

“ ‘Sword-point and blade will reconcile us first’ ”<sup>1</sup>

## The Vikings in the English Context

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown, "The Battle of Maldon," in *Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, ed. Richard North, et al., 499-518 (Edinburgh Gate: Longman, 2011): 504, line 60.

The popular perception of the Viking people today is a very caricatured, often romanticized, version of the reality. As a result of their violent activities in Britain and other areas, the Vikings have become synonymous with the term “barbarian”. Unfortunately, this outlook does a great disservice to the complexity of Viking society and culture demonstrated by contemporary historical accounts and archaeological investigation. The Viking influence on what would eventually become known as the United Kingdom cannot be overstated as the raiders became invaders, neighbours, and finally integrated residents of Britain. Their impact is also far reaching: covering linguistic, political, and cultural influences that survive to this day. But in order to decipher this influence it is necessary to understand how the Anglo-Saxons saw the Vikings they were in contact/conflict with and how this differs from how the Vikings viewed themselves. This relationship can then provide a greater understanding of the popular conception of the Viking people in modern society and how it came to be.

The Vikings were a seafaring people that settled many parts of the globe and explored many more during the early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> The term “Viking” is, perhaps, inaccurate as it describes an action rather than the name of a people itself. To go *viking* is an Old Norse term meaning “to go on an expedition” and it was from this term that “Viking” came to describe a people as opposed to an activity.<sup>3</sup> The more encompassing term is “Norse” as it describes a large group of people who spoke a similar language, known as Old Norse, and lived all over Europe including Iceland and Greenland.<sup>4</sup> The term is most associated with the residents of Scandinavia during the 8<sup>th</sup> century on through the 11<sup>th</sup> century who migrated outwards to settle in places like

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<sup>2</sup> Nigel Saul, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 2.

<sup>3</sup> James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World* (Lancashire: Frances Lincoln Publishers Ltd., 1980): 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Britain.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the term “Viking” has pervaded historical studies and shall be used here for the purpose of consistence.

The Vikings first came to Britain in 793 CE sacking the monastery at Lindisfarne off its northeast coast.<sup>6</sup> The Vikings proceeded to kill the monks present and take the valuables enclosed in the monastery; a policy that gained them no small amount of fear and dislike from ecclesiastical writers.<sup>7</sup> Records such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mention only intermittent raids performed by small parties up until the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century when raids began to escalate.<sup>8</sup> 850 CE marked the first time the Vikings would winter in Britain as they set up camp near Kent.<sup>9</sup> This cumulated in 856 CE when the Great Heathen Army invaded and took York in northern Britain.<sup>10</sup> It was here that the Vikings established a base of operations, which they named Jorvik.<sup>11</sup> This was the first permanent settlement as the Norse began to work land in the area.<sup>12</sup> Conflicts continued as more Vikings traveled to the island seeking land.<sup>13</sup> These conflicts did lessen for a number of years following the victories of Alfred the Great (r. 871-899), but would flare up again in the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century, albeit with less strength on the part of the Vikings.<sup>14</sup> The Norse presence in Britain had already been decreasing for a number of years when they lost the

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<sup>5</sup> Axel Olrik, *Viking Civilization* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971): 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 82.

<sup>7</sup> Saul, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England*: 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> K.R.G. Pendlesonn, *The Vikings* (New York: Albany Books, 1980): 39-41.

<sup>9</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968): 226.

<sup>10</sup> Clare Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ivarr to A.D. 1014* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press Ltd., 2007): 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991): 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 93.

<sup>13</sup> Pendlesonn, *The Vikings*: 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010): 93.

Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 CE.<sup>15</sup> This defeat marked the conclusion of the eponymous Viking Age in Britain.<sup>16</sup>

The Anglo-Saxon view on these foreign invaders is best demonstrated by the historical and liturgical texts written across the temporal scope of the Viking Age in Britain. The issue that arises with such sources is the bias of the authors. Consisting almost entirely of clergy, the authors are, perhaps understandably, predisposed against the individuals who are pillaging their places of worship and livelihood.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while valuable for their perspective, these texts must be examined carefully so as not to translate this bias into historical discussion. The value of archaeological data is somewhat limited in the context of determining how each culture viewed the other as such things are only suggested by material culture. However, archaeologists have been able to demonstrate a marked increase in Scandinavian and Scandinavian influenced artifacts during the 9<sup>th</sup> century in southern Britain.<sup>18</sup> Such items could have been taken in the aftermath of skirmishes, but the nature of the artifacts would seem to indicate otherwise. These finds, largely consisting of combs, are significant for the implication that these two cultures were able to negotiate trade and even emulate parts of the other's culture in their own material culture.<sup>19</sup>

The shift in literary portrayal that takes place between the beginning of the Viking invasions of Britain in 793 CE and their ultimate settlement is an interesting transition. This transition can be seen to follow a few phases as the Anglo-Saxon residents who, until the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries were considered barbarians themselves, adapted to the ever-growing presence of the

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<sup>15</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*: 135.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Pryor, *Britain in the Middle Ages: An Archaeological History* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006): 82.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Scott Rohan and Allan J. Scott, *The Hammer and the Cross* (Oxford: Alder Publishing, 1980): 33.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Rogerson, "Vikings and the New East English Towns," *British Archaeology* (Council for British Archaeology), no. 35 (June 1998).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Danes on Britain soil.<sup>20</sup> The first of these phases can be seen as a time of ignorance as the Vikings come out of liminality to wreak havoc on the coastal monasteries and villages. This can best be demonstrated by a passage in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle from 793 CE, which discusses the “terrifying omens” that preceded the Viking raid on Lindisfarne.<sup>21</sup> The Vikings are portrayed as messengers of the Apocalypse with the destruction they wreak at holy sites lending credence to ecclesiastical writers.<sup>22</sup> The Vikings are also only referred to “heathens” in the early years of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a further reflection of the otherness and ignorance associated with the raiders.<sup>23</sup>

The Anglo-Saxons then enter a phase of acclimatization, as the Vikings become less of a threat from the unknown to a more cohesive enemy that meets a cohesive resistance under Alfred the Great. One can see this shifting perspective in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, which discusses the events of the actual Battle of Maldon in 991 CE and was likely written shortly after.<sup>24</sup> Excerpts from the battle still demonstrate a belief in the “barbaric” nature of the Vikings, but this is tempered by a grudging respect accorded them when the Anglo-Saxon leader, Byrhtnoth gives ground to the Vikings in order to have a fair fight.<sup>25</sup> The “us” versus “them” mentality is somewhat lacking in this work, as the themes are more relevant to discussions of courage versus cowardice and truth versus betrayal. *The Battle of Maldon* also implies a greater awareness of the Vikings and their activities than has been previously conveyed in textual sources. Certainly this is not a heroic or individual portrayal of Vikings, but it is quite a shift from the early ecclesiastical portrayals of the Vikings as portents of the Last Judgment.

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<sup>20</sup> Olrik, *Viking Civilization*: 7.

<sup>21</sup> Unknown, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *The Viking Age: A Reader*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010): 230.

<sup>22</sup> Unknown, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": 230.

<sup>23</sup> Unknown, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": 230-232.

<sup>24</sup> Unknown, "The Battle of Maldon": 499.

<sup>25</sup> Unknown, "The Battle of Maldon": 508-509.

Following the Anglo-Saxon victory at the Battle of Edington (878 CE) over the Danelaw Vikings of Gunthrum the Old, the Treaty of Wedmore was signed forcing Gunthrum to convert to Christianity and leave Alfred's lands be.<sup>26</sup> The new perspective on the Vikings can be seen in Alfred's "Preface" to the Old English version of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*. This preface is an incredibly diplomatic work in that it does not mention the Vikings or their defeated leader by name at all. Indeed, the only discussion of the Vikings is an indirect mention at the beginning of the second paragraph that reads: "then I also remembered how I saw, before it had all been ravaged and burnt...".<sup>27</sup> Given that Gunthrum had (supposedly) converted to Christianity and had recently sealed an agreement with Alfred it would not have been advantageous for Alfred to exacerbate the situation further. This change in perspective is also echoed in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle by the entry for 871. The Vikings are no longer referred to as "heathens" and are instead referred to as "Danes".<sup>28</sup> Such a shift would appear to imply at least partial acceptance of the Vikings by their Anglo-Saxon neighbours.

Of course this was not the end of Viking incursions and what may be construed as a revival of earlier phases recurs in literary works during the 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, this would seem to be a perspective only held by members of the clergy. Certainly the Vikings were a force to be reckoned with, but with ignorance of the Vikings gradually being replaced with knowledge the "barbaric forces of Satan" portrayal became untenable outside ecclesiastical works. Evidence that the Anglo-Saxon layman viewed the Vikings differently can be seen in Alcuin's letter to King Athelred from 793 CE.<sup>29</sup> This letter to the king expresses

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<sup>26</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*: 322.

<sup>27</sup> King Alfred, "Preface to the Old English Translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*," in *Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, (Edinburgh Gate: Longman, 2011): 433.

<sup>28</sup> Unknown, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle": 276-277.

<sup>29</sup> Alcuin, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred, 793," in *The Viking Age: A Reader*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010): 232-234.

Alcuin's concern about the Anglo-Saxons beginning to become a little too close to the pagan Vikings for his liking. Alcuin mentions that Anglo-Saxon emulation of these people was to be abhorred as he states: "Look at your trimming of the beard and hair, in which you have wished to resemble the pagans".<sup>30</sup> Indeed the early 11<sup>th</sup> century work of Ælfric of Eynsham demonstrates that the clergy were still demonizing the Vikings in a fashion that would permeate into popular portrayals today. In *The Passion of St. Edmund, King and Martyr* Ælfric refers to Viking atrocities committed against Britain and this (supposedly) pacifist king.<sup>31</sup> However, the purely hagiographical nature of this piece would suggest the inaccuracy of its Viking portrayal.

Information on the Vikings from their own context is sparse at the best of times. While the Icelandic sagas of the 14<sup>th</sup> century are invaluable in the information they provide about all walks of life they are by no means contemporary with the Viking Age.<sup>32</sup> Most likely, these sagas are the transcribed remnants of an ancient oral tradition passed down through generations.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, some of these are considered to be later descriptions of earlier events and provide insight into how Vikings viewed themselves.<sup>34</sup> The Viking views on raiding, something their more "civilized" Anglo-Saxon neighbours took issue with, are particularly valuable in showing raids as a cultural exploit and right of passage as opposed to the malicious attack on Christianity portrayed by contemporary liturgical writers.<sup>35</sup> The *Vatnsdæla* saga written around 1260 discusses (among other things) a father's view on raiding to his son.<sup>36</sup> Lamenting on the "kids today" the old Viking states that Vikings used to have to raid in order to gain wealth and

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<sup>30</sup> Alcuin, "Alcuin's Letter to King Athelred, 793": 233.

<sup>31</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham, "The Life of St. Edmund," in *Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic, and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, ed. Richard North, et al., (Edinburgh Gate: Longman, 2011): 750.

<sup>32</sup> Arved Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009): 36.

<sup>33</sup> Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society*: 37.

<sup>34</sup> Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society*: 34-35.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Kellogg and Jane Smiley, "Vatnsdæla saga," *Icelandic Sagas Database*, ed. Sveinbjorn Thordarson, September 13, 2007, [http://sagadb.org/vatnsdaela\\_saga](http://sagadb.org/vatnsdaela_saga) (accessed November 1, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Kellogg and Smiley, "Vatnsdæla saga," ed. Sveinbjorn Thordarson.

respect.<sup>37</sup> He goes on to say that unless a Viking proved himself in battle even an inheritance could be taken away.<sup>38</sup> This not only demonstrates the significance of raiding itself, but also the stock placed in riches and renown; the two things needed to maintain and ascend one's status in Viking society.<sup>39</sup> Other sagas indicate that Vikings believed in predestination, especially on the battlefield. *Sverris saga* mentions a king who describes to his warriors that there are only two outcomes in a battle: life or death.<sup>40</sup> A Viking should then fight fearlessly because death in retreat is the worst kind of death.<sup>41</sup>

For contemporary accounts about Vikings from their own context one must look outside the historical record. Archaeology has been instrumental in filling some of these gaps; burials have provided important information pertaining to various elements of Viking material culture. Further information on how the Vikings saw themselves can be gleaned from what is perhaps an unexpected source. Board games can tell a lot about a culture; rules, setup and names for different aspects of a particular game can provide a unique yet valuable glimpse into the minds of the people that made them. One game in particular is valuable for the purposes of this investigation as it acts as a sort of microcosm for the Viking view of the world in so far as the game can represent it. That is to say, there are a number of key aspects of Viking culture that can be seen characterized in the rules of the game.

*Hnefatafl*, pronounced *Nhev-eh-TAH-full*, is a board game from Scandinavia played from at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>42</sup> The game was quite popular as evidenced by its placement in Viking burials such as the one at Skamby, Östergötland in Sweden where amber game pieces

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<sup>37</sup> Kellogg and Smiley, "Vatnsdæla Saga," ed. Sveinbjorn Thordarson.

<sup>38</sup> Kellogg and Smiley, "Vatnsdæla Saga," ed. Sveinbjorn Thordarson.

<sup>39</sup> Olrik, *Viking Civilization*: 156.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Kellogg and Jane Smiley, "Sverris Saga," *Icelandic Sagas Database*, January 20, 2001, [http://sagadb.org/sverris\\_saga](http://sagadb.org/sverris_saga) (accessed November 1, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Kellogg and Smiley, "Sverris Saga".

<sup>42</sup> R.C. Bell, *Discovering Old Board Games*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Bucks: Shire Publications Ltd., 1980): 41.



were discovered.<sup>43</sup> Commonly played on a 13x13 or 11x11 sized board, the full set of rules has been lost, but successors of the game and archaeological finds of game pieces have provided sufficient insight into the game mechanics that the game can be reconstructed relatively accurately today.<sup>44</sup> The rules are as follows: one player controls the attackers, while the other controls the defenders and a king.<sup>45</sup> No matter which game board size is used, the attackers always outnumber the defenders by a two to one ratio, excluding the king (either 24:12[+1] or 16:8[+1]).<sup>46</sup> The defender's goal in the game is to protect the king, who starts out in the middle square (throne), and to escort him safely to one of the four corners of the board.<sup>47</sup> The goal of the attacker is to capture the king or, alternatively, block his escape.<sup>48</sup> All pieces may move as many spaces as desired in one direction (save diagonally) without jumping over another piece or landing on one of the five spaces designated for the king.<sup>49</sup> Either side may capture or "kill" a piece from the other side by hemming it in on either side.<sup>50</sup> However, the king must be surrounded on all four sides, or three sides and the throne square, in order to be captured.<sup>51</sup> A piece is also not captured if it moves in between two opposing pieces.<sup>52</sup> The defenders were typically dark coloured, while the attackers were light coloured with the king piece being markedly larger than the rest of the pieces on the board.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Rundkvist and Howard Williams, "A Viking Boat Grave with Amber Gaming Pieces Excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden," *Medieval Archaeology* (Society for Medieval Archaeology), no. 52 (2008): 83.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 95.

<sup>45</sup> Bell, *Discovering Old Board Games*: 41.

<sup>46</sup> Rundkvist and Williams, "A Viking Boat Grave with Amber Gaming Pieces Excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden," : 95.

<sup>47</sup> Bell, *Discovering Old Board Games*: 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Rundkvist and Williams, "A Viking Boat Grave with Amber Gaming Pieces Excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden," : 94-95.

Keeping the above in mind, one can begin to notice the influence of Viking culture on the rules. Looking first at the game pieces discovered in the archaeological record, one notices that they are compact making for easy transport.<sup>54</sup> The board, while it was often made of wood, could be made of fabric or even drawn in the sand.<sup>55</sup> Given the wandering nature of Viking culture, an easily transportable game is beneficial. It is also from archaeological investigation that it is known the attackers outnumber the defenders: the ideal scenario for a Viking raid.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the placement of the attackers at the four sides of the board represents longships surrounding an enemy. This is a common Viking battle tactic and not the only one present in the game.<sup>57</sup> The game itself is meant to represent Viking society in the sense that no one Viking soldier is stronger than another. That is, until a Viking's comrade takes advantage of the distraction to come from behind and smash the enemy's skull in, there can be no immediate victor. The importance of teamwork (despite this being a two player game) is an important Viking ideal that permeates the strategy for winning in the game.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore if one piece knowingly goes in between two enemy pieces it is not captured because the piece (representing a Viking) is aware of what it is getting into and is not "taken by surprise". One may also note the formation of the pieces on the board. Each of the formations makes use of a vanguard, which was another important part of Viking battle tactics.<sup>59</sup> The strength of the king is also worthy of note. Viking mentality states that in order to be a leader one must be strong, extraordinary even.<sup>60</sup> This prowess is demonstrated, not only by having the king as a much larger piece, but by having the rule that the king cannot be taken by any less than three enemy warriors (four in most

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<sup>54</sup> Rundkvist and Williams, "A Viking Boat Grave with Amber Gaming Pieces Excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden," : 83.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*: 95.

<sup>57</sup> Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995): 90-91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*: 53-54.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*: 147-149.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*: 14-19.

cases). Ostensibly the king should be the best warrior among either the defenders or attackers and should be much more difficult to “kill”. If anyone were to play this game they would discover that despite the greater number of attackers it is far easier to get the king to safety than it is to capture him. The range of movement is also an interesting addition that shows the Viking acclimatization to freedom and range of movement. The world was open to the Vikings and as such there are no restrictions on the movement of pieces save those of practicality. One may even take a stronger view of this by stating that the only thing that stops Viking movement is resistance (i.e. another piece).

The Vikings have long been a popular subject for popular culture and interpretation in modern society. Unfortunately, thanks to some of these interpretations, the word “Viking” has become somewhat of a trope for barbarous, uncultured, anti-Christian behaviour.<sup>61</sup> Thus, modern society has the deeply ingrained image of an inevitably hairy individual wearing a horned helm and little else, wielding a massive weapon, and drinking from a human skull.<sup>62</sup> The Vikings themselves can be seen as partially to blame for their targeting of Christian religious institutions, as it is Christian accounts that paint the “barbarians” in such an unfavourable light. However, contrary to Christian belief at the time, the Vikings were likely attacking monasteries because of their tendency to not only be undefended, but also hoard large amounts of valuable items the Vikings were seeking.<sup>63</sup> In any case it is important that the reasons for the permeation of this rather demonic image into the modern day are discussed so that they can be understood and eventually stamped out in the light of more recent scholarship.

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<sup>61</sup> Sean McGlynn, *By Sword and Fire: Cruelty and Atrocity in Medieval Warfare* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 2008): 72-74.

<sup>62</sup> Kevin J. Harty, ""Save Us, O Lord, from the Fury of the Northmen"; or "Do you Know What's in your Wallet?"," in *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011): 3.

<sup>63</sup> Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*: 80-82.

It is likely the myth that Vikings drank from human skulls came from a 1636 work by Danish physician and antiquarian, Ole Worm.<sup>64</sup> In his work, *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima*, Worm mistranslated (unknowingly or otherwise) an Icelandic saga where Viking warriors were drinking from horns.<sup>65</sup> Instead of translating it as “from the curved branches of skulls” he instead wrote “from the skulls of those whom they had slain”.<sup>66</sup> This has been further compounded by the Icelandic word for a drinking vessel, which is *skál*.<sup>67</sup>

The anachronistic level of sword use by Vikings is another common misconception perpetuated by Hollywood’s desire for the “epic” sword fight on film. In actuality the Viking sword was far less widespread on the battlefield than movies would have the audience believe. Vikings went into combat most commonly armed with shield, spear, and axe.<sup>68</sup> Due to the exceptionally high value of iron at the time, a spear, which required significantly less iron in order to forge than the long blade and handle structure of a sword, was a better decision for the lower class Viking in a culture that demanded all men own weapons.<sup>69</sup> On top of requiring more reasonable amounts of iron, axes had the distinct advantage of doubling as a tool as well as a weapon making them a versatile choice for everyday carry.<sup>70</sup> Thus, swords were reserved as weapons of the elite.<sup>71</sup>

The horned helms are another modern misconception with an identifiable genesis. In 1811 a number of authors of Swedish origin created a social group to study literature and analyze

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<sup>64</sup> Johnni Langer, "The Origins of the Imaginary Viking," *Viking Heritage* (Gotland University), April 2002: 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ole Worm, *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Copenhagen: Imprimebat M. Martzan & G. Holst, 1651): 203.

<sup>66</sup> Worm, *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima*: 203.

<sup>67</sup> Langer, "The Origins of the Imaginary Viking": 6.

<sup>68</sup> William R. Short, *Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2009): 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*: 6-9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.

<sup>71</sup> Ewart Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996): 135.

Scandinavia's past.<sup>72</sup> Known as the Geatish Society, its members wrote prolifically on the Vikings over its 33 years of operation.<sup>73</sup> The Vikings were often romanticized and re-imagined as a sort of "noble-barbarian".<sup>74</sup> The "noble-barbarian" idea also exhibited itself in the portrayal of Vikings with winged helmets and Classical garb in order to associate them with a Roman and Greek influence long glorified by Western society.<sup>75</sup> While some Viking helmets have been discovered exhibiting horn-like structures it is thought that these were largely ceremonial due to a horned helmet's incongruity with the Viking combat style involving an interlocked line of shields.<sup>76</sup>

The aforementioned inaccuracies have been highly influential in shaping the modern image of the Viking in a variety of media as modern writers carry the biases of their predecessors. What is intriguing is how the modern descendants of the Vikings view their ancestors. Of specific note is how the Anglo-Saxon perspective has influenced the British of today. Modern English (as in British) perspectives on the Vikings are much more complex than those exhibited by France or Nazi Germany. Janet L. Nelson sums this complexity up beautifully:

Confronted by Vikings, the English, ancient and modern, have oscillated between repulsion and association. English identity has been constructed against a Viking Other, as a narrative of shared victimhood and resistance, personified by King Alfred the Great. Yet it has been constructed, too, on an assimilationist paradigm, in which the Vikings... become no longer 'them' but 'us'.<sup>77</sup>

The Viking invasion of Britain has been considered to be the impetus for what can be called (for lack of a better term) nationalism amongst the Britons who felt a sort of unity against the

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<sup>72</sup> Langer, "The Origins of the Imaginary Viking," : 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*: 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Short, *Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques*: 38.

<sup>77</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: II, The Vikings and Others," *Transactions of the RHS* (Royal Historical Society), November 2002: 4.

Vikings.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Alfred the Great is widely considered to be one of the most influential Britons as evidenced by him being the only ruler of Britain to be accorded the title “Great”.<sup>79</sup> Alfred stood as a symbol of resistance to Pagan incursion and a defender of Christianity.<sup>80</sup> Some pre-modern scholars, such as Dorothy Whitelock even went so far as to argue that Alfred’s campaigns created and united England itself.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, J.R. Green, while echoing a barbaric portrayal of the Vikings, also continued to state that Briton and Norse amalgamated to create a culture that would (eventually) become recognizable as “British” today.<sup>82</sup> Many British people, notably at York, are proud of their genetic heritage and have taken such concerns to heart when portraying Vikings in museum exhibits. The Jorvik Viking Centre at York is an extraordinary example of the culmination of historical and archaeological reconstruction into an accurate portrayal of the Vikings and a unique showcase of the Viking presence in Britain.<sup>83</sup>

While modern Britain is susceptible to the Viking caricature that remains common all over the world, the modern British perception of the Vikings goes beyond that. The Viking effect on the United Kingdom is not only recognized, but is also celebrated as an important part of British history. The modern perceptions of the Vikings maintain the sense of “otherness” exhibited during the Viking Age with the modern awareness of their influence and genetic legacy in the United Kingdom.

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<sup>79</sup> *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*, ed. Don LaPan, et al.: 127.

<sup>80</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*: 313.

<sup>81</sup> Nelson, "England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: II, The Vikings and Others," : 6.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.

<sup>83</sup> Pryor, *Britain in the Middle Ages: An Archaeological History*: 174-175

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