

‘A MOST VILE PEOPLE’:
EARLY ENGLISH HISTORIANS
ON THE VIKINGS

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‘A MOST VILE PEOPLE.’ THE TRANSLATION IS NOT AN ELEGANT one but how else without obscenity are the words *plebs spurcissima* to be rendered? And how do you translate such phrases as *plebs immunda* (‘that filthy race?’) *squalidæ turmæ* (‘disgusting squaddies?’), *lues immunda* (‘a filthy pestilence?’), and *rex . . . foetidus* (their ‘stinking king?’).¹ These, with the more common and certainly less emotive words *pagani*, *barbari*, are all expressions used of the ninth-century Viking invaders of England in the Chronicle attributed to Æthelweard, educated ealdorman of Wessex in the late tenth century. Æthelweard wrote in the reign of Æthelred the Unready, but before the renewed Viking onsets that the inadequately prepared king suffered. So, though he was looking back over a period of peace lasting some fifty years, Æthelweard’s loathing of the old enemy retained its edge.²

¹ I take the text of Æthelweard’s Chronicle from the edition by A. Campbell, *The chronicle of Æthelweard* (Edinburgh, 1962). Dr Lapidge, using this chronicle, points out that its text is ‘poorly transmitted and . . . frequently corrupt’, and he often suggests different interpretations, sometimes dependent on emendation of the text (S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 189–91 and notes, pp. 334–8). Indeed, in the group *rex . . . foetidus* Lapidge emends to *foetidas* so that the word can agree with a following *turmas*, regarding Campbell’s translation of this passage as ‘utterly incomprehensible’.

² Campbell dates the work to the period 978–88, and ‘in view of the reference in the final chapter-heading to the “deeds” of Æthelred’, prefers a date late within that period (*Æthelweard*, p. xiii, note 2). If the phrase at the end of Æthelweard’s account of the battle of *Brunanburh* (p. 54) is accepted at its face value (*nec usque ad istas motus adhæsit sine littora Anglorum foedere classicus*: Campbell translates, with difficulty with the grammar, ‘and [since then] no fleet has remained here, having advanced against these shores, except under treaty with the English’), the Vikings had not returned in force when his *Chronicle* was written.

It is in part wording like this that prepares the historian to be, as he properly should be, sceptical of the value and accuracy of the English historical record of the Vikings. The bias is clear: the wording extravagant. So the information is suspect, and the sources must be probed with care.

Curiously enough, the Vikings did not see themselves in this same unflattering light. Their records are sparse, for they were in our sense of the word illiterate. Yet where we have their records, the Vikings often speak of themselves with favour. The literature they left behind them is fragmentary, but in it is some picture of their nature, some reflection of their values. Two types of 'writing' are important to my discussion. The first is in the content of their inscriptions, and particularly their memorial ones—the words in which they commemorated their dead, the values, status and activity they attributed to them. The second is the subject matter of their poems of praise, those verses in which Viking court poets celebrated their lords and showed what qualities they esteemed in a leader, a ruler, or a fellow-countryman.

These sources too have their bias, their extravagance of wording. They too must be approached with caution, for it is wise not to believe all the Vikings tell you about Vikings. In this paper my concern is not whether these sources report accurately what the Vikings did. Their importance is that they demonstrate how the Vikings wanted themselves to be seen by their world, how they publicly proclaimed their age.

Such contemporary materials depict a people far distant from the filthy, murderous and treacherous hordes that Æthelweard painted. They make clear that many Vikings viewed themselves in a heroic light. They were as romantic about Vikings as some television personalities are. The memorial stones record a society that was in some ways self-consciously aristocratic, and a way of life that was in some ways self-consciously heroic. Virtues praised are the heroic ones: valour and power of endurance, liberality, loyalty and respect for honour. Deeds of shame, *níðingsverk*, are

treachery to comrades, breach of trust.³

It is not only that the inscriptions record heroic ideals—though indeed they do that—but that they do it in heroic mode. Faced with a notice of a dramatic historic event, the Viking rune-master will often burst into heroic verse, just as the carver of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century English epitaph will turn to verse of pious platitude. Each reflects its age. In Viking times, not only did a man fight with courage, travel with enterprise, or die with nobility; the writer of his epitaph thought it worth describing these events in the language and form of heroic verse. To take a couple of examples out of many. At Sjörup, Skåne, is a memorial stone, perhaps of the eleventh century, set up by a man after his *félagi* (a word which, in this context, I take to mean ‘comrade-in-arms’). The primary record, set in an outer band of runes, is simple description: ‘Saxi put up this stone in memory of his comrade Ásbjörn, Tóki’s son’. Within this is a second band of runes, comprising two lines of verse which show why Ásbjörn needed and deserved commemoration:

SaR:flu:aki:at:ub:salum:an:ua:map:an:uabn:afpi.

Sár fló eigi at Upsalum
*en vá með hann vápn hafði.*⁴

‘He did not run at Uppsala, but fought while he could hold weapons.’ The significance of this example is that, to recount a heroic deed, its verse uses a form of words that must have been traditional in heroic poetry. The Norse *en vá með hann vápn hafði* gives the parallel to the Old English heroic formula *þa hwile þe hi (he) wæpna wealdan moston* (*moste*), ‘as long as they (he) could wield weapons’, used of the doomed English defiance to the invaders in the poem of

³ As on the Söderby, Uppland, Sweden, rune-stone (L. Musset, *Introduction à la runologie* (Paris, 1965), p. 392). The stone was a memorial to Helgi whom Sasur killed, ‘and he did a *níðingsverk*—betrayed his comrade.’

⁴ L. Jacobsen and E. Moltke, *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (København, 1941–2), *text*, cols. 332–4. The last line of verse is variously divided into its separate words, but this does not affect the argument.

The Battle of Maldon; or to *þenden hie ðam wæpnum wealdan moston*, 'as long as they could wield those weapons', which the *Beowulf* poet uses to refer to the dead Heathobard warriors, killed in a tribal feud with the Danes.⁵ The man who put up this stone in Skåne looked upon his slaughtered friend in the same way: as one who had perished in valiant resistance, refusing the easy option of flight. We are not sure what this battle at Uppsala was, and it may have been a sordid little skirmish; but here it has become a great and heroic Viking adventure.⁶

My second example is different in kind because of its quite different context, but it records the same ethic, this time in success rather than in death and defeat. The runes are cut on the smaller of two plaited silver collars, part of an early eleventh-century hoard found in the far north of Norway, at Senja, Troms fylke.⁷ They seem to be the prizes of war, or rather the profits of a Viking raid, for the inscription records such an enterprise, grandiloquently and perhaps cynically.

furumtrikiafrislat̃sa | uitaukuiksfotumuirskiftum

*Fórum drengja Frislands á vit,
ok vígs fōtum vér skiptum.*

'We went to visit the Frisian lads. And we it was who split the spoils of war.' I doubt if the 'Frisian lads' were as enthusiastic about the visit.

A good example of the way a court poet could use the

⁵ E. V. Gordon, *The battle of Maldon* (London, 1937), ll. 83, 272; F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (New York, 1922), l. 2038. There are of course numbers of other cases in Old English heroic literature of this range of vocabulary being used, but not the exact formula: cf. *Maldon*, ll. 167–8.

⁶ Another Skåne stone, Hällestad I (Jacobsen and Moltke, *Runeindskrifter, text*, cols. 347–50) uses the phrase *sár fló eigi at Upsalum*, referring to the same battle which may therefore have been a major one. It has been identified with the fight at Fyrisvellir which, at any rate in *Ynglingasaga*, ch. 22, was *mikil orrosta*. There is no way of confirming the link between this battle and the stones, and in 1942 Jacobsen and Moltke denied it on linguistic evidence (col. 333). Thirty years later Moltke was less sure of his grounds: *Runerne i Danmark og deres oprindelse* (København, 1976), p. 242.

⁷ M. Olsen et al., *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* (Oslo, 1941–), V, 127–40.

heroic to define contemporary events is *Eiríksmál*, the funeral ode for Eric Bloodaxe, commissioned by his widow Gunnhildr. As it survives—and this is presumably only a fragment—it is allusive rather than descriptive. It is entirely in dialogue form, and the poet stages his action in Valhöll, showing Eric welcomed in by the gods and heroes of Germanic antiquity. He is to be a recruit to the great force that Óðinn is mustering to fight the grey wolf at Ragnarök, and he brings with him an army of the slain so huge that its marching shakes the timbers of the great hall. The scene is a splendid evocation of outdated mythology, designed to glorify the dead warrior king. In part using the poem as source, *Fagrskinna* tells of Eric's last battle. Athelstan of England had, says the saga, entrusted Eric with the government of Northumbria. Eric was dissatisfied with this limited polity so he attacked neighbouring lands to assert his control there. After Athelstan's death he invaded Southumbria.

Eric had so great an army that it included five kings, for he was a tough and successful fighting-man. He had such confidence in his own prowess and in his army that he advanced far inland, plundering as he went. Against him came King Óláfr, sub-king to Eadmund. They fought, and Eric was beaten down by superior local forces and fell there with all his host.⁸

In the Norse version the battle was a major one, and it comes as something of a shock to find that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not mention it; indeed, does not even record Eric's death. Symeon of Durham says succinctly that Eric was killed by Maccus, son of Onlaf, but gives no details.⁹ Roger of Wendover, more than two centuries after the event, is a little more forthcoming:

Through the deceit (*proditione*) of Earl (*comes*) Osulf, King Eilric and his son Henric and brother Reginald were treacherously (*fraudulenter*) slain by Earl (*consul*) Maco in a certain wilderness which is called 'Steinmor'.¹⁰

⁸ F. Jónsson, *Fagrskinna: Nóregs kononga tal* (København, 1902-3), p. 27.

⁹ T. Arnold, *Symeonis monachi opera omnia* (London, 1882-5), II, 197.

¹⁰ H. O. Coxe, *Rogeri de Wendover chronica, sive Flores historiarum* (London, 1841-4), I, 402-3.

This may have been *Fagrskinna*'s great battle (though it is in the wrong part of England), but it sounds suspiciously like an ambush or a secret murder. At any rate, it has none of the glory of *Eiríksmál*. Modern anti-heroic sentiment is likely to believe Roger of Wendover's terseness rather than *Eiríksmál*'s extravagance, and after all, Roger is a historical source, *Eiríksmál* only a literary one.

Such divergent reports of the Vikings form the theme of this talk. It is not just that I oppose critical and down-to-earth English views to favourable and heroic Norse ones. The matter is not so simple; the contrast, I suggest, is less stark than my prelude has implied. I suggest further that differing modern views of Viking activity may be traceable in the varied development of English attitudes to that people in the early Middle Ages.

A single lecture cannot deal with this theme in detail, and I have to be content to throw out a few ideas. To begin with, it might be useful to make a couple of distinctions. A weakness of some general studies of the Viking Age is that they regard all Vikings as the same Viking (and this applies to some mediaeval accounts too). They take too little account of variations between the three or more individual races involved; this is perhaps inevitable and even forgivable, for the material is often so sparse that it must be cobbled together from a wide range of sources. I suspect too that general writers on the Vikings do not properly take note of the different social classes involved, classes that may have had different incentives and ways of life. Also significant is the time span of the Viking Age: it covered, say, 250–300 years, from the last decade of the eighth century to the second half of the eleventh, and it would be strange if people did not modify their values over so long a period. Specifically, during the last decades of the Viking Age, from, say, 1000 in Norway, a little earlier in Denmark and rather later in Sweden, Vikings were Christians. Even before these dates many had found touch with Christianity, and borne a tenuous allegiance, and perhaps more, to that faith. We could expect the material for the later period to show

evidence of Christian influence on Viking actions. True, the memorial stones give us little trust in the civilising effects of the religion of the Prince of Peace, for they still celebrate pillage and plunder while imploring God to have mercy on the soul of the plunderer.¹¹ But other Vikings may have responded more positively.

A tentative example may be that recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 994, which recounts how the forces of Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway and Sveinn of Denmark combined to ravage southern England: ‘and they rode wherever they wanted, and kept on doing unspeakable evil.’ Æthelred bought them off with a *danegeld* of 16,000 pounds. Then he used diplomacy to detach Óláfr from Sveinn.

Then the king (Æthelred) sent Bishop Ælfheah and Ealdorman Æthelweard for King Anlaf (Óláfr), and meantime gave up hostages to the (Viking) ships. And they led Anlaf with great ceremony to the king at Andover. And King Æthelred received him in confirmation at the bishop’s hands, and gave him royal gifts . . . And Anlaf promised that he would never come back to England with hostile intent.¹²

To this the Chronicler adds *swa he hit eac gelæste/eac swa gelæste*, ‘and what’s more he kept his promise’, as though it was a rare thing for a Viking to do since they were notorious for treachery. We who have read Snorri may suspect that Óláfr kept his word in part because thenceforward he was so busy claiming and defending his Norwegian kingdom that he had no time for overseas adventures; but from the context it looks as though the Chronicler thought that Óláfr’s confirmation in Christianity had something to do with it. Perhaps he was right.¹³

¹¹ As, for instance, Ali of Väsby, Uppland, Sweden, who put up his own stone, recorded that he had taken *danegeld* in England, and ended with a prayer to God to help his soul (Musset, *Runologie*, p. 383); and some of the stones commemorating the men who died in Ingvarr’s bloody expedition to the East (*ibid.*, p. 396).

¹² B. Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, according to the several original authorities* (London, 1861), I, 242–3.

¹³ There is a like example in the *Chronicle*, annal 878, where the Vikings under Guthrum made two promises, first to leave Alfred’s kingdom and second to have their

Nevertheless there is no doubt that in general the Western historical writers are hostile to the Vikings. Nor is it surprising. To get the full relish of a Viking raid, you have to be on the right end of it. Yet though they deal almost exclusively with the darker aspects of Norse activity, the English writers are often remarkably dispassionate. An example here is the first batch of entries on the Vikings in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, those up to, say, 891/2. They describe raids, battles, sieges, oath-breakings and treachery, but they seldom comment, at any rate directly. A typical case is the entry for 865/6.

Here the heathen (Viking) host camped on Thanet and made a treaty with the people of Kent. And the Kentishmen promised them money in return for the treaty. And under cover of the treaty and the promise of money, the host sneaked away inland by night and overran all eastern Kent.¹⁴

Clearly in English eyes the Vikings behaved like cads, and typically so for it was notorious that their word could not be trusted, but the Chronicler, with proper English *sang-froid*, forbore to make a point of it. Not so the Welshman Asser when he came to summarise the incident for his *Life of King Alfred*.

In the year of the Incarnation of Our Lord 864, the pagans over-wintered on the Isle of Thanet, and concluded a firm treaty with the men of Kent. The men of Kent promised to give them money in return for their keeping the treaty. But in the meantime, the pagans, acting like foxes, secretly broke out of camp by night, tore the agreement to shreds, rejected the offer of money (for they knew they would get hold of more from loot than by peace) and devastated the whole region of eastern Kent.¹⁵

king baptised, *ond hie þæt gelæston swa*. This contrasts with the events of 876 where treachery and paganism go hand in hand: '(the Vikings) swore him (Alfred) oaths on the holy ring, which up to then they were not prepared to do for any nation, that they would leave his kingdom at once. And under cover of this, the mounted army evaded the English forces by night and stole into Exeter' (but cf. their swearing of oaths and keeping *godne friþ* the following year).

¹⁴ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 130-1.

¹⁵ W. H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred* (Oxford, repr. 1959), p. 18.

Asser has added a good deal. Here, as so often elsewhere, he stresses the Vikings' paganism.¹⁶ He lays weight on their treachery: the treaty they break is a firm one (*firmum foedus*); they do not just break it, they tear it in pieces (*foedere disrupto*); in doing so they act like foxes (*vulpino more*); their excuse is blatant greed. The Vikings do not steal stealthily out of their camp (the Old English uses the verb *bestelan*), they burst out (*erumpentes*), and Eastern Kent is *depopulati*. Asser has heightened the language to define his disgust, and the viciousness of the enemy is made explicit.

In adapting the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Asser commonly gives the Vikings a bad press. As well as contrasting their paganism with the virtuous (or sometimes, regrettably, less virtuous) Christianity of the English, he often adds pejorative adjectives, adverbs or phrases. Where the original simply refers to *se here* (871/2), Asser puts *exosae memoriae paganorum exercitus*, 'the pagan army of loathsome memory'. Where the *Chronicle* simply tells that two Viking leaders rode inland (in the same entry), Asser makes the reason explicit, *in praedam*, 'for plunder'. Where the Vikings are defeated and sensibly run for it (860/1), Asser makes them flee *muliebriter* (which I hesitate to translate 'like women') or take to *opprobriosam fugam*, 'shameful flight' (871).

There is a comparison here with Æthelweard, who also vilifies the Vikings, though in general not in his early entries on them: there the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is translated more or less straight. Only after 871 when Alfred joins Æthelred in the defence of Wessex is there any extensive overt criticism of Norse behaviour; then they become *plebs impiissima*. This is perhaps not surprising as Æthelweard was descended from Æthelred, and his *Chronicle* was addressed to the Abbess Matilda, descendent of Alfred, as the writer conscientiously points out in his *Prologus* and recapitulates in his introduction to Alfred's reign. Thenceforward, Æthelweard savages the Vikings, accounting them cruel and

¹⁶ Further on this see my 'The audience of *Beowulf* and the Vikings', in C. Chase, *The dating of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1981), p. 119.

untrustworthy, and even perverting the text of the *Chronicle* to denigrate them. When the Vikings gain a victory (871), Æthelweard calls it 'fruitless' (*sterilem*), even though they carry off loot. When the Vikings make a truce (877), Æthelweard says *fraude constituunt iterata pacem barbari mente*, 'in the same treacherous state of mind, the barbarians made peace', even though the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* admits that they *godne frið heoldon*, 'kept a firm peace'.

However, Æthelweard's description of the enemy is not always unflattering. He often becomes the prisoner of his extravagant style, which sometimes encouraged him to write beyond his material. In such things as set-piece battle scenes, both sides may get romanticised treatment. In 871, for instance, the Vikings rode *aut certe explorationis ritu tam celeres aut æterni numinis*, an odd expression which Campbell translates 'as swift indeed as scouts or as the eternal spirit.' Whatever that means, it sounds exciting and perhaps even approving. It is a good distance from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* terse version, *ridon ii.eorlas up*, 'two Viking earls rode inland'. Their opponent on this occasion, the ealdorman Æthelwulf, was a worthy defender: *quamuis pauca manus, sed fortia animi receptacula manent*, 'though his forces were small, they had strong reserves of courage.' Both sides get recognition.

When the English lose, the author can find good reason. In 871 Alfred came to the throne, and immediately Wessex faced a great summer army of invaders.

The army of the English was sparse because of the absence of the king who was then attending his brother's funeral. But though they were not at full strength, there was a stern resoluteness in their breasts. They took delight in the contest, and thrust the enemy back for some way.¹⁷

Eventually the English were beaten, but only because they were exhausted. The difficulty with this story is that it contradicts the *Chronicle*. From its place in that history, this

¹⁷ Campbell, *Æthelweard*, pp. 39–40.

seems to be the battle fought at Wilton between a small English force and the whole Viking host; the *Chronicle* records that Alfred was in that fight. Apparently Æthelweard was reluctant to admit that, leading his people for the first time as king, Alfred lost. Hence the star-treatment he gives the leaderless West Saxons.

But on occasion Æthelweard could be generous to the Vikings too. Here is his terse but rhetorical picture of an enemy fleet in action (885): *insistunt remis; deponunt scarmos; unda coacta rutilant arma*, 'they drove their oars; laid down their gear; their weapons glittered red on the churning wave.' Not surprisingly, the Vikings won that round. Of course, Æthelweard's style had got the better of him. Though he wanted to show the Vikings as villains, he could not resist a bit of fine writing, and the *Chronicle's* simple *þa metton hie micelne sciphere wicenga, and þa wiþ þa gefuhton . . . and þa Deniscan ahton sig* was inadequate.

Æthelweard could not resist commonplace either. His story of the battle of Ashdown (871) ends:

and, so to speak, all the gentler youth of the barbarians fell there, so that neither before nor since has such a great disaster been heard of since the Saxon nation seized Britain by force of arms.¹⁸

Anglo-Saxonists who have read the poem of *The Battle of Brunanburh* will recognise the *topos*:

Ne wearð wæl mare
on þis eiglande æfre gieta
folces gefylled beforan þissum
sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
ealde uðwitan, sibban eastan hider
Engle and Seaxe up becoman,
ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
wlance wigsmiþas, Wealas ofercoman,
eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.¹⁹

¹⁸ Campbell, *Æthelweard*, p. 37.

¹⁹ E. V. K. Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon minor poems* (New York, 1942), p. 20.

'Up to now there has been no greater slaughter, no army cut down by the sword's edge, in this island—as far as books, early scholars, tell us—since the Angles and Saxons came ashore from the east, sought Britain over the wide seas, proud battle-smiths, valiant fighters, overcame the Celts and seized the land.'

The structure of Æthelweard's narrative too is rhetorical. When the Vikings first descend on England, they strike at a peaceful and prosperous land. Æthelweard's ending to his account of the battle of *Brunanburh*/*Brunandun* (939 = 937) shows Britain returning to the peace the marauders had destroyed, a peace that was to last until the writer's own time: 'the ploughlands of Britain were knit together, everywhere peace and fertility of all things, nor has any fleet, brought to these shores, remained here without a treaty with the English.'²⁰ Æthelweard is not concerned with strict historical fact. He wants to entertain, struggling to render the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* into elegant Latin as he understood it, and this affects both his matter and his manner.

To turn from Æthelweard to Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* is to move to another class of writing. Working over a century later, Henry was consciously producing a work of history, not annal, tale or propaganda. There is, of course, a rhetorical element, for Henry gave his book a preface in which he animadverted on the moral and didactic task of history, which above all distinguishes man from the brute creation (as modern historians are likely to confirm).²¹ History, he claims, records 'the greatness of men of power, the wisdom of those of pragmatic mind, the judgment of the just and the moderation of the temperate', though not all those qualities are prominent in Henry's account of the Vikings. By examples history encourages its readers to reach for truth and to eschew evil. And—and this is important for his treatment of the Norsemen—it records

²⁰ Campbell, *Æthelweard*, p. 54.

²¹ T. Arnold, *Henrici archidiaconi Huntendunensis historia Anglorum* (London, 1879), p. 2.

Dei judicia, 'God's judgments'. Thus Henry in his *Prologus*, following in part on his model Bede.

The incursions of the Danes are to him a clear case of the Almighty sitting in judgment on an impious people. Henry sees them as part of God's overall plan for putting Britain in its place and building a multi-racial society. Five plagues (*plagæ*) have struck Britain, the instruments of God's vengeance, though on whom is not always clear.²² Three had permanent effects, the intermediate two were only temporary; so Henry, with customary clarity, outlines a pattern of alternate long- and short-lasting invasions. Those of the Romans, Saxons and Normans had long-term results. Temporarily distracting were the attacks of the Picts and Scots and of the Danes. The Danes were effective because of their large numbers and the mobility of their raiding parties, but though they seized the land by force of arms, thereafter they vanished from English history, *deperierunt*.²³

A plague, of course, must be a pretty big affair. The Almighty would hardly attempt to amend manners and morals by a slight visitation upon a people. So Henry must demonstrate the weight, variety and determination of the Scandinavian attack on England. He does this by his interpretation (or, as some might think, his misinterpretation) of his main source here, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. To begin with, we must question his competence in Old English. Though he certainly had acquaintance with the language, it was certainly shaky, as his inept translation of the poem on *The Battle of Brunanburh* makes clear.²⁴ Some of his variations from the *Chronicle* narrative could then be the result of incompetence. But some are the effects of editorial policy. To borrow a phrase which a modern scholar has used of a fellow historian who also has difficulties with the early

²² Arnold, *Henrici historia*, p. 8.

²³ Perhaps dialectologists and place-name scholars would not agree.

²⁴ Arnold distinguishes, by using different type-faces, the accurate and inaccurate bits of this translation (*Henrici historia*, pp. 160-1). However, Old English verse is harder to understand than prose, and Henry's incapability in verse translation need not mean that he could not read Old English prose adequately.

vernaculars, Henry's work is 'brave, comprehensive and imaginative';²⁵ but—and the analogy continues—it is not always clearly to be derived from his sources.

An interesting case of Henry's treatment is from the opening of Book 5 of Henry's *Historia*, a book devoted to the Danish incursions before 1000. This plague was *longe immanior, longe crudelior* than the others. The Vikings came incessantly at the Anglo-Saxons, attacking from all sides, their intent *non obtinere sed prædari . . . omnia destruere, non dominari*, 'to plunder not to hold, to destroy everything not to rule'.

It was a remarkable thing that, when the English kings were marching east to fight the Danes, before they reached the enemy forces a dispatch-rider would rush up and say, 'Sir, where are you marching to? A huge fleet of pagans has come ashore in southern England, devastating towns and farms, and putting everything to sword and flame.' On the same day another would rush up and say, 'Where are you running off to, sir? A terrible army has descended on western England. Unless you hurry back to face them, they will think you have run away and will attack your rear with sword and flame.' On the same day or the next another dispatch-rider would arrive and say, 'Noble lords, where are you making for? The Danes have landed on your northern shores. First they burned your halls. Then seized your goods. Then spitted your children on spears. Then took some of your women by force, and carried the rest off.' Crushed by this grim plague of rumours, the king and people lost all strength of body and mind and collapsed.²⁶

Which king? we might ask. Which people? For the picture is a general one, attached to no specific king or part of England. This way of telling the story, with its detail of direct speech, is not, of course, in the *Chronicle*: it is Henry's own devising. Yet I think we can trace an origin for this general picture of Vikings appearing on all sides and putting the English to despair. Whereas in Henry it is an opening summary, defining the common effects of Viking energy and ferocity, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the parallel

²⁵ C. P. Wormald. 'Viking studies: whence and whither?', in R. T. Farrell, *The Vikings* (Chichester, 1982), p. 142.

²⁶ Arnold, *Henrici historia*, p. 138.

passage applies to a particular time and a particular circumstance. The disgruntled annalist for the year 1010, at the heart of Æthelred's incompetence as he sees it, describes the effect of the English king's ineptitude. The Danes were sweeping along the Thames valley, baffling the English by their swiftness and change of movement.

Then they turned south into the Thames valley, riding to horse towards their ships. And then quickly turned west to Oxfordshire, and from there to Buckinghamshire, and so along the Ouse until they reached Bedford, and straight along to Tempsford, burning everything as they went along. Then they turned shipwards with their plunder. And as they were going to their ships, the English army should have come into the field to prevent them turning inland again. And that's when the English army went home.

Then follows the Chronicler's generalisation on the English efforts to defend the country that year, and this, I think, is Henry's source.

And when the Vikings were in the east, the English army held to the west. And when the Vikings were in the south, our army was in the north. Then all the council was summoned to the king to determine how to defend the country. But whatever was devised did not last even a month.²⁷

The wording and presentation are quite different, yet the pattern of thought is the same. Henry, it seems, has generalised from a single succession of events, or rather from a single version of a single succession of events.

It is true that there is support for Henry's presentation in the single accounts of diversionary raids whereby the Vikings sought to draw off English forces. The clearest example is in the *Chronicle* annal for 893/4. Alfred had divided his army into two, so that only half needed to be on service at any one time. The active half had defeated the great Danish host and chased it until it took refuge on an island in the River Colne. There the English besieged the Danes until their term of service ended. Even in those days the English had learned to work to rule, so the army went off home

²⁷ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 264-5.

without waiting to be relieved by Alfred and the division that served with him. The Danes were left on the island, unable to move though unmenaced. To secure them from harassment, the Northumbrians and East Angles (presumably the Viking colonists of those areas, who might be supposed to be sympathetic to their fellow-countrymen in trouble) made two diversionary attacks in the west. This is how the *Chronicle* puts it.

The king was on his way there (to the Colne) and the other English levies were on their way home, and the Danes stayed behind there because their king had been wounded in the fight and they could not move him. Then those who live in Northumbria and East Anglia gathered about a hundred ships and went south round the coast, and about forty ships and went north round the coast and besieged a fortress in Devon by the Bristol Channel; and the ones who went south round the coast besieged Exeter. When the king heard this he turned west to Exeter with all his army . . . And when the king got there, they (the attackers) went to their ships.²⁸

Evidently the hostile fleets attacked Devon only to draw off the English army. In theory Henry could have had this sort of story in mind when he wrote his opening to Book 5; yet he did not follow what was going on in 893/4 since, when he came to tell of that year's fighting, he made a mess of the story. He tried to clarify the events which the Chronicler certainly had expressed rather confusedly, and in doing so omitted important detail. The Vikings are not shown besieged on an island and the English army is not divided in two, essential elements in the tale. In Henry's version the attack on Exeter is not a diversionary move but an attempt at plunder. First Henry details the two Kentish Viking encampments, the great host at Appledore and the smaller force at Milton, the treachery of the Milton leader and Alfred's forbearing response. Thereupon, making no connection between these Danes and the western raid, he continues, in typical style: 'but then to King Alfred came a messenger who said, "A hundred ships have come from Northumbria and East Anglia and are besieging Exeter."'

²⁸ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 166-9.

While the king was marching to meet this new threat, the Appledore army moved to Essex, apparently without hindrance. Then: 'but when they heard of the king's arrival, the besiegers of Exeter ran to their ships and remained at sea like pirates (*in mari prædantes manebant*).'²⁹ The Exeter attack, implies Henry, was for pillage, not tactics.

Henry's opening generalisation in Book 5 is unlikely to be built from events like these, events that show the English king and people responding vigorously to the Viking challenge. The apathy that Henry describes belongs to Æthelred's reign, to a single and idiosyncratic *Chronicle* entry for the later Viking Age which fortunately supported Henry's theory of the causes and effects of the whole period. As some later historians, he prefers his hypothesis to the precise statements of his source. Henry needed to assert the devastation the Vikings achieved, the great weight of their attacks. By simplifying, shortening, and to some degree misrepresenting the 893/4 annal, he gives it a sharper impact, one that implies an unrelenting series of Danish inroads.

Henry also must show the Vikings swarming *quasi locustæ*. He must account for the weight of numbers under which the English gave way. To take a couple of examples. In 840/1, says the *Chronicle*, 'King Æthelwulf fought against the crews of thirty-five ships at Carhampton, and the Danes held the battlefield.' Henry has to explain how a West Saxon king could be beaten by an enemy force that was apparently small. 'Though there was a small number of ships, there was a great number of invaders in the biggest ships.'³⁰ In 871, the *Chronicle* reports, 'the Viking army came to Reading in Wessex'. Some time later that year, at Ashdown, this same army was drawn up in two divisions, one led by two kings, the other by ? two earls; presumably each Viking leader took command of his own men. Henry expands this ingeniously. This army is *exercitus novus et*

²⁹ Here Henry may have been influenced by the *Chronicle's* statement that, on its way homeward, one of the fleets that had attacked Exeter made a coastal foray on Sussex (Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 172-3).

³⁰ Arnold, *Henrici historia*, p. 140.

maximus, quasi fluvius inundans et omnia secum volvens, 'a huge new army, like a river in flood rolling everything along with it.' The reason it was divided into two brigades: 'since, because of the great multitude, they could not advance all together, they proceeded in separate divisions and by different ways.'³¹ Additions like this have no authority. They are interpretation, not fact. Their purpose is to support Henry's notional picture of Viking activity in England.

In clear contrast to Henry stands his contemporary, William of Malmesbury. William's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* is a work of a different nature and organisation from Henry's *Historia*. The first book of the *Gesta* treats the individual early English kingdoms in turn. This brings Anglo-Saxon history into the first Viking Age; so these early attacks appear, not as a concerted invasion of the country, but as a series of onsets on different peoples. Indeed, William gives that as a reason why the English resistance was ineffectual: not because the Vikings were strong but because the English were divided. Each king chose to take on the enemy within his own borders.³²

Moreover, William writes a more varied type of history, and uses a wider range of sources than Henry. He employs tale, legend and song, not always with conviction, as well as more conventional authorities. He interests himself in government and administration as well as warfare. To him Alfred is not only a war-leader, he is a legislator too (*leges inter arma*), an administrative innovator and an educationalist. Athelstan is an international statesman and diplomat as well as the victor of *Brunanburh*.

A result of this difference in emphasis is that in William's work the Vikings seem less of a general threat. They are marginal rather than central to the age, implies William, anticipating Professor Sawyer by some 800 years. This does not mean that William underestimates their power. They are still vicious, treacherous and cruel. They are still *barbari*,

³¹ Arnold, *Henrici historia*, p. 144.

³² W. Stubbs, *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi de gestis regum Anglorum libri quinque* (London, 1887-9), I, p. 123.

raptim copioseque insulam petentes, 'barbarians attacking the island rapaciously and in force'; they are still *piratae . . . per totam insulam vagantes, et inopinatis appulsionibus littora omnia infestantes*, 'robbers spreading throughout the island, and infesting all its coastline with unexpected landings.' But they are vulnerable to a strong defender, with the effect that in Edward's reign they became *militibus contemptui, regi risui*, 'objects of contempt to the armed forces and of derision to the king.'³³

There is another aspect of William's treatment of the Vikings, perhaps more significant. He retells an adventure of the Viking king Anlaf before *Brunanburh/Brunefeld*. Anlaf disguised himself as a minstrel and insinuated himself into the English camp to spy out the land. When he had gone again, one of Athelstan's men who had formerly served under Anlaf warned the English king that the supposed minstrel was a spy. Athelstan was peeved and asked why the man had not told on the Norse leader when he was there. The man replied: 'The oath I have just sworn to you I once swore to Anlaf. If you had seen me break faith to him, you would have anticipated I might do the same to you.'³⁴ We are not told if the unnamed man was English or Scandinavian, but at least William's story shows the two nations sharing the same ethic about loyalty to one's lord and truth to one's oath. In this tale the Vikings are not defined as treacherous. The heroic pattern of life continues.

Something of a paradigm of the way historical attitudes to the Vikings vary is to be found in the treatment of the incident in Dorset towards the end of the eighth century which is often called the first recorded Viking raid on this country. The primary source, of course, is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 789 (787):

In this year King Berhtric (of Wessex) married Offa's daughter Eadburg, and in his days there first came three ships of Northmen (to this the DEF texts add 'from Hordaland'), and then the reeve rode up and wanted to

³³ Stubbs, *Willelmi de gestis*, I, 76, 108, 135.

³⁴ Stubbs, *Willelmi de gestis*, I, 143.

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drive them to the king’s manor because he did not know what sort of men they were (*þe he nyste hwæt hie wæron*), and then he was killed. These were the first ships of Danish men to come to the land of the English.³⁵

Apparently the affair was not important enough to get its exact date recorded, but the last sentence shows why the later compiler put it into his chronicle. He interpreted the landing and the affray that followed as the forerunner of the Scandinavian invasions. In fact there is nothing in the account to imply a raid unless the phrase *on Engelcynnes land gesohton* is translated, not ‘came to the land of the English’, but ‘attacked’. This is possible, but the phrase has not usually been so taken, nor, I think, did Æthelweard take it so. He could rely on either a fuller version of the *Chronicle* than now survives, or additional, local, material which he combined with his *Chronicle* text, for he tells the reeve’s name and where he was staying. In general his version is more prolix, and here it is important to distinguish between what he added from knowledge and what from conjecture. And further, what is purely stylistic.

Æthelweard’s flowery prose begins with a pastoral, with the West Saxons ploughing their fields *serena cum tranquillitate*, and their oxen assisting *proximo amore*. Then:

Suddenly a not over-large fleet of Danes arrived—galleys three in number. This was their first journey here (*advectio*). When he heard of it the king’s reeve, who was in a town called Dorchester, jumped on his horse and raced to the harbour with a few men, thinking them to be traders rather than raiders (*magis negotiatores esse quam hostes*). He took them under control (*præcipiens eos imperio*) and directed them to be driven to the royal manor. He was killed by them on the spot, as were those with him. The reeve’s name was Beaduheard.³⁶

Æthelweard’s interpretation is clear enough, though not necessarily the truer for all that. The reeve had read his Liebermann and knew that traders ‘must bring before the king’s reeve at a people’s meeting the men they are taking inland with them, and declare how many of them there

³⁵ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 96–7.

³⁶ Campbell, *Æthelweard*, pp. 26–7.

are.³⁷ He tried to do his duty of checking strangers into the land. Perhaps he offended the Northmen by his imperious attitude; perhaps there were language difficulties, the Northmen misunderstood his intent and panicked. At any rate they killed him and his followers. Beaduheard had apparently had no report of plundering or raiding, since he brought with him only a small band of men (*cum paucis* = OE *lytle werode*, a bit of information that could well be from Æthelweard's source, not his imagination).

So much for Æthelweard. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* version is consistent with this interpretation but adds little to it, though it might possibly be significant that there is no mention of plundering either before or after the reeve's intervention. One tiny fact in the DEF versions might be significant, that the Northmen were men of Hordaland. I see that if marauders came to their shores, the Anglo-Saxons might be able to tell, from their appearance and equipment, that they were Norwegians. I doubt if they would know they came from a particular part of Norway, nor would I think any defender, faced with a mob of Viking thugs, would waste time in asking. The Norwegians seem to have had some dialogue with the English, and this implies that at least at first the approach was peaceful.

In the next century and a half the story develops a good deal. Florence of Worcester follows the *Chronicle* fairly well but with a few tendencious additions. From the opening of the story he stigmatises the incomers as aggressors—they are *Danici piratæ*—while the reeve is even more an innocent victim, completely ignorant of who the marauders were or where they came from (*cum . . . penitus ignoraret qui essent vel unde venissent*).³⁸

Henry of Huntingdon is even clearer that the Northmen were plunderers; they arrive in England with that intent—*prædationis causa*. The reeve rushes out to capture them, not knowing who they were and why they had landed. He is

³⁷ F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (Halle a.S., 1903–16), I, 68.

³⁸ B. Thorpe, *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi chronicon ex chronicis* (London, 1848–9), I, 62.

celebrated as the first of very many victims of the Vikings.

This was the first Englishman killed by the Danes, after whom many thousands of thousands were killed by the same people. And these were the first ships that the Danes brought here.³⁹

Henry has prepared the reader for this incident by describing the portents seen in the land in 786, and speculating on their meaning: *an . . . factum est ad correctionem gentium, ne plagam Dacorum, quæ proxime secuta est, correcti perferrent*, 'whether their purpose was the reformation of the peoples so that, being reformed, they might withstand the plague of the Danes which followed closely on.' So this landing of the Northmen fits in with Henry's general interpretation of the Viking incursions.

But it is William of Malmesbury, with his love of a good story, who makes a meal of this one.

(Berhtric) had begun to relax in secure idleness when the robber nation of Danes (*gens Danorum piratica*), used to living by rapine, landed here stealthily in three ships and destroyed the peace of the province. This force came to spy out the fertility of the land and the courage of its inhabitants, as is evidenced by the subsequent appearance of that multitude which overran practically all Britain. Landing secretly when the peace of the kingdom was at its height, they attacked a royal town (*vicum*) nearby, killing the reeve (*villicum*) who was bringing reinforcements. But they soon lost their plunder through fear of those who came rushing up, and took refuge in their ships.⁴⁰

This version is little like the earliest one, though something of its source is traceable. At any rate, the peaceful condition of the country which the Danes disturb fits in with Æthelweard's prosy narrative. But William's detail is distinctive: the spying intent behind the Danish attack, the advance on the royal township, the counter-attack by the English who make the robbers relinquish their booty. William makes a good tale of it, but it is a tale, not history. What may originally have been a trading visit that went

³⁹ Arnold, *Henrici historia*, pp. 128–9.

⁴⁰ Stubbs, *Willelmi de gestis*, I, 43.

wrong has here developed into a planned and ruthless venture into an enemy land to spy and to rob. Had we not got the Old English version, these twelfth-century historians might have convinced us that this was indeed the first Viking ravaging of English soil.

Another episode, equally significant but different in kind, brings us back to the heroic view of the Viking Age. It is an incident in the battle of Stamford Bridge, which some would regard as the last great Viking battle. In general the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not give much detail of this encounter. The C version describes it thus:

Then Harold, king of England, surprised them above the bridge, and the two forces engaged and continued the fight throughout the day. And there were killed King Haraldr of Norway and Earl Tostig and a multitude of men with them, both Norwegians and English, and the Northmen fled from the English.⁴¹

At this point the text broke off, but there is a continuation in a late twelfth-century hand (and in non-Classical Old English) which adds:

Then there was one of the Norwegians who defied the English army so that they could not cross the bridge or complete their victory. Then one of the English shot an arrow but it achieved nothing. Then another got under the bridge and stabbed him beneath his mailcoat. Then Harold, king of the English, came across the bridge and his army with him and made great slaughter of both Norwegians and Flemings.

This story is of the stuff of the heroic tradition. As W. P. Ker expressed it long ago, 'No kind of adventure is so common or better told in the earlier heroic manner than the defence of a narrow place against odds.'⁴² The *Chronicle* shows an English writer responding to a Viking who acted in this heroic mode, who fought as long as he could hold weapons. The C *Chronicle* shows the tale in the late twelfth century, but it is earlier than that. Both Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury report it. Indeed, it so

⁴¹ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 339.

⁴² W. P. Ker, *Epic and romance* (London, 1897), p. 5.

impressed Henry that he added it to the DE *Chronicle* version he was using at the time.⁴³ As usual, it is William who tells the tale with most gusto.

The English got the upper hand and put the Norwegians to flight. Yet—and perhaps posterity will find this hard to believe—a victory by so many men of such quality was delayed for a long time by a single Norseman. This man stood at the entrance to the bridge called *Stansfordbrigge*, and put paid to several of our force, stopping the rest from getting across. Invited to give himself up so that a man of such valour could experience the generous clemency of the English, he laughed at those who offered it, and, screwing up his face, he taunted them with being men of such feeble hearts that they could not withstand a solitary man. Nobody came nearer him for they thought it rash to get at close quarters with someone who had desperately thrown aside all means of saving himself. One of the king's followers hurled an iron spear at him from a distance. It spitted him as he was arrogantly making preliminary flourishes (*dum gloriabundus proludit*) and was taking less care of his safety, and he yielded victory to the English.⁴⁴

To the heroic situation of the single fighter in a tight spot, William has added another convention common to heroic literature. Before battle the warrior stands in front of his enemy and mocks him, accusing him of cowardice or effeminacy. Any Norseman who had read, say, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, would understand the behaviour of the unknown hero of Stamford Bridge.

Even earlier than this there were Englishmen who acknowledged the heroic nature of Viking activity. In the early eleventh century there was at least one chronicler who recognised the Vikings as heroes even while describing their atrocities. The writer who reports Sveinn's campaign of the first decade of that century has both a wry humour in speaking of the English discomfiture, and a tendency to use poetic words in portraying the Norsemen. In the *Chronicle* for 1003 (CDE texts) he tells of Sveinn ravaging Wilton, and then marching past Salisbury to the sea, 'to where he

⁴³ Tostig's defeat in the Humber, his flight to Scotland and alliance with Haraldr of Norway, their joint invasion of Yorkshire and the battle of Fulford are all told by Henry in the same terms as in the DE *Chronicle*, as against the C version of events.

⁴⁴ Stubbs, *Willelmi de gestis*, I, 281.

knew his ships were'.⁴⁵ But he does not use the common word for 'ships'. Instead he has the kenning *ȝðhengestas*, 'wave-stallions'. The word occurs only here, but it relates to a number of other compounds in *-hengest* with the meaning of 'ship', *sæhengest*, *brimhengest*, *merhengest*, *wæghengest*, for instance, all of which seem exclusively poetic words. There is a similar example in the *Chronicle* for 1004, where the C and D versions have an interesting variant upon the E text. The incident is Sveinn's ravaging of East Anglia and Ulf-cytel's valiant defence. The E text ends 'There the flower of the East Anglians were killed. But if they had been at full strength, the Danes would never have got back to their ships as they themselves said.' C and D, with presumably the primary text here, use the last clause to open a new sentence: 'As they themselves said, they never met fiercer hand-to-hand fighting in England than Ulfcytel brought them.'⁴⁶ I translate as 'fiercer hand-to-hand fighting' the phrase *wyrsan handplegan*. *Handplega*, literally, 'hand-sport', is a word the poets use for 'battle'; of the four examples in the Toronto Concordance this is the only prose one. Moreover, there are numbers of other compounds in *-plega*, also meaning 'battle', which are virtually restricted to verse usage: *æscplega*, *ecgplega*, *gylpplega*, *hearmplega*, *secgplega*, *sweordplega* and so on. In these cases the Chronicler is deliberately using a word unusual and evocative in its context, deliberately stressing the poetic nature of the Viking ship, Viking warfare.

An even more cogent example is the annal for 1006 in the C and D versions. The annalist recounts the progress of Sveinn's army through Wessex with the English forces in disarray as the attackers, 'following their old habit, lit their beacon-fires as they went along.' The Danes plundered their way through Hampshire and Berkshire until they came to Cuckamsley, an old barrow and moot-place on the edge of the downs, in the heart of Wessex. The annalist tells us why they went there. 'There they awaited what they had been

⁴⁵ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 252-3.

⁴⁶ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 254-5.

arrogantly threatened with, for it had often been said that if they got to Cuckamsley, they would never reach the sea again.⁴⁷ The phrase I have translated 'what they had been arrogantly threatened with' needs annotation. The Old English is *beotra gylpa*. The phrase's syntax is obscure but its semantic range is clear and is that of a heroic society. The element *beot-* has the meaning 'threaten' with something of the force of 'boast'. One use of the noun *beot* is of a boasting oath or threat or promise of an exploit to be achieved, made formally in a prince's hall: what in Old Norse would be called a *heitstrenging*. *Gylp-* has a similar sense. It looks as though the writer of the *Chronicle* is saying ironically that the English had made a great to-do about what they would do to the Vikings if they ever ventured thus deep into Wessex, and the Vikings called their bluff, marching out of their way to Cuckamsley and saying, 'Come and get us'. It is not tactically sensible behaviour, nor, I suppose, was there any plunder to be got at Cuckamsley to make the trip profitable. But it is heroic behaviour, having the quality of defiance suited to a people who enjoyed such poems as the Helgi Hundingsbani lays. What is more, it looks as though the Anglo-Saxon chronicler appreciated such a way of acting, for he goes on to describe with sharp relish the Vikings turning back to their winter quarters, thrashing the English levies who tried to intercept them, and then deliberately marching past Winchester gates, *rancne here and unearhne*, 'an arrogant and fearless host' who had carried supplies and booty from over fifty miles from the sea. Of course, the writer had a propaganda purpose. His appraisal of the Vikings serves as an indictment of Anglo-Saxon folly, faithlessness and indecisiveness. But it sounds an admiring appraisal.

Finally, an example that gives the most direct contrast to Æthelweard's picture of a vile, filthy, cruel and untrustworthy people. It is from the late Anglo-Saxon world, but is probably not the work of an English writer. This is the

⁴⁷ Thorpe, *Chronicle*, I, 256-7.

Encomium Emmae Reginae, attributed to a Fleming in the entourage of Emma, widow successively of Æthelred and Cnut. Blatantly a work of propaganda, the book praises the queen and her son Harthacnut, but treats also of Cnut and his father Sveinn Forkbeard. The writer is quite prepared to suppress unacceptable information; yet biased as the book is in its treatment of individuals, it seems less so with respect to peoples, and its account of the Danes is in some ways good evidence. The relationship between king and man is sufficiently dealt with, one requiring loyalty and service and rewarded by liberality; Sveinn, says the Encomiast, made his men beholden and faithful to him *multa liberali munificentia*, so that they would have obeyed him no matter what odds he called them to fight against—and this, of course, is also part of the heroic code. But what is one to make of this description of Cnut's men who invaded England in 1015, celebrated in rhetorical rhyming prose?

nullus inueniebatur seruus, nullus ex seruo libertus, nullus ignobilis, nullus senili aetate debilis; omnes enim erant nobiles, omnes plenae aetatis robore ualentes, omnes cuiuis pugnae satis habiles, omnes tantae uelocitatis, ut despectui eis essent equitantium pernices.⁴⁸

'None found among them was a slave, none a freed-man, none of low birth, none enfeebled by age; for all were noble, all strong in the power of maturity, all properly trained in any type of warfare, all of such fleetness that they despised the speed of cavalry.' Perhaps men of a similar quality were mustered in the well-planned encampments of tenth-century Denmark, and perhaps later Norse tradition recalled these trained armies in its tales of troops like the Jónsborg Vikings, whose rules ensured that only the fittest could join, and who were glorified as heroes, even if not entirely competent ones.⁴⁹ The Encomiast anticipates this literary development, stressing the splendour of these great warriors in a pair of set-piece descriptions of Viking royal fleets

⁴⁸ A. Campbell, *Encomium Emmae reginae* (London, 1949), p. 20.

⁴⁹ N. F. Blake, *Jónsvíkinga saga* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 17–18.

setting sail, magnificent in their gilded decoration. Whether such fleets ever existed outside literature and Hollywood films is another matter.⁵⁰

What to make of all this? I am not sure any conclusion can be drawn, though there may be a moral. Even within the Viking Age, or at least within living memory of it, the English tradition shows the variety of opinions that could be expressed, or implied, about these peoples and the way they acted. A small amount of factual record led to diverse interpretations; it is unlikely that any single one tells the whole of what was a complex story. Twelfth-century historians would often be misleading if we had not their sources to check them against. Where we know of no source we must read later writers with caution. Perhaps the only conclusion is that there appears to be no end to the ingenuity historians can bring to bear upon a small supply of facts, and that of making many books about Vikings, there is likely to be no end.

⁵⁰ This has not stopped some writers using this material as evidence: cf. P. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking achievement* (London, 1970), pp. 232–3; C. R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon art: a new perspective* (Manchester, 1982), pp. 190–2.