I. Tucker (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 35, n. 4. Whitelock based her interpretation on the fact that the word *Norðmanna* also occurred in the account of the *Annals of St Neots*: see Dumville and Lapidge, *Annals of St Neots*, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Emergence of English Identity, 700–1000', in *Medieval Europeans: Studies in Ethnic Identity and National Perspectives in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alfred P. Smyth (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 24–52 (pp. 34–35).

⁹⁵ The death of the reeve is mentioned in all five main manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

⁹⁶ A further change, as pointed out by McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, pp. 215–29, had occurred by the early thirteenth century, when Ælle had developed from a minor

Susanne Kries

character to the protagonist in the anonymous *Narratio de Uxore Aernulfi ab Ella Rege Deirorum Violata*. In this story he is a powerful and violent king. An edition of the text is included in *Lestorie des Engles*, Hardy and Martin, pp. 328–38. As to the story's possible influence on Danish and Norwegian legends around Ragnarr loðbrók see McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, pp. 215–29.

⁹⁷ The term is taken from John A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 6.