

‘Torn between Saxon and Dane’

Reconstructing ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cultural identity through
the ‘personal’ in *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*

Nicola Louise Nuttall



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Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

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Summary

This thesis analyses the television series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* for their construction of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identities, particularly looking at the use of ‘personal’ identity as a tool of cultural memory and identity.

The thesis first explores how television is a relevant medium to explore cultural memory through particularly because of the nature of longform serialised dramas, which allow audiences to form deeper and more personal connections with the narratives presented to them and their wider political themes.

It then studies how memories of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cultural identities have previously been shaped by an emphasis on personal identity. This occurs through the creation of individual figures whose personal identity becomes symbolic and representative of the wider cultural identity. The racialisation of these identities are also explored, for the way that they enable a further layer exclusion of individuals from the cultural group.

The television series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* are next analysed in detail for the way they use personal aspects of their character’s identities, particularly names and personal relationships, to reflect and explore the character’s cultural identities and the wider groups’ cross-cultural interaction.

Finally, the shows are discussed within their contemporary socio-political climate, to reveal the themes of cultural unity that the series creators lean into through these personal relationships amidst a heavy climate of rhetoric about immigration and multiculturalism. At the same time, neither series addresses the legacy of racist usage of the ‘Vikings’ and ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ and this silence allows the series to appear complicit in the upholding of these identities as racially white exclusive identities.

Foreword

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Introduction

The Viking Age traditionally has its start dated to the Norse raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria in 793. This, in addition to the wealth of sources from English chronicles regarding the Scandinavian invasions and in contrast to the distinct lack of contemporary literary sources from the medieval Norse peoples themselves, has helped keep the invasions of England at the front and centre of the traditional ‘Viking’ narrative found in both academia and popular culture. The effect of this is that Viking Age retellings are rarely just reconstructions of these medieval Scandinavian peoples, but also of the medieval English people they encountered, commonly referred to as ‘Anglo-Saxons.’

On the other hand, the early medieval English period has also been traditionally dominated by study of the Norse attacks. In particular, the life of King Alfred is highlighted by his contemporary chronicles and thus post-medieval scholars and historians as notable for his victories over the Danes. This too has a distinct effect on popular culture narratives of the pre-Norman medieval period in England, also centring the Scandinavian invasion, and thus reconstructing a memory of the foreign invaders as well as the people of the English kingdoms who fought against them. We are thus left with a dual narrative of early medieval Norse and English societies, remembered very commonly by the Anglophone West in opposition and contrast to one another, and thus so constructed within narrative retellings.

Two television series from the 2010s represent this duality very well. History Channel’s (and later Amazon’s) *Vikings*, first premiering in 2013, follows medieval Norwegian raiders and their families as they explore Europe and seek power, fame, and a heroic death to take them to Valhalla. Their encounters with England, specifically Wessex and Northumbria, are centred throughout the series as the only ‘foreign’ territory to appear in every season of the show, and much like the Viking Age narrative itself, are framed as signposts for the beginning (the raid at Lindisfarne, Season 1 Episode 2) and end (The Battle of Edington, Season 6B Episode 10) of the ‘Viking’ story.

Meanwhile, 2015’s *The Last Kingdom*, first produced by the BBC before being taken over by Netflix, takes place almost solely in ninth-century England, primarily following the ‘Saxons’ of Wessex, led by King Alfred and his family, as they deal with persistent invasions from the ‘Danes.’ The protagonist is Uhtred, born Saxon but captured as a child and raised as a Dane, so the show does also follow a ‘Viking’ story to an extent. Uhtred’s narrative in this show, however, is more deeply intertwined with the Saxon court and Saxon politics that this

show can be easily seen as somewhat of the inverse of *Vikings*: about England, but with the Dane invasions centred and framing the story.

Both series were released over seven years, with *Vikings* completing its 89-episode run in 2020, and *The Last Kingdom*'s 46th and final episode releasing in 2022. Such long-running formats, bringing repeated doses of their constructed medieval peoples into viewers' lives and minds, must certainly have had an impact on how modern audiences remember these cultures, as routinely as they were thrust into the media spotlight.

This paper intends to explore television as a medium of cultural memory. 'Cultural memory' is one process by which cultural identity is created, recognised, and communicated. In general definition, it is the collective or shared remembrance by a group of its own past, both informing and being informed by the group's contemporary sense of identity. That is, the group may define its identity through aspects of the past that they remember, but the memory itself is also altered and shaped by the group's contemporary sense of identity.

This cultural identity is one kind of collective identity. Collective identities are created by and for groups. Yet, unlike individual identity, which can be rooted in and expressed in the physical reality of the individual body, there is no 'social body;' collective identity has no existence except in 'recognition by its participating individuals.'¹ There is thus a direct link between the expression of 'personal identity' and 'collective identity;' Assmann points out that many personal identities only become meaningful in the context of the wider 'we', where the sense of collective belonging reinforces the personal identity.² I stray from Assmann in my definition of 'personal identity' and its distinction from 'individual identity,' in that the latter I define as the identity of the entire unique self; the collection of all attributes and characteristics that in combination create a unique individual. Personal identity, in my usage, reflects individualised aspect of a collective identity the individual subscribes to. Thus, when I refer to 'personal identity' within this paper, I am referring really to a 'personal cultural identity' – the individualisation of a cultural identity.

It is these personal identities that the television series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* are reconstructing, rather than presenting the collective but intangible social body. When we witness the feats of the 'Vikings' or 'Saxons' on screen, we do not see a collective cultural

¹ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 113-114.

² Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, p. 115.

group moving homogenously. We see individual characters with individual stories, and with personal characteristics forming their own personal identities that reflect and represent their wider cultural identity.

The aim of this thesis is to explore this personal aspect of cultural memory and identity and how the television shows *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* effectively construct ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ personal cultural identities for both their characters as well as the audience, whose identities are informed and constructed with the help of the series’ medium, themes, and presentation of cultural identity.

Chapter 1 will more closely demonstrate the role of television in cultural memory, as well as exploring how personal identity has previously been crucial in pre-modern and earlier cinematic constructions of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity. Particular attention is paid to the use of individual characters and people as exemplary or representative figures of wider cultural identity, as well as how these identities became racialised and thus exclusive to those with particular physical and personal attributes.

Chapter 2 will closely analyse some of the key narratives and characters of *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* to demonstrate how the shows repeatedly emphasise the importance of the ‘personal’ in the construction of the cultural identity. I examine this personal aspect of identity primarily through personal names, as well as familial bonds and other personal relationships.

Chapter 3 will underline the modern political context of both series, underlining how themes and other aspects of their narratives respond to this context in a way that engages the audience even more personally with the constructed identities. Here, I will draw back particularly to discussions of the racial aspect of these identities and how this is reflected in the political themes of the show. Finally, I will also refer back to the discussion of the medium of television, and how the development of the medium and modern trends of online engagement have created an even more active audience, interacting with television and allowing it to inform their identity on more personal levels than ever before.

Firstly, however, it is worth noting that ‘Anglo-Saxon’ is an inaccurate term to describe the medieval English people. It was used very scarcely in Old English sources,

uncommonly compared to ‘Englisc’ or ‘Anglecynn,’³ and does not reflect any homogenous group of people living in the English kingdoms after the Saxon invasions and before the Norman conquest. ‘Saxon’ is an adequate replacement, though it refers to only one of the tribes of peoples living in England at the time, alongside the Angles, the Jutes, and the Britons. I generally prefer ‘medieval English peoples’ and similar variants to refer to the historical population. Where I have used ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to refer to such people it remains in quotations and is only used so to demonstrate that others have referred to the group in this way. As an ‘identity,’ it has even more of a loaded, very explicitly racial baggage that make it inappropriate to use seriously today as a historical term, as I will discuss in Chapter 1.

‘Viking’ is more complicated – it was used, and regularly, but in the contemporary sources it is more defined as an indicator of activity, profession, or lifestyle rather than an ethnic or cultural label,⁴ though it is often used by scholars as the latter. I prefer ‘medieval Norse’ or ‘medieval Scandinavian’ peoples. Like ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ where I use ‘Viking’ I retain the quotations to demonstrate that others have anachronistically categorised the group with this as a cultural identity label.

³ M. Rambaran-Olm, ‘Misnaming the Medieval: Rejecting “Anglo-Saxon” Studies,’ *History Workshop*, 4 Nov 2019, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/misnaming-the-medieval-rejecting-anglo-saxon-studies/>, accessed 22 May 2022.

⁴ C. Downham, ‘Viking Ethnicities: A Historiographic Overview,’ *History Compass*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2012, p. 1.

Chapter 1: Personal and cultural identity in the context of memory

1.1: Television: Medium of memory and vehicle for identity

There are many approaches to the understanding of cultural memory as a concept;⁵ this paper has not the scope to unravel the intricacies of varying theoretical viewpoints, but I take Jan Assmann's framework for a more specific definition of 'cultural' memory in contrast to 'communicative' memory as the foundation for my definition and usage.⁶

One notable feature of Assmann's approach, and one that is relevant here, is the aspect of 'formation,'⁷ which is the process by which a group creates some material symbol or 'figure' of cultural memory; 'material' here being used in a loose sense, as such a symbol can take the form of, for example, a work of poetry or literature or even visual or verbal performance as much as it can a physical monument. Part of the key to this formation is that it is a deliberate reconstruction or remembrance; the choice to preserve is active in nature.⁸ Assmann's framework sometimes insists on more restrictive definitions for figures of cultural memory, such as that they have some kind of 'institutional' or 'specialist' quality.⁹ The extent to which popular media production companies could be considered institutional or specialist is irrelevant here, Assmann himself notes that his structure is not encompassing of all aspects of modern cultural media, including television.¹⁰

Vikings and *The Last Kingdom* are deliberate reconstructions of the past, conscious acts of remembrance. This is enough that I find it sufficient to consider them figures of Anglophone Western¹¹ cultural memory. Modern cultural movements and globalisation make discussing Western 'culture' and 'identity' a particularly complex endeavour, but what is

⁵ A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, is a thorough but not comprehensive survey of approaches.

⁶ J. Assmann, (tr. J. Czaplicka) 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity' *New German Critique*, Vol. 65, 1995, pp. 128-133.

⁷ Assmann, 'Collective Memory,' pp. 130-131.

⁸ Assman, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation*, p. 20.

⁹ J. Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory,' in Erll & Nünning (eds.) *Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory,' p. 117.

¹¹ *Vikings* is an Irish-Canadian production, *The Last Kingdom* is a British production, however both shows are at some point in their runs acquired by the American streaming services Amazon Prime Video and Netflix respectively.

shared by much of the Anglophone West (in this case, Britain, the USA, Canada, and Ireland) is at least a partial sense of identity with ‘Viking’ and/or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ labels. These terms are derived from medieval Norse and English societies respectively (though not uncontroversially), and thus memories of these societies that are formalised in, for example, television productions created within the Anglophone West, can be classed as ‘cultural’ memories, contributing to and reflecting Western identities.

In the field of Norse reception, there has been some amount of work on ‘Viking’ movies.¹² Films, though, are designed to be viewed either at the cinema or at home in a one-time completed sitting, unless a viewer chooses to rewatch and have the full experience a second time. Television is longform content, traditionally delivered in a week-by-week format (though with the rise of streaming services, many shows are now delivered with a full season at once). With serialised dramas (as *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* are), each season of a series is still usually released yearly, or with a gap of between 6 months and 2 years depending on how long filming and productions take, meaning that experiencing the full intended narrative lasts many hours across several years. This slow but persistent format of storytelling imbeds the narrative much more deeply into the average viewers’ lives, along with the added personal nature of television shows traditionally being designed for home viewing, while films are marketed primarily for cinema viewing, even if they are also made available for the home afterwards.

It has been noted how medium can affect and even ‘impinge on’ memory.¹³ When dealing with representations of the past, television is then possibly far more significant as a medium in terms of the impact it can have on the formation of cultural memory. A group is perhaps more likely to carry with it ideas that have been presented consistently and repeatedly across a long period of time than those delivered in a single evening’s worth of entertainment, though I add the caveat that cinema certainly has its place in the public consciousness and Hollywood’s influence on public perceptions of culture and identity should not be understated.

The serialised and longform narrative of television drama has been shown to draw on both the casual relatability of other longform television like soaps, while still drawing on

¹² K. J. Harty (ed.), *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, London: McFarland, 2011, is perhaps the most comprehensive overview.

¹³ P. Hermann, ‘Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature,’ *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 81, No. 3, 2009, p. 297.

larger, more political themes such as what a film or play may explore. By including aspects of ‘soapiness,’ the intimacy of a plot for the audience is increased, which serves not to trivialise the political aspects of a narrative, but to demonstrate how they are interwoven more deeply with our personal lives.¹⁴ That is to say, the plotlines of television dramas that draw on the personal lives of the characters, for example relationships and friendships, can actually allow the audience to identify more strongly with the wider political questions of a narrative.

1.2: ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity in pre-modern reception

Emphasis on personal lives of individuals to better engage an audience with a memory of the past did not begin with television. The idea of characters and personal relatability has been used since the medieval era to effectively communicate cultural identity. Similarly, a sense of personal cultural identity has also been central to accessing, creating, and engaging with cultural memory. Here, I aim to show a few ways the ‘personal’ has been key to previous constructions of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Viking’ identities in Britain and the United States, as these have had some of the most influential impacts on the Anglophone western canon of memory.

Reception of the more general early medieval English period or peoples is associated most strongly with a sense of liberation and freedom of a Teutonic past. Englishmen as far back as the sixteenth century were drawn to Tacitus’ *Germania* for a view of the Saxons as a monarch-free, socially equitable society bound together by bonds of loyalty and kinship.¹⁵ It was also a personal desire that appears to have been the defining perception of the Germanic culture at this time; their ‘love of liberty’ that in the early seventeenth century was celebrated as having ‘transformed’ into institutional freedoms.¹⁶ While individual characters are not emphasised as much in this time, it is still the personal desire for freedom, and the personal bonds between individuals that are seen to be the pillars of Germanic/Saxon identity.

By the eighteenth century, interest in the early medieval English people particularly began to flourish alongside a greater interest in Nordic and Germanic literature, and it is also at this time that historical study of this group begins to take on a more racial aspect.

¹⁴ G. Creeber, ‘“Taking our personal lives seriously”: intimacy, continuity and memory in the television drama serial,’ *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2001, p. 453.

¹⁵ J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian historians and the English past*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 110

¹⁶ R. Horsman, ‘Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1976, p. 389.

Historians qualified the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ as a Germanic ‘race,’ sharing a common heritage and kinship with the Germanic and Norse peoples. At first, evidence of this was proven through examinations of language and history, though with scholars like Pinkerton, who described there being distinct and individually characterisable traits between the races,¹⁷ the importance of inherent difference began to extend to the physical nature of the individual.

The importance of the personal in these characterisations of the races is shown through Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. As a literary work, rather than a historical study, we begin to see parallels to the fiction of today. Scott uses his heroes’ personal traits to exemplify Saxon racial and cultural traits more effectively than through ‘abstract institutional excellence.’¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle similarly stressed the works and accomplishments of individuals such as Robert Burns to emphasise the greatness of the Saxon race.¹⁹

This became more explicitly physical with the rise of ethnologists and the first physical measurements of supposed racial differences, and then expanded upon by phrenology in the early nineteenth century.²⁰ The way that these researchers took personal attributes, ascribed them to entire groups, and then developed comparative value judgements about racial superiority is surely not better exemplified than the Caucasian race being so named because of one particular skull from Caucasus that the eighteenth-century ethnologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach decided was ‘the most beautiful in his collection.’²¹

Throughout the nineteenth century and following, scholars continued to reiterate and develop these ideas. Kingsley has been noted for the way he used racialised ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ in order to ‘gatekeep’ medieval knowledge,²² while John Mitchell Kemble’s archaeological work on Saxon burials provided a further physical ‘legitimacy’ to his

¹⁷ J. Pinkerton, *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths Being an Introduction to the Ancient and Modern History of Europe*, London: George Nicol, 1787, pp. 33-34.

¹⁸ Horsman, ‘Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism,’ p. 394.

¹⁹ T. Carlyle (eds. D. R. Sorensen and B. E. Kinser), *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 157.

²⁰ Horsman, ‘Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism,’ pp. 395; 398.

²¹ Horsman, ‘Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism,’ p. 396.

²² M. R. Knightley, ‘Hereward the Dane and the English, But Not the Saxon: Kingsley’s Racial Anglo-Saxonism,’ *Studies in Medievalism*, Vol. 21, 2012, p. 89.

racialised theory of Anglo-Saxonism.²³ Following the works of men like these, Anglo-Saxonists in the twentieth century continued to associate ‘Anglo-Saxon’ with race, and for Tolkien in particular, an ethnic ‘Englishness.’²⁴ Hobbit characters in his fictional works, which embodied and romanticised a white Englishness constructed from a variety of Saxon sources and medievalisms, represented Victorian explorers in an ‘adventure story’²⁵ that thus framed the nineteenth and twentieth century English colonisers as heroes from a white, overtly ‘Anglo-Saxon’ past. Tolkien was also wrapped up in the Englishness of his own personal cultural identity, which directly influenced the ‘fervency’ with which he explored Englishness through medievalisms in his fictional works.²⁶ These deeply internalised views and prejudices about medieval English literatures and who they belonged to resulted in personal and direct racist acts exemplified in his rejection of Stuart Hall’s proposal of graduate work on William Langland when Tolkien was Hall’s professor at Oxford in the 1950s.²⁷

This racialised ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ was also taken to a personal level in the United States also, where a Saxon heritage was used to ascribe an ancestral and superior right for the white colonisers of the land to disinherit and enact genocide on the Native populations through ideas such as manifest destiny.²⁸ Thomas Jefferson suggested including the semi-mythical Saxon chiefs Hengist and Horsa on the seal of the nation, claiming Americans were descended specifically from them.²⁹ Unlike in England, where calls back to the Saxon period extended the ‘English’-ness backwards, in America, the ‘Anglo-Saxon’-ness was brought forward, with ‘Anglo-Saxon’ becoming a term white settlers used to describe themselves personally and racially, emphasising this perceived direct ancestry.³⁰ In some cases there were

²³ H. Williams, ‘Heathen Graves and Victorian Anglo-Saxonism: Assessing the Archaeology of John Mitchell Kemble,’ in S. Semple (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 13*, Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2006, p. 20.

²⁴ K. Lavezzo, ‘Whiteness, medievalism, immigration: rethinking Tolkien through Stuart Hall,’ *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, 2021, p. 36.

²⁵ Lavezzo, ‘Whiteness, medievalism, immigration,’ p. 35.

²⁶ Lavezzo, ‘Whiteness, medievalism, immigration,’ pp. 40-41.

²⁷ Lavezzo, ‘Whiteness, medievalism, immigration,’ p. 43.

²⁸ R. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 219-220.

²⁹ M. J. Mora and M. J. Gómez-Calderón, ‘The Study of Old English in America (1776-1850): National Uses of the Saxon Past,’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 97, No. 3, 1998, p. 324.

³⁰ Mora and Gómez-Calderón, ‘The Study of Old English in America,’ p. 331.

attempts to prove the ‘purity’ of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ blood in America, such as showing through a study of last names that the majority of settlers in the US came from areas of England that were not as influenced by the Norse or Norman invasions.³¹ Here, to be ‘Anglo-Saxon’ was not an abstract concept of broad cultural characteristics, but something a lot more tangible, personally relatable to anyone with the right skin colour, heritage, and last name, and at the same time exclusive of those without.

In Britain, the most common constructions of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ memory with a personal focus feature King Alfred, who is central to understanding such memory.³² Alfred’s personal character was already being constructed to a degree during his lifetime, through the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser’s *Life of Alfred*, which emphasised his victories against the Danes as well as his passion for learning and literature.³³ It was the latter that, in the fourteenth century, led to him becoming anachronistically named as the founder of the University of Oxford.³⁴

Regarding the former, Alfred was certainly not the only king in the early medieval English period to fight or win against the invading Scandinavian forces. Yet, the successes he enjoyed have been celebrated significantly more than those of any other English king from the time, in part due to narratives of Alfred’s personal struggle that accompanied and strengthened the narrative of Saxon triumph. In particular, the infamous household tale of Alfred burning the cakes during his time in the marshes in Somerset, which in popular memory leaves aside the fact that he had the means to build a fortress at Athelney³⁵ and was not, as the tale presumes, having to shelter in the homes of the local farmers. As the story usually goes, Alfred was on the run from the Danes and was sheltered by a shepherd’s wife who asks him to watch over her cakes. So distracted by thoughts of how to overcome the problem of the Danes, Alfred lets the cakes burn and the shepherd’s wife (not knowing the king’s true identity) scolds him.³⁶ This narrative emphasises Alfred’s personal determination

³¹ Mora and Gómez-Calderón, ‘The Study of Old English in America’, p. 333.

³² S. Keynes, ‘The Cult of King Alfred the Great,’ *Anglo-Saxon England*, Vol. 28, 1999, p. 227.

³³ Keynes, ‘The Cult of King Alfred the Great,’ p. 228.

³⁴ Keynes, ‘The Cult of King Alfred the Great,’ p. 236.

³⁵ R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, London: Longman, 1998, p. 156.

³⁶ D. Horspool, *Alfred the Great*, Stroud: Amberley, 2014, pp. 77-83.

to defeat the Danes while reflecting the plight of both Alfred and all the kingdoms: the threatening Danish invasion.

The English defeats of the Danes were celebrated through many works of literature in the early modern centuries that centred Alfred as the national hero. In the political strife of the eighteenth century, the Patriot Whigs named Alfred as the first ‘Patriot King’ and celebrated how he had ‘rid the country of tyranny.’³⁷ Also, in 1740 Mallet and Thomson’s play about King Alfred included an ode with lyrics that would go on to become those of the now infamous ‘Rule Britannia.’³⁸ These lyrics were often included in many later plays of the nineteenth century that centred around Alfred – that this was during the early stages of Britain’s imperial centuries should not be understated. The memory that Asser created in his *Life of Alfred*, one of a man who overcame personal suffering and emerged from both a physical and mental struggle against the Danes and his own moral temptations – as Charles Dickens puts it, his ‘mighty heart’³⁹ – was taken on excitedly by the Victorians as a symbol of the ‘English Saxon character’ and as justification for Britain’s imperial action.⁴⁰

This ‘cult of Alfred’ can be seen at the peak of its glory in 1901 when a statue of the king was erected in Winchester to celebrate one thousand years (though by mistake they were two years late) since Alfred’s death in 899. As part of the celebration, the unveiling of the statue was followed immediately by the distribution of service medals to attending British soldiers who had recently returned from fighting in the second Boer War,⁴¹ in which the Boer republics in southern Africa were attempting to resist British imperial occupation. The rewarding of aggressive imperialist military action at a celebration of Alfred’s life demonstrates the perception of his achievements (where, notably, his personal character was once again reinforced with the telling of one of the ‘homely tales of his life,’⁴² the burning cakes) as paralleling the Empire’s own. This link could not have been made any clearer when

³⁷ B. Yorke, ‘The Most Perfect Man in History?’ *History Today*, Vol. 49, No. 10, 1999, p. 11.

³⁸ J. Parker, *‘England’s Darling’: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 150.

³⁹ C. Dickens, *A Child’s History of England*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1907, p. 17.

⁴⁰ A. Lynch, ‘Chapter 17: Medievalism and the ideology of war’, in L. D’Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 140.

⁴¹ Parker, *‘England’s Darling,’* p. 11.

⁴² Parker, *‘England’s Darling,’* pp. 10-11.

H.E. Platt wrote of the need to continue the Boer war being as necessary as Alfred's need to continue his resistance against the Danes.⁴³

That Alfred's defeats of the Danes were being credited as indicative of the British imperial spirit while other academics emphasised the Germanic kinship between Saxon and Norse seems contradictory on the surface. But there was also a middle ground being struck here. Alfred's leadership was intended to be viewed in contrast to the concept of the 'Norman yoke', with his government and legal code perceived as more democratic and liberated than the government imposed by William of Normandy and his successors.⁴⁴ Alfred's Germanic connection, as emphasised by the wealth of 'Anglo-Saxonism' scholarship outlined above, could perhaps then serve as a spiritual predecessor to the Hanoverian dynasty of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries, and actually enforce their legitimacy in rule rather than contradict it. Authenticity falls to the side here; Alfred's emphasis on learning and textual production (including his creation of a chronicle) seems to have stemmed from his visits to Rome and French courts as a child, and his practice of inviting worldly scholars to his own court was likely directly inspired by Charlemagne.⁴⁵

Norse reception in Britain follows a similar pattern to the 'Anglo-Saxonism' outlined above, with early modern interest primarily gaining traction from the seventeenth century onwards, centred on a glorified Teutonic past. Medieval and early English historians had already played a hand in shaping a 'Viking character,' with Asser, Æthelweard, and William of Malmesbury delivering a vicious and bloodthirsty portrayal in their works, despite their source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, remaining somewhat terse in its descriptions of the Norse invaders' nature.⁴⁶ British academics then began to look towards the Scandinavian literary canon and discovered another dimension to their own past, a heroic age behind the medieval invaders that could add a fiercer dimension to the British national heritage – many of the Norse raiders had, after all, settled in Britain following their conquests, as would have been

⁴³ S. Heathorn, "'The highest type of Englishman": Gender, war, and the Alfred the great millenary commemoration of 1901,' *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2002, p. 479.

⁴⁴ C. A. Simmons, 'Chapter 15: Romantic medievalism,' in L. D'Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 110.

⁴⁵ S. Keynes, 'Chapter 1: Alfred the Great and the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', in N. G. Discenza & P. E. Szarmach, *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ R. I. Page, 'A Most Vile People': Early English Historians on the Vikings', *The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies*, London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1987, pp. 11-12; 20-21.

evident from the sheer quantity of Norse-derived place names in the east and north of England and other areas of the British Isles.

One particularly crucial text in this new understanding of the Norse people was the death song of Ragnar Lothbrok, or *Krákumál*, as it is often known. This is a piece of Old Norse skaldic poetry composed from the perspective of the Norse warrior Ragnar Lothbrok who recounts many of his battles and deeds as he lies in a snake pit in Northumbria, succumbing to his death ordered by King Ælla. It was first translated fully into English by Thomas Percy in 1763, though he translated it from a Latin version by Ole Worm. Hugh Downham's version of the poem in 1781 was also widely received and enjoyed.⁴⁷ This poem contributed greatly to the idea of Norse 'death-defiance' associated with the worship of Odin, and was evidence that belief in Valhalla contributed to the fierce warrior mindset of the medieval Norse invaders.⁴⁸ Additionally, it personalised the 'Viking' character into an idealised individual, and particularly one with an explicit connection to England. Ragnar also appears in his own legendary saga, which also features the story of his death. The saga follows *Völsunga saga* in the latter's manuscript and can be considered a sequel to it as the tales are connected in several ways, one of which being that Ragnar's second wife Aslaug is the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. His legendary status thus added to the 'pride' both Scandinavian and British audiences could feel in having such a figure to represent their historical achievements.⁴⁹

Victorians, especially those in areas known as having been part of the 'Danelaw',⁵⁰ were excited by this Scandinavian revival. They took particular interest in Nordic travel and in more Norse literature than just the legendary sagas and poetry, for example the Icelandic sagas. Several historians and writers at this time were preoccupied with tracing their own

⁴⁷ S. Basdeo, 'The Once and Future Viking: The Popularity of Ragnar Loðbrók in the 18th century,' in P. Hardwick and K. Lister (eds.), *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019, p. 25.

⁴⁸ R. W. Rix, 'The Afterlife of a Death Song: Reception of Ragnar Lodbrog's Poem in Britain Until the End of the Eighteenth Century', *Studia Neophilologica*, Vol. 81, No. 1, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁹ Basdeo, 'The Once and Future Viking,' p. 20.

⁵⁰ A. Wawn, 'Hereward, the Danelaw and the Victorians,' in J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select papers from the Proceedings of the 13th Viking Congress*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001, p. 357.

personal ancestries to Scandinavia and Iceland, in particular W. H. Auden, who explicitly noted his physical and racial ‘Aryan’ and ‘Nordic’ traits.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Germanic nationalist movements began to adopt a rhetoric of racialised Nordicism as part of a means to integrate their national identity with the perceived racial whiteness and purity of Nordic ethnicity. The most well-known and gravely impactful of these were the *Völkisch* and later Nazi movements in early twentieth-century Germany, where a very specific image of the Nordic race was circulated to encourage people to distinguish between those who were physically and thus personally descended from ‘Viking’ ancestors and those who were not.⁵² That this rhetoric directly contributed to the murders of six million Jewish people and hundreds of thousands of others at the hands of the Nazis cannot be left unsaid, and is a harrowing reminder of how racializing cultural identity can have a profound and devastating impact on the lives of individual victims.

In the United States, medieval Norse people have also been looked to as ancestors. In the nineteenth century, American scholars began to reconstruct a foundation myth for their country based not on the traditional figure of Christopher Columbus, but instead on Leif Eriksson and the other ‘Vikings’ from the two Vinland sagas, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, in which Norse explorers discover and settle a new territory believed to be North America.⁵³ Despite the historical fragility of these sagas as records, and the settlement itself - if it even did occur - certainly not surviving until the colonisation of the land by Columbus and later Europeans, many latched onto Leif and the potential of an explicitly northern European founder figure. Prominent supporters of the movement to recognise this, including poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, were able to raise a statue of Eriksson in Boston that still stands today.⁵⁴ There also developed a culture of tourism in New England to visit sites that

⁵¹ S. Haraldsson, ‘Chapter 11: ‘The North begins inside’: Auden, Ancestry, and Iceland,’ in A. Wawn (ed.), *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1994, p. 257.

⁵² L. Nighswander, ‘No Nazis in Valhalla: Understanding the Use (and Misuse) of Nordic Cultural Markers in Third Reich Era Germany,’ *International ResearchScape Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2020, p. 6.

⁵³ J. M. Mancini, ‘Discovering Viking America,’ *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2002, p. 872.

⁵⁴ P. J. Roylance, ‘Northmen and Native Americans: The Politics of Landscape in the Age of Longfellow,’ *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2007, p. 437.

Leif and his companions had supposedly once stood themselves, closing the spatial and in some ways the temporal gap between themselves and their perceived predecessors.⁵⁵

Further to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and Germanic racial rhetoric discussed above which legitimised a white superiority complex, the Vinland foundation myth provided even more of a ‘historical’ precedent for a white presence in North America, coming as it did several hundred years before Columbus, and from a culture by now wholly synonymous in the northern European and American perception with ‘pure’ racial whiteness. It was thus able to serve as an anti-immigration counter to the influx of Italian immigrants at the time who may have looked to Columbus as their own predecessor, as well as distracting from or overriding contemporary Native American claims to the land of New England.⁵⁶

1.3: Cinema: The precursor to television

Before television came film, and Hollywood has put medieval topics, including ‘Vikings,’ in the spotlight since the very early days of cinema, with Roy William Neill’s *The Viking* in 1928. Like literature, drama films usually centre their narratives on character and individual personalities, and historical fiction films have been no exception. Here, I wish to explore two films from the mid-twentieth century, 1958’s *The Vikings* and 1969’s *Alfred the Great*, to reveal how the presentation of the main characters’ personal identities reflected (or failed to reflect) wider audience feelings of cultural identity with regards to early medieval England and the Norse invaders.

*The Vikings*⁵⁷ is centred directly around English⁵⁸ and Norse identity. Eric (Tony Curtis) is the child of a Northumbrian queen (Maxine Audley) who was raped by a ‘Viking’ leader, Ragnar (Ernest Borgnine). He is raised as a slave by Ragnar, and takes their religion as his own, not knowing his true parentage on either side. He conflicts with Ragnar’s son Einar (Kirk Douglas) throughout the film, neither knowing the truth of their brotherhood until just before their final conflict, when Einar is told and thus hesitates in the fight, allowing Eric the chance to win. Eric then takes on the role of king of Northumbria, in the place of Aella (Frank Thring) who he has killed, and fulfils his birthright as the son of a Northumbrian queen. However, he also holds a great funeral for Einar; this is the final scene of the film.

⁵⁵ Roylance, ‘Northmen and Native Americans,’ pp. 438-439.

⁵⁶ Roylance, ‘Northmen and Native Americans,’ pp. 443-444.

⁵⁷ R. Fleischer (dir.), *The Vikings*, United Artists, 1958.

⁵⁸ The film prefers ‘English’ over ‘Saxon’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ for the medieval English people.

Eric and Einar's personal identities in this film can be seen to directly represent a memory of wider English and 'Viking' identities, and their relationship to each other. Eric's dual identity, descended from both English and Norse, ultimately makes him the perfect leader – he has the warrior's strength of the 'Viking,' while receiving the legitimate hereditary right to rule through his English mother. His relationship with Einar, a pure 'Viking,' is tense. They are in conflict throughout most of the film, but there is ultimately a mutual respect and recognition of their kinship, seen in Einar's final hesitation to kill his brother, and Eric's respectful funeral for Einar. The English side of Eric is expressed best through his relationship to Morgana (Janet Leigh), the Welsh⁵⁹ princess who he falls in love with, and treats more gently and with more kindness than the vicious Einar's attempts to rape her, playing on the traditional trope of hypermasculine 'Viking' rape and pillage.⁶⁰

Eric is victorious in love and war not despite his part-'Viking' identity, but rather because of it. His prayers to Odin early in the film spare his life, and it is his kinship with Einar that too saves him from a possible death in the final battle. Aella, the Northumbrian king, is more of a villain here than the 'Vikings' themselves, and Eric and Einar's only truce is in service of vanquishing him. Rooting out the weakness in English society by aligning with the brutal but heroic Norse side of one's identity appears to be the overall theme. It is thus through the personal identity of Eric and his relationship with Einar that this wider cultural memory of the relationship between English and Norse identity is constructed.

What is also notable here is that the character of Ragnar, both Eric and Einar's father, is Ragnar Lodbrok,⁶¹ the film's version of the legendary warrior from Old Norse literature. Eric and Einar are entirely fictional creations of the film, not tied to any pre-existing narratives or conceptions audiences may have, leaving the writers room to create their own story, while the character of Ragnar, known as he may well have been to British audiences, roots the film in a sense of 'authentic' Norse connection. Though Ragnar does not play a particularly parental role to Eric, his fatherhood is crucially important to the narrative as it

⁵⁹ This perhaps even gives Eric more of a 'British'-ness with the inclusion of a non-English romance, encouraging a British union, and perhaps also drawing on the another common British medievalism – the Arthurian legends, which audiences may most associate with the name 'Morgana' in a medieval context

⁶⁰ E. R. Sigurdson, 'Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction,' *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 86, No. 3, 2014, pp. 249-267, for the exploration of how rape has become synonymous with the 'Viking' stereotype in media.

⁶¹ Modern spellings of his name vary; here I follow the movie, when discussing the pseudo-historical figure from the sagas I retain 'Ragnar Lothbrok'

creates a tense dramatic irony the audience feels watching Einar and Eric's conflict play out, with neither knowing the truth of their relation. It also places Ragnar (and thus the Norse legends) as an even more direct ancestor of England, with Ragnar fathering this future (though fictional) king Eric. The film thus reasserts both England's 'Viking'-ness, through the 'authentic' figure of Ragnar, and Ragnar's English connection, by not only reconstructing his death in Northumbria at the hands of Aella, but by inventing a part-English descendant for him. For the audience this creates a stronger and more personal memory of 'Viking' and 'English' identity.

Unlike *The Vikings*, which was a huge success and widely known, *Alfred the Great*,⁶² the only feature film made about the Old English king, was not at all popular and faded quickly into obscurity. That there has only been one attempt at a film about Alfred though, and that it went so badly, is at first surprising given his status as a national hero. The film deals with Alfred's (David Hemmings) persona oddly, however. He is not the moral role model of the traditional Alfredian character, but is instead bitter and mean-spirited, resentful at having to give up a life of priesthood for the kingship (a sacrifice invented by the film itself). The traditional picture of Alfred's inner struggle with lust here plays out as a brutal rape of his wife (Prunella Ransome) on their wedding night, who finds a happier romance with the 'Viking' leader Guthrum (Michael York), though she returns to Alfred at the end of the film. This is almost the perfect opposite of the Eric/Morgana/Einar romance in *The Vikings*. It has been suggested the darker elements of Alfred's character were influenced by disillusionment with government and war at the time,⁶³ and this is certainly possible. This twisting of the usual tropes of the Alfredian character however could have also been a significant reason for the film's lack of resonance with audiences, who may not have expected the first and only feature film about the only English king popularly labelled 'the Great' to have presented him in such a manner, and decided that this is not an Alfredian identity they wished to represent the Saxons or the English at all.

⁶² C. Donner (dir.), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1969.

⁶³ C. A. Snyder, "'To be, or not to be" – King: Clive Donner's *Alfred the Great* (1969)', in K. J. Harty (ed.) *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011, p. 39.

Chapter 2: Identity in *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*

2.1: Ragnar, Ragnarson, and Ragnar's sons

Vikings primarily follows the life of Ragnar Lothbrok and his family, friends, and allies. Ragnar is a Norwegian 'Viking' raider and farmer, who climbs the ranks of his society to earl, and eventually king. Key to this social climb are the raids he organises west, to England, where he meets and captures the Christian monk Athelstan, who becomes one of his closest friends. Throughout the first four seasons, one of the main plotlines is Ragnar's identity and belief in his gods, and how much this is influenced by his friendship with Athelstan. Athelstan himself struggles with his own identity and beliefs having been torn from his native land and having found a second home with Ragnar and his family. This is compounded by his eventual dealings in Wessex, where he travelled with Ragnar and meets King Ecbert and his family. There, Athelstan has an affair with the wife of Ecbert's son and fathers a child. Both Athelstan and Ragnar are eventually killed, but Ragnar leaves behind five sons: Bjorn, Ubbe, Hvitserk, Sigurd, and Ivar. This second generation of warriors spend the following seasons expanding their known world, and attempting to live up to the fame and notoriety that comes with being a 'son of Ragnar.' The show also continues to follow Ecbert and his family in Wessex, where his son Aethelwulf raises Athelstan's child, Alfred, as his own, who grows up to become king himself and has his own dealings with Norse raiders in his attempts to keep peace and forge a united England.

The Last Kingdom follows the life of Uhtred, the second son of Uhtred, lord of Bebbanburg, a castle and territory in Northumbria, England (modern day Bamburgh). His father and older brother are killed by a party of raiding Danes, and he is captured by these men, who are led by a man called Ragnar the Fearless. Ragnar takes Uhtred and another Saxon child, Brida, into his home as slaves, and eventually comes to see them as his own children. Many years later, Ragnar and his family are burned alive in their home in Northumbria by a rival faction of Danes, while Uhtred's uncle Aelfric attempts to have Uhtred killed, to solidify his own claim to the lordship. Uhtred survives, but having been blamed for Ragnar's death by the Danes, and being unable to return to his home of Bebbanburg, he turns instead to the Wessex court. There, he meets Alfred, who soon becomes king, and the series follows Uhtred's alliances and conflicts with Alfred and his family as he pursues his ultimate goal of reclaiming Bebbanburg. Alfred meanwhile, and eventually his children, Edward and Aethelflaed, come to rely on Uhtred in their goal to unite the English

kingdoms and restore peace to a land fractured by violence and conflicts with the Danes. Though born Saxon and pursuing his Saxon birth right, Uhtred retains his Dane identity from his time spent with Ragnar, and throughout much of the series, he is forced to navigate this duality of identity, never feeling truly at home or accepted by either group.⁶⁴

In both series, personal identity is thus a huge and consistent theme, especially personal cultural identity. For Uhtred the centre of his narrative and a source of consistent conflict and struggle for him is how his personal cultural identity does and does not allow him to access relationships and alliances with either Saxons or Danes. For Ragnar, the question of what it means to be ‘Viking’ is confronted and thrown into doubt when he encounters England, and his own exploration of his cultural identity forces his friends and family, who look to him as a role model and ideal, to either question or reinforce their own ‘Viking’ identity that they define in comparison with or in contrast to Ragnar’s personal identity.

Thus, in both *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, main characters not only have their personal identity *reflect* their cultural identity, but their personal identities actively *interact with* their cultural identity through characters explicitly questioning their own sense of belonging within their cultural group, and making personal choices to reinforce that identity or stray further from it. Despite the variety of cultures presented in *Vikings*, this identity interaction happens almost solely internally (as in the case of Ragnar’s sons, defining themselves against Ragnar’s ‘Viking’ identity) or across the Norse/English boundary (as with Ragnar, Athelstan, Ecbert, exploring a duality in their identities), with a couple of brief exceptions. In *The Last Kingdom* meanwhile, the sole and intended focus is the Norse/English cultural identity duality, so the action and narrative is thus limited to almost exclusively these two groups. This leaves both series, one with a seemingly wide cultural outlook, and the other with a very narrowly defined one, portraying the Norse/English cultural interaction as the centre of ‘Viking’ and Saxon stories.

Vikings immediately creates this sense of Norse and English duality in identity through the character of Ragnar Lothbrok himself, as he is based on the legendary Ragnar featured in sagas and poetry discussed in Chapter 1. Any viewers familiar with Ragnar’s tale, including those who saw *The Vikings*, would thus immediately expect England to play a part in his narrative, knowing of his infamous death in Northumbria. While the series is based on his character, the rest of Ragnar’s adventures are entirely fictional creations of the series

⁶⁴ Season-by-season summaries for both series can be found in the Appendix.

writers, either made up entirely or ascribed to Ragnar despite being drawn from entirely alternate sources, for example Ragnar's involvement in the siege of Paris.⁶⁵ The viewer's expectations of England however, will not be disappointed, as his adventures there become a focal point of his narrative, and his death in Northumbria is in fact one of the aspects of his original story with which the series remains relatively faithful to, with his final monologue echoing specific stanzas of *Krákumál* and his final words, 'How the little piggies will grunt when they hear how the old boar suffered,' are a variation of his last statement in *Ragnars saga loðbrók*.⁶⁶

In *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred's Dane captor and second father figure is Ragnar, nicknamed 'the Fearless.' He is evidently not based on the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok; the existence of Ubba Ragnarson, a leader of the Great Army to whom Uhtred is not related and who is likely based on Ubba, one of the sons of Ragnar in the saga, suggests that Lothbrok does exist otherwise in the fiction of *The Last Kingdom*. However, Ubba's heritage by Lothbrok is not mentioned explicitly, and when it is Ragnar the Fearless who leads the Danish raiding parties in Northumbria in the first episode of the series, the audience may be forgiven for assuming that Ragnar is based at least somewhat upon Lothbrok, whose *Vikings* counterpart makes similar raids in Northumbria in the first season of his series, and who, as mentioned, is known from the legends to have died there. Building on the legacy of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Krákumál* then, both *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* within their first few episodes create an understanding for the audience that the story will revolve around a 'Viking'/English duality through their use of the character and name of Ragnar.

Another aspect of Ragnar's legacy that both shows build on is that of his sons. Uhtred retains his connection to his father through his name – Uhtred Ragnarson. When this name is used it is primarily by others addressing him, seeking to affirm Uhtred's Dane identity either as an attempt to include him (when used by other Danes such as Uhtred's father Ragnar)⁶⁷ or other him (when used by the Saxons, for example in Alfred's court to mark him as different).⁶⁸ The patronymic style name is distinctly Scandinavian and is thus a clear indicator

⁶⁵ J. K. Puchalska, 'Vikings Television Series: When History and Myth Intermingle,' *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, Vol. 15, 2015, p. 94.

⁶⁶ M. Schlauch (tr.), *The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok Together with the Lay of Kraka*, New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1964, p. 249; pp. 266-267.

⁶⁷ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 1, Episode 1, BBC 2, 10 Oct 2015.

⁶⁸ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 2, BBC 2, 23 Mar 2017.

of his Dane identity when used, In *Vikings*, Ragnar's sons frequently self-identify as 'sons of Ragnar Lothbrok,' while others also use this title for them and about them to reinforce their status.⁶⁹

In *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred also has a Saxon name that reflects the other aspect of his identity: Uhtred 'of Bebbanburg.' This name reflects the lands and lordship which his Saxon birth father held, and which Uhtred feels are rightfully his following his father's death. This name thus connects him explicitly to Saxon land and to his Saxon father, with the land being his birth right by nature of this familial connection. Like 'Ragnarson,' 'of Bebbanburg' is also a name used by others to reaffirm the Saxon aspect of his identity, and when used by other Saxons this serves as inclusion,⁷⁰ when used by Danes it is to exclude.⁷¹ Uhtred's personal cultural identity is therefore signposted for viewers through these names, which act as markers to reflect his relationship with both cultures, and their relationship to him when each name is used in a particular context.

On the topic of names, it is also here worth noting the terminology each show generally uses to refer to the wider cultural groups. *Vikings*, surprisingly, does not actually include any character, Norse, English, or otherwise, uttering the term 'Viking' until Season 3.⁷² The series title, of course, makes it clear from the beginning that we are to understand the Norse characters as 'Vikings,' but it seems at least somewhat odd that the show is initially hesitant for the characters themselves to embrace this label. This could be due to a perception of historical inaccuracy, but this is not enough for the show from the third season onwards to then use the term liberally, both by the Norse characters for themselves, and by others such as the English and Franks. Before this, words like 'heathen' and 'pagan' are used by other cultures, while the Norse themselves generally veer away from situations where cultural group terms are needed for themselves. In some cases, however, the ninth-century 'Vikings' appear distinctly knowledgeable about modern Scandinavian nation states, referring to Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes as distinct groups, despite the actual geographics of the show being particularly hazy.⁷³

⁶⁹ 'A New God,' *Vikings*, Season 5B, Episode 3, History, 12 Dec 2018.

⁷⁰ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 7, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

⁷¹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 5, BBC 2, 13 Apr 2017.

⁷² 'Born Again,' *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 6, History, 26 Mar 2015.

⁷³ For example, the territory which Lagertha becomes earl of in Season 2 is Hedeby, but the landscape appears distinctly Norwegian (with striking mountains and fjords) in the series, and she does not make

For the medieval English people, *Vikings* generally uses ‘Saxons’ or ‘Christians.’ While the use of ‘Saxons’ is somewhat more historically accurate than ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ modern audiences unfamiliar with the ethnic or cultural make up of the English kingdoms at the time, and who are likely very used to hearing ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to describe the period, may mistake ‘Saxon’ as simply a shorter form of the term, and still ascribe it the racial connotations with which ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (and to an extent, Saxon itself) is loaded. *The Last Kingdom* too uses ‘Saxon’ as the primary identifier for the medieval English people, both inwardly and externally.

The Last Kingdom veers from *Vikings* in its Norse terminology, seeming to favour ‘Dane’ to a far greater degree than ‘Viking’ – though the latter is used once in the first episode to refer to Ragnar’s raiding party, so the audience is still easily able to make the connection to ‘Viking’ identity through the Danes of the show. The series is potentially trying to appear more historically ‘authentic’ here; ‘Dane’ is used by the Old English sources more than ‘Viking,’ and the show may also be trying to elevate itself away from the significant degree of two-dimensional pop-culture associations audiences may have with ‘Vikings,’ due to the term’s immensely popular usage as a cartoon stereotype. If this is the aim, however, it is inauthentic itself, as while it was more common than ‘Viking,’ ‘Dane’ was not a particularly common term either, in comparison to general religious-based designations like ‘heathen’ and ‘pagan.’⁷⁴ While the show does make some attempt to remove itself from modern ideas of Scandinavian nationhood,⁷⁵ *The Last Kingdom*’s use of ‘Dane’ rather than these more common religious terms also gives the impression that medieval English society was more concerned with ideas of ethnicity than they actually were.

2.2: Identity through relationships

A key aspect of Norse society in both shows is social bonds. In *Vikings*, fealty to one’s lord is symbolised and emphasised by the arm-rings Norse characters wear. The importance

mention of leaving Norway or seem to need to travel the kind of distance required from Norway to what is now northern Germany. Similarly, Kattegat is a fictional town, but it is a Danish name, though the characters all acknowledge that Kattegat is a part of Norway - ‘Resurrection,’ *Vikings*, Season 6A Episode 9, History, 29 Jan 2020.

⁷⁴ O. Timofeeva, ‘Alfredian Press on the Vikings: A Critical Discourse Approach to Outgroup Construction,’ *Journal of English Linguistics*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2016, p. 239.

⁷⁵ Where in modern English we would refer to something or someone from modern Denmark as being ‘Danish,’ *The Last Kingdom* uses ‘Dane’ for both noun and adjective form - e.g. ‘Dane army,’ ‘He is Dane’ - creating some distance between the Danes of modern day and the historical ‘Danes’ of the series.

of these is stressed in Bjorn's coming-of-age ceremony in Season 1, and their link to Norse identity re-stressed when Athelstan throws away his arm-ring in Season 3,⁷⁶ as a final embracing of his Christian God. In *The Last Kingdom*, the Dane armies are frequently united through social bonds between their leaders, and when these social bonds are genuine is usually when their military successes are the most common. When their social bonds break apart, they are more easily defeated, for example after Cnut has Young Ragnar killed, their Great Army which they had previously led together begins to suffer more defeats, such as at Beamfleot in Season 3 Episode 6.

Familial bonds play a large role in this too, and turning against one's family, such as the wars between Ragnar's sons in later seasons of *Vikings*, is treated as a huge betrayal worthy of death. In *Vikings* also, King Harald Finehair's killing of his brother Halfdan⁷⁷ is the one thing he states that he regrets⁷⁸ for the rest of his life. Similarly, in *The Last Kingdom*, Erik, a Dane warrior who led his army with his brother Sigefrid, betrays Sigefrid after he falls in love with Aethelflaed, and Sigefrid kills him for it. This betrayal and his resulting murder is a deeply emotional and tragic moment for both brothers.⁷⁹ Also in *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred's frequent abandoning of Brida and Young Ragnar in favour of Alfred is taken extremely hard by them both, and Brida only comes around to forgive Uhtred when he reveals that his reason for staying with Alfred was in order to save Young Ragnar from being put to death by Alfred.⁸⁰

Social bonds and personal relationships across cultures however, are also a distinctly important part of the narrative of both shows. It is these that deserve the most attention here for the ways they represent and reconstruct wider cultural interaction between the 'Vikings' and the 'Saxons.'

In *Vikings*, Ragnar's relationship with the English monk Athelstan, and the friction this causes with his friend Floki is particularly noteworthy. Floki for many seasons is firmly (in some cases even excessively) devoted to his Norse identity which he expresses primarily through fervent religious devotion to the pagan gods. This is connected explicitly with the

⁷⁶ 'Born Again,' *Vikings*, Season 3 Episode 6.

⁷⁷ 'Moments of Vision,' *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 10, History, 24 Jan 2018.

⁷⁸ 'The Final Straw,' *Vikings*, Season 6B, Episode 6, Prime Video, 30 Dec 2020.

⁷⁹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2 Episode 8, BBC 2, 4 May 2017.

⁸⁰ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3 Episode 6, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

notion of ‘Viking’-ness when Aslaug takes her and Ragnar’s son, Ivar, to Floki, and asks him to teach Ivar ‘the ways of our gods’, ‘to hate the Christian God’ and ‘to be a Viking’⁸¹ because she feels that Ragnar cannot fulfil this. Even though Athelstan has been killed by this point, Ragnar’s friendship with him is reaffirmed as impactful on Ragnar’s identity, making him not truly ‘Viking’ and resulting in Aslaug feeling this way and favouring Floki.

It is also Floki who kills Athelstan, to end his influence on Ragnar. Even when Athelstan seemingly converts to the pagan religion, Floki remains persistently distrustful of Athelstan and his Christian beliefs,⁸² which signify him as an outsider to their cultural group. When Athelstan throws away his arm-ring, Floki immediately stirs up resistance against both him and Ragnar because of Ragnar’s trust in Athelstan,⁸³ and makes the decision to kill Athelstan. Floki’s hatred for Athelstan is never rooted in personal betrayal at Ragnar choosing another friend over him, but is deeply integrated in his cultural beliefs – he is choosing a Christian Saxon over his Norse pagan friends, and this results in a distrust and disbelief in Ragnar’s own cultural identity.

Floki’s distrust of Ragnar’s Norse identity because of this relationship is also not unfounded. After spending time with Athelstan, Ragnar asks to learn about some Christian practices, and in one poignant scene, Ragnar learns to recite the Lords’ Prayer from Athelstan.⁸⁴ The ambiguity of Ragnar’s faith becomes so pronounced that during the attack on Paris, Ragnar is able to successfully trick not only the Franks, but many of his own men, into believing he had fully converted and wished for a Christian burial. It is narratively unclear exactly who was aware of this being a trick, as the ‘Viking’ army seems prepared to attack Paris once Ragnar reveals he is not dead, but there is a scene of many of his close friends privately speaking to his coffin as if they truly believe he is dead and had fully converted to Christianity,⁸⁵ where it would have been of no benefit to the trick on the Franks.

On Athelstan’s part, his relationship with Ragnar, as well as his relationship with Ecbert, is indicative of his own personal struggle with his cultural identity. Athelstan frequently states his uncertainty in what he believes, sometimes stating that he believes in

⁸¹ ‘Yol,’ *Vikings*, Season 4A, Episode 4, History, 10 Mar 2016.

⁸² ‘Scarred,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 4, History, 12 Mar 2015.

⁸³ ‘Born Again,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 6.

⁸⁴ ‘The Lord’s Prayer,’ *Vikings*, Season 2, Episode 10, History, 1 May 2014.

⁸⁵ ‘The Dead,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 10, History, 23 Apr 2015.

both the pagan and Christian gods at the same time.⁸⁶ After he is introduced to Ecbert, he stays in England for a time, and he and Ecbert become close after their shared love for manuscripts and appreciation for the Romans (and notably, for the pagan Roman gods). Ecbert provides Athelstan with the facilities and support to practice his Christian faith using all the skills he learned as a monk in his previous Saxon life. Despite this, Athelstan eventually chooses to return to Kattegat with Ragnar. This decision, which he makes twice,⁸⁷ seems to primarily be a choice between his friendship with Ecbert and Ragnar as well as a lifestyle decision. With Ecbert and Ragnar both as kings of their respective societies at this time, it is very easy to see this as Athelstan choosing between a Christian or ‘Saxon’ identity, and a pagan or ‘Viking’ identity.

Athelstan leaves a distinct and lasting impact on the English royal court, however. During his stay in Wessex in Season 3, he enters into a sexual relationship with Judith, the wife of Aethelwulf and Ecbert’s daughter in law. While they are both Christian, as Athelstan often appears to become closer to his Christian God when in England and surrounded by other Saxons, their relationship is particularly informed by Athelstan’s time with the ‘Vikings.’ For the large part of Season 1, Athelstan refused to partake in any sexual activity due to his strict following of the Christian monk lifestyle. After spending much time in Norse company however, he comes to participate in the sexual freedom they enjoy.⁸⁸ By the time Athelstan engages with Judith in their affair, Athelstan clearly has no qualms about the potential ‘sin’ of this sexual deviancy, thanks to this now ‘Viking’ aspect of his identity.

Judith’s encounter with the ‘Viking’ side of Athelstan has a prolonged affect on her and her identity as a Saxon woman. Similarly, Ecbert’s relationship with the ‘Viking’ Lagertha, contemporaneous to Judith and Athelstan’s affair, also appears to have an effect on his attitudes the gender roles and sexual freedom. Following these two relationships, Ecbert and Judith begin to engage in a sexual affair of their own, deeply troubling to the rest of the Saxon court and in particular for Aethelwulf, as Judith’s husband and Ecbert’s son,⁸⁹ but it seems to bring both Ecbert and Judith happiness and comfort. Additionally, Ecbert begins to provide Judith with other freedoms not otherwise accessible to Saxon women; she asks him to

⁸⁶ ‘The Wanderer,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 2, History, 26 Feb 2015.

⁸⁷ In both ‘The Choice,’ *Vikings*, Season 2, Episode 9, History, 24 Apr 2014, and ‘Scarred,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 4.

⁸⁸ ‘Sacrifice,’ *Vikings*, Season 1, Episode 8, History, 21 Apr 2013.

⁸⁹ ‘Promised,’ *Vikings*, Season 4A, Episode 5, History, 17 Mar 2016.

learn to paint and he provides her a teacher.⁹⁰ That she chooses this as her freedom after her affair with Athelstan is particularly symbolic of her connection to the monk, as this had been his role in the monastery at Lindisfarne before he had been captured.

Athelstan also leaves behind one other important legacy for the English court – a son. Judith falls pregnant after her affair with him, and is initially punished. Upon learning the identity of the father however, Ecbert considers the baby to be truly ‘holy,’⁹¹ and forces Aethelwulf to accept the child and raise him as his own. This child is to become Alfred, the series’ version of King Alfred the Great, but he does not appear as an adult character until Season 5. While the series is thus not focussed on Alfred himself as the primary representative of English or Saxon character, his personal character and role is foreshadowed and set up by the projection of Alfredian characteristics backwards onto his predecessors and relatives, primarily Ecbert and Athelstan.

It is not necessarily historically inaccurate to suggest that previous kings of English kingdoms in the eight and ninth centuries may have wished for or aspired to uniting the English kingdoms, and the historical Ecbert has on occasion been given credit for doing so.⁹² The idea of ‘England’ as a conceptually homogenous nation had been around since at least the time of Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* demonstrates a belief that all the tribes of the Angles, Jutes, Saxons, and others were spiritually (if not politically) united through their Christian religion. Yet popularly, Alfred is generally known as the first king to make direct political action towards this. *Vikings* thus at first appears to undermine this, with Ecbert’s dream of a united England and his successful annexation of Mercia in pursuit of it. What *Vikings* actually does here however, is instead to enforce Alfred’s characterisation through his relationship to Ecbert. Ecbert is made traditionally ‘Alfredian’ through his attempts at peace with the Norse invaders, his love of writing and desire for Athelstan to preserve manuscripts and history, and of course through his dream of unification. As Alfred’s tutor, he passes down these academic interests, rather than the pure warrior traits of Aethelwulf that the latter teaches his other son, Aethelred.

Athelstan is similarly ‘Alfredian.’ First introduced as a monk and manuscript scribe, Athelstan is both extremely Christian and extremely literary. His interest in knowledge and

⁹⁰ ‘Kill the Queen,’ *Vikings*, Season 4A, Episode 2, History, 25 Feb 2016.

⁹¹ ‘Born Again,’ *Vikings*, Season 3, Episode 6.

⁹² Keynes, ‘The Cult of King Alfred the Great,’ p. 248.

learning is emphasised by his understanding of the Norse language that he says he taught himself, which marks him out as different from the other monks by the ‘Vikings’ and is the reason Ragnar initially spares his life.⁹³ Literature and learning is also a crucial part of his relationship with Ecbert, who entrusts the maintenance and protection of Roman texts to Athelstan.⁹⁴ Ecbert’s belief that Athelstan is a deeply holy person, seems to not be in spite of his time with the ‘Vikings’ but because of it, through a greater appreciation of God’s work in pagan peoples that the two of them share in secret.⁹⁵

Ecbert especially favours Alfred over his older brother, Aethelred, engaging him in diplomatic and literary education over the military training Aethelwulf gives to Aethelred.⁹⁶ From the moment of Alfred’s conception, it is clear the show attempts to frame Alfred as particularly special because of his relationship to Athelstan, and his favouring by Ecbert. When Alfred is still a small child, Ecbert chooses for him to go on a pilgrimage to Rome, to meet the pope. Upon this meeting, the Pope has a vision of a monk, walking beside Alfred, who is evidently meant to be Athelstan.⁹⁷ After both Athelstan and Ecbert’s death, Alfred evidently has a better relationship with Judith than Aethelwulf – her relationship to Ecbert and Athelstan allows her to be the medium through which Alfred can access his relationship to them both.

When Alfred becomes an adult, he makes a personal vow to Ecbert’s grave to attempt to achieve his dream of a united England.⁹⁸ Further, before he even becomes king, he makes a visit to Lindisfarne, the monastery where Athelstan used to live and work before his capture by the ‘Vikings.’ He finds it a holy place and feels close to his father there, but also encourages them to instigate teaching in English as well as Latin, so that knowledge can be spread further. He also shows a tolerance and understanding of the pagans that he believes does not necessarily conflict with God, but could be God working in unconventional ways, that contrasts with the Abbott’s strict and demonising attitude.⁹⁹

⁹³ ‘Wrath of the Northmen,’ *Vikings*, Season 1, Episode 2, History, 10 Mar 2013.

⁹⁴ ‘Unforgiven,’ *Vikings*, Season 2, Episode 6, History, 3 Apr 2014.

⁹⁵ ‘Unforgiven,’ *Vikings*, Season 2, Episode 6.

⁹⁶ ‘The Great Army,’ *Vikings*, Season 4B, Episode 7, History, 11 Jan 2017.

⁹⁷ ‘Death All ‘Round,’ *Vikings*, Season 4A, Episode 9, History, 14 Apr 2016.

⁹⁸ ‘The Message,’ *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 6, History, 27 Dec 2017.

⁹⁹ ‘Full Moon,’ *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 7, History, 3 Jan 2018.

Even though Alfred ultimately defeats the ‘Vikings’ in a great battle against Ivar and Hvitserk, and converts Hvitserk to Christianity, this tolerance and accepting attitude towards the ‘Vikings’ is framed as a positive attribute that does not impede on his victory over them. This attribute can be seen to have been inherited from both Athelstan, who was of course sympathetic to the ‘Vikings’ and considered himself among them for much of the show, and Ecbert, who was also frequently understanding of the pagan attitude even while trying to defeat them. Though Ecbert remains Christian and also commits a great atrocity against Ragnar’s farming settlement, he is still portrayed as much more positively sympathetic to Ragnar and the ‘Vikings’ than many of the other English leaders like Aelle and Aethelwulf who simply wish for their total and utter destruction. When Alfred inherits this sympathy, it creates a struggle for him to overcome when he wishes to welcome Bjorn, Ubbe, Torvi and Lagertha to their settlement in Wessex but the church and court object. Alfred, with the help of Judith, overcomes this however, and the settlement and agreement between Alfred and Ubbe is framed as a positive success, benefitting both the Saxons and the ‘Vikings.’

Ubbe’s personal connection to his father here also aids this settlement, as he chooses to be baptised as a Christian in order to secure greater support in Wessex for the agreement. When asked by Bjorn if he will truly renounce the gods and Valhalla, Ubbe replies that Ragnar stopped believing in their gods too, thus giving him a personal precedent for his conversion.¹⁰⁰

Thus, when the show is dedicating time to the English, it is constantly and consistently building up to Alfred and the Alfredian legacy, not only through Alfred’s personal character but through the identity and personal characteristics of those who precede and raise Alfred. The English or Saxon story in *Vikings* then, despite not featuring him until Season 5, is still the story of Alfred and how Alfred came to be the man he was, and how this was affected by personal relationships with the ‘Vikings.’

On the other hand, the ‘Viking’ story right up to the end is also drawn back to England at its centre, again through personal relationships. In Season 6B, Ivar is returned from the Rus kingdom to Kattegat, and remembers a game of chess he played with Alfred as a child on Ragnar’s final trip to England.¹⁰¹ He tells King Harald and Hvitserk that without an external enemy to fight, internal discord is inevitable. He holds onto a chess piece that Ragnar gave

¹⁰⁰ ‘A New God,’ *Vikings*, Season 5B, Episode 3.

¹⁰¹ ‘The Final Straw,’ *Vikings*, Season 6B Episode 6.

him from England, and believes fighting in England once again to be their solution. Ultimately his personal relationship with Ragnar and his personal experience in England come to help him define their cultural identity – being a ‘Viking’ should be about fighting overseas, and, like Ragnar, particularly fighting the English.

In *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred is frequently torn between his personal relationships with Alfred, Brida, and Young Ragnar. Uhtred allies himself with Alfred on many occasions because gaining favour with the Saxon king seems to provide Uhtred with the best opportunity to retake Bebbanburg for himself, and re-establish his ancestral birth right. This alliance with the Saxons is thus directly tied to his own Saxon identity; in order to reclaim that identity he must work closely with other Saxons in pursuit of it. In the meantime, Alfred also rewards Uhtred with other lands and holdings in England. This is not a purely political relationship, however. Uhtred and Alfred, despite periods of great distrust between them, ultimately form bonds of personal loyalty and trust between them, and for this reason Alfred also attempts to charge Uhtred with protection of his own family and children and relies on him to keep them safe.¹⁰² Uhtred is frequently drawn into siding with Saxon armies against the Danes due to the personal connection and loyalty he feels towards Alfred and his family, especially Aethelflaed, Alfred’s daughter, with whom he eventually forms a romantic bond.¹⁰³

Of course, this causes friction between Uhtred and his Dane family. Brida and Young Ragnar desire Uhtred’s support and alliance with them over Alfred in order to prioritise taking revenge on Kjartan, the man who killed their father, Ragnar. This thus makes the other side of Uhtred’s conflict also tied directly to his Dane identity through his heritage and father. Brida eventually turns on Uhtred after he chooses Alfred and the Saxons over the Danes so many times. She believes that because of those personal relationships, and his hesitation in joining forces with her and Young Ragnar to avenge their father, that Uhtred has forsaken his Dane identity and become a Saxon.¹⁰⁴ When Uhtred is torn between Alfred and Brida, he is quite literally ‘torn between Saxon and Dane,’¹⁰⁵ his two fathers, and the two conflicting sides of his personal cultural identity.

¹⁰² *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 2, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

¹⁰³ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 1, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

¹⁰⁴ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 5, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

¹⁰⁵ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 3, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

Uhtred's mixed identity can also be seen in his many romantic relationships over the show. His first wife, Mildrith, is a Saxon, Christian woman. It is a forced marriage though, and the tensions that arise between them reflect Uhtred's reluctance and hesitation to fully trust or work with the Saxons at this stage. He then forms a romantic relationship with the Cornish pagan queen Iseult. Though pagan, Iseult is neither Dane nor Saxon, and therefore acts as a bridge between Uhtred and Alfred, the latter of whom slowly grows to trust Iseult (and thus Uhtred) when he sees she is able to aid him in his and his child's sickness.¹⁰⁶ Uhtred's second wife is Gisela, a pagan Dane who is settled in the mixed Saxon and Dane lands of Northumbria. This is Uhtred's longest, happiest, and most successful relationship. Gisela's background from a mixed territory reflects Uhtred's own, and reveals that he is potentially happiest and most successful when embracing this mixed heritage. After Gisela's death, Uhtred becomes involved with the Dane Seer Skade. They do not engage romantically, but Skade insists that their destinies are tied together.¹⁰⁷ Unlike Iseult's, Skade's magic causes Uhtred terrible suffering.¹⁰⁸ Uhtred's time with Skade is simultaneous with Uhtred's time as an outlaw of Wessex, after engaging in overly-violent behaviour that sees Alfred punish him harshly. It is only after Uhtred frees himself of Skade¹⁰⁹ (who herself engages in gruesome violence as part of her magic)¹¹⁰ that Uhtred and Alfred are able to reconcile,¹¹¹ suggesting Uhtred needed to rid himself of the idea that he was strictly and solely Dane in order to be at peace and embrace his Saxon allies and identity. Uhtred's final relationship is with Alfred's Christian and Saxon daughter Aethelflaed, however she ultimately refuses him as she takes a vow of chastity in order to rule Mercia.¹¹²

Ultimately, Uhtred has no romantic partner by the finale of the series, leaving his identity untied by marriage or romance to either individual aspect of his identity. He does, however, have three living children by Gisela: Osbert, Young Uhtred, and Stiorra. Osbert is raised away from Uhtred by Saxon priests, his return is only revealed at the very end of the

¹⁰⁶ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 1, Episode 7, BBC 2, 21 Nov 2015.

¹⁰⁷ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 1, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

¹⁰⁸ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 2.

¹⁰⁹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 8, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

¹¹⁰ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 1.

¹¹¹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 9, Netflix, 19 Nov 2018.

¹¹² *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 8, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

final episode¹¹³ and his fate is uncertain until that point, but Young Uhtred and Stiorra return to Uhtred's life in Season 4. Despite having both been brought up in Alfred's court, the two diverge significantly in their beliefs and identity. Young Uhtred is a devout Christian, initially despising of his father.¹¹⁴ He comes around to supporting him and recognising their differences in faith do not have to divide them. That Uhtred bestows him his own and his Saxon father's given name connects Young Uhtred even more directly to the Saxon part of Uhtred's identity. Meanwhile, Stiorra identifies strongly as a Dane,¹¹⁵ rejecting her upbringing at the court in favour of the knowledge that both Uhtred and Gisela were Danes. Young Uhtred and Stiorra thus represent that within himself, Uhtred retains both Saxon and Dane identity and is able to pass on both aspects to his descendants as part of their own heritage.

The majority of Uhtred's closest companions are Christians, if not Saxon Christians – the priest Beocca, the nun Hild, the Irishman Finan. After Brida's turn to antagonist, Sihtric is Uhtred's only consistent pagan companion, Stiorra providing an exception in Seasons 4 and 5. Uhtred himself, despite being baptised multiple times in his life, explicitly believes in the pagan faith.¹¹⁶ His extremely mixed close personal relationships seem to reflect his confused identity – he cannot fully belong to one cultural identity or the other. His ultimate aim is to claim his 'birth right' as was his from his Saxon father, but Ragnar and the Danes are evidently the family that were more culturally impactful on his upbringing given his religion.

Uhtred's relationship with Alfred (and later Edward) tend to be the focus point of the series and a key source of conflict for Uhtred and the English court. Frequently a major point of tension for Alfred and Edward is their feeling unable to trust or rely on Uhtred, but recognising that they need him to achieve their goals. Uhtred's tension arises from feeling duty bound to help the rulers of Wessex, while also maintain his personal goals and alliances. This relationship reflects Saxon and Dane relations as a whole in the show – when Uhtred and Alfred/Edward are working together, usually peace is achieved, and a period of stability is reached for Wessex. When they are in conflict, this often causes or is accompanied by greater periods of discord between Saxons and Danes overall. There is also a gradual coming together across the five seasons of trust and peace in this relationship. In the earlier seasons, Uhtred's

¹¹³ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 5, Episode 10, Netflix, 9 Mar 2022.

¹¹⁴ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 2, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

¹¹⁵ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 6, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

¹¹⁶ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 1, Episode 5, BBC 2, 7 Nov 2015.

support of Alfred would culminate in a military victory over the Danes. In Season 4, it results in peace negotiations rather than a battle,¹¹⁷ and in Season 5, the Danes and Saxons actually work together to defeat a common enemy who had been the cause of strife between the two groups throughout the season.¹¹⁸

It is a repeated sentiment in the show that ‘without Alfred there is no Wessex.’¹¹⁹ In addition, the series title, *The Last Kingdom*, is a reference to Wessex being considered the final kingdom of England unconquered by the Danes, and thus the only hope of Alfred’s dream of a united country. Thus, Alfred is not just Wessex, he is England itself. Despite this, Alfred is not portrayed as an infallible hero. He makes mistakes and is betrayed by many, and is frequently stubborn in his reluctance to consider Uhtred’s advice or help. He ultimately learns to acknowledge the reliance on Uhtred however, and embraces the idea that England will need to work with the Danes, because England itself will inherit a partly Dane identity. Alfred explicitly recognises this part-Saxon, part-Dane identity in Uhtred and states that he represents what England will become.¹²⁰ In this way, Alfred’s tolerant understanding of the Dane invasion also serves as a personal reflection of the wider Saxon group having to recognise the Dane aspect of England in order to move forward together.

What is notable is that in both shows, many of these personal relationships also lead to direct political action. Many of the main characters in both shows are not just personal representatives of their larger cultures, but they are also political leaders. Their personal identity, relationships, and sense of kinship thus have a more direct impact on the actions taken by the wider cultural groups. Ragnar and Ecbert’s personal friendship in *Vikings*, for example, is not just analogously representative of common ground between the Saxons and the ‘Vikings,’ but explicitly leads to periods of peace between the two groups in the show. In Season 5 of *The Last Kingdom*, when Uhtred is unable to reconcile with Brida and she believes him to have betrayed her for the Saxons, she raises an army and brings about conflict between the Danes and the Saxons.

¹¹⁷ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 10, Netflix, 26 Apr 2020.

¹¹⁸ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 5, Episode 10.

¹¹⁹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 3, Episode 2.

¹²⁰ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 3, BBC 2, 30 Mar 2017.

Chapter 3: A thoroughly modern ninth century

3.1: Invasion and immigration

In the decade since *Vikings* first aired, the Anglophone West has become increasingly more fraught and divided on issues of immigration and cultural interaction, as well as more sensitive to the ways different cultures treat and respect one another. In 2015, the British public voted by majority in a referendum to leave the European Union. Campaigns to leave, and the aftermath of the referendum as a deal with the EU was sought by the fractured and disharmonious British government, were dominated by concerns about immigration on both sides. On one hand, immigration was viewed as an ‘invasion’,¹²¹ a threat that could further destabilise a nation already dealing with a struggling health service, and a significant housing and poverty crisis. On the other hand, many were concerned with a rejection of European unity leading to further racial and xenophobic discrimination towards immigrants, an increase in intolerance and ignorance towards the crucial services and workforce they frequently provide, and further degradation of values of respect and admiration for the diversity of cultural backgrounds amongst the people of a twenty-first century Britain.¹²²

Just a year after the Brexit referendum, in 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Similar to the “Vote Leave” campaigners for Brexit, Trump’s election campaign built on an attitude of resistance to immigration, particularly against those from Muslim countries, with the war on ‘terrorism’ as a thinly-veiled justification for Islamophobia.¹²³ Parallels between Trump’s presidential win and the success of the Leave campaign in the United Kingdom have been explicit, with Trump praising the EU referendum

¹²¹ F. Infante, ‘Powder keg Calais: Hooded anti-fascists clash with right-wing protesters as tempers reach boiling point over migrant invasion of port’, *Mail Online*, 7 Sep 2014, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2747116/Powder-keg-Calais-Hooded-anti-fascists-clash-right-wing-protesters-tempers-reach-boiling-point-migrant-invasion-port.html>, accessed 13 May 2022.

¹²² P. Butler, ‘Politicians fuelled rise in hate crimes after Brexit vote, says UN body’, *The Guardian*, 26 Aug 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/aug/26/politicians-rise-hate-crimes-brexit-vote-un-committee>, accessed 13 May 2022.

¹²³ D. Shariatmadari, ‘How war on Islam became central to the Trump doctrine’, *The Guardian*, 30 Jan 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/30/war-on-islam-central-trump-doctrine-terrorism-immigration>, accessed 13 May 2022.

result as a sign that Brits want to ‘take their country back... take their borders back’,¹²⁴ and likened this to attitudes in the United States that his presidential campaign supported.

It is with this background that audiences were tuning into *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, the former first airing in 2013 but reaching great success for the next seven years with its six seasons, and the latter first airing on the BBC in both the US and the UK just months after the EU referendum. Both shows centre their premise on a historical ‘invasion’ of England and attempt at settlement by a foreign culture, with key themes being multi-cultural interaction, exchange, and community living. Another contemporarily relevant theme is the foundation of nationhood, with each show dedicating time to the West Saxons rulers’ pursuits of a ‘united England,’ a notion likely to affect emotion or opinion particularly in English and wider British audiences, not only after the Brexit referendum fractured the political sphere divisively, but with questions of devolution also remaining relevant following the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. Notably, King Alfred, who is depicted fictionally in both shows, had already been explicitly connected to notions of British separation from the EU by UK Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, who referred to Alfred as ‘the first Eurosceptic’¹²⁵ in his speech celebrating his constituency win in the general election of 2010.

The creators of *Vikings* could certainly not have predicted these particularly tumultuous political events when they were first devising the series and its premise and plot. *The Last Kingdom* was based on a book series by Bernard Cornwell first released in the mid-2000s, and the first two seasons primarily follow the plot of the novels without too much deviation. However, by the time both series were well under way, the political atmosphere certainly cannot have been absent, even if only subconsciously, from the minds of the creators as both shows in their later seasons featured questions of cultural unity and multiculturalism within a nation or settlement to a much greater extent.

Vikings achieves this to a lesser degree than *The Last Kingdom*, with a final military victory for Alfred over the ‘Vikings’ serving as the final climax to the series, but even this is at least intermingled with notions of respect for other cultures – Alfred allows Hvitserk to

¹²⁴ E. MacAskill, ‘Donald Trump arrives in UK and hails Brexit vote as ‘great victory’’, *The Guardian*, 24 Jun 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/24/donald-trump-hails-eu-referendum-result-as-he-arrives-in-uk>, accessed 13 May 2022.

¹²⁵ J. Isaby, ‘Jacob Rees-Mogg identifies the three historical heroes from his constituency who will be his political inspiration’, *Conservative Home*, 8 Jun 2010, <https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2010/06/jacob-reesmogg-identifies-the-three-historical-heroes-from-his-constituency-who-will-be-his-politica.html>, accessed 13 May 2022.

give Ivar a full ‘Viking’ burial, and Alfred and his soldiers respectfully attend this.¹²⁶ Alfred had previously shown sympathy to the ‘Vikings’ and the pagan religion when visiting the monastery of Lindisfarne, where his father Athelstan had been captured during the ‘Viking’ raid. The abbot tells the story of Athelstan, condemning him for turning to a pagan way of life. Alfred suggests that it could be ‘part of God’s will’ and that ‘there is good and evil in everything and everyone,’¹²⁷ and shows the abbot Athelstan’s cross which he proudly states was given to him by Ragnar. Alfred’s religious tolerance is here framed as positive and progressive, in contrast to the harsh scorn from the abbot, and this is emphasised when Alfred goes on to strongly suggest that the monastery begin to conduct their religious sermons and teachings in English, not just Latin, to make them more accessible to the wider populace. This is something Alfred is particularly known for encouraging during his rule, and would certainly resonate well with a modern audience for whom accessibility and class struggles for access to knowledge and education are important political concerns.¹²⁸

A successful Norse settlement had already been established in Wessex in Season 5 by Ubbe, Torvi, Bjorn, and Lagertha, none of whom are present for the final battle against Alfred which is led by Ivar, Hvitserk, and Harald. This creates the possibility (though this is not canonically addressed or resolved) for Alfred to recognise the final ‘Viking’ army as an entirely separate group of invaders which does not imply the need for the established settlement to be dismantled or destroyed, as Ragnar’s first settlement attempt had been by Ecbert and Aethelwulf in Season 3.

Across the Atlantic in Season 6B, Ubbe, Torvi, and Floki navigate a difficult cultural interaction with the Mi’kmaw, a First Nations people in North America. Here, cultural division and tension again become a problem after the murder of We’jitu, one of the Mi’kmaw, by one of the Norsemen. The murderer is punished (he is sentenced to death, and Ubbe denies him entry to Valhalla by refusing to blood-eagle him¹²⁹), and the ‘Vikings’

¹²⁶ ‘The Last Act,’ *Vikings*, Season 6B, Episode 10, Prime Video, 30 Dec 2020.

¹²⁷ ‘Full Moon,’ *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 7.

¹²⁸ T. May, ‘PM: The right education for everyone’, speech at Derby College, 19 Feb 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-the-right-education-for-everyone>, accessed 13 May 2022.

¹²⁹ An idea created by the series, and not present in the medieval sources, is that if one is able to endure the punishment of the blood-eagle without expressing pain, they will be granted entry to Valhalla. Here, Ubbe denies the murderer the opportunity to face this challenge.

attend the victim's funeral to pay their respects,¹³⁰ appearing to have tentatively navigated the conflict and potentially avoided a cycle of revenge and conflict like the one that had plagued them throughout their previous settlements in Iceland and Greenland. Overall, these plotlines demonstrate that the show is routinely engaging in narratives of intercultural communication and interaction that will feel relevant for modern viewers.

The Last Kingdom more heavily leans into themes of peace and harmony between cultures in the final seasons. In the climax of Season 4, a prolonged siege of Winchester by Sigtryggr's Danes is resolved after Uhtred negotiates a truce between him and Edward,¹³¹ in contrast to the previous three seasons of the series, which all climaxed with violent battles between Saxons and Danes, with the Saxons winning each time (Battle of Edington in Season 1; Battle of Beamfleot in Season 2; Battle of the Holme in Season 3). Season 5 then follows the Saxons and Danes attempting to maintain this new-found peace between them. Conflict is stirred up again, but this time through the manipulative and selfish actions of Aethelhelm, who deliberately spreads misinformation and constructs a contrived plot to turn the cultures against one another. Thus, when the two sides end up in conflict again, the audience feels more sympathy for them both as victims of this manipulation, as neither side is the true aggressor. The Season 5 finale's climactic battle features the remaining Danes, led by Stiorra, aiding Uhtred and Edward in defeating the forces of Constantin of Scotland and Whitgar, Uhtred's cousin who illegitimately rules Bebbanburg. Bebbanburg at this point remains an independent stronghold, and while Uhtred decides it will remain so for now due to Edward's ruthless actions, he promises Edward that one day a future king will unite it with rest of the English kingdoms and achieve Alfred's dream of England.¹³² The show thus ends on a significantly hopeful note of cultural and national unity, not only between Saxon and Dane, who celebrate their victory together, but for England itself.

Cornwell has explicitly claimed that issues of immigration and nationhood were the reason the BBC chose his novels, *The Saxon Stories*, to be made into a television programme. He claimed that the story of people in English kingdoms at the time who wanted to be united had 'interesting echoes of today'. His connection of the story to immigration is broader than just the Norse invasion however: 'The Saxons are immigrants ... then the Danes, the

¹³⁰ 'The Last Act,' *Vikings*, Season 6B, Episode 10.

¹³¹ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 4, Episode 10.

¹³² *The Last Kingdom*, Season 5, Episode 10.

Normans ... right through to this century, we are all immigrants.'¹³³ There is little emphasis in the television series itself of Saxon immigration or invasion, as they are well established as the dominant people in England, occasionally skirmishing with the Britons in Cornwall or the Scots in the north, but it is not entirely absent.

One explicit reference to Saxons as a resisted, invading force is in the character of Pyrlig, a Christian priest, who is forced to fight for his life after being captured by the Danes. To their surprise, he appears to be a seasoned fighter and emerges the victor in combat. When asked where he learned to fight, he reveals he is Briton, and says 'I was brought up killing Saxons,'¹³⁴ indicating that even in the ninth century there was continued violent resistance to Saxon rule, or at the very least significant conflict between the two groups, perhaps in border territories. This is somewhat of a throwaway line, however, as Pyrlig otherwise works for Alfred and the Saxon court, allying himself consistently and loyally to Uhtred and the Saxon cause. Any remaining anti-Saxon sentiments seem to arise as sympathy for Danes rather than actual hostility for Saxons, such as the kindness and empathy Pyrlig shows Brida in Season 5 after the loss of her daughter, though this is also fuelled by a desire to convert her to Christianity, which he believes will ease her sorrow. Ultimately though, the English kingdoms of *The Last Kingdom* are presented with differing intercultural conflicts and sympathies across more lines than just Saxon and Dane, allowing the audience to connect the past directly to a modern, multi-cultural Britain.

The foundation of nationhood in *The Last Kingdom* has previously been analysed through the scope of heroic affect and national feeling. Here, it was found that Uhtred is framed by the show as a national hero of epic proportion, through his character growth and decisions, as well as the framing of action and combat within the show. However, this analysis also found the importance of Alfred in helping shape Uhtred as such a hero, steering his actions and motivations from purely selfish to serving a grander purpose for the founding of the nation.¹³⁵ Korte also finds that political and social developments in Britain post-9/11,

¹³³ M. Brown, 'Bernard Cornwell: BBC made *The Last Kingdom* due to its 'interesting echoes of today'' *The Guardian*, October 17, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/oct/17/bernard-cornwell-bbc-last-kingdom-interesting-echoes-today>, accessed 14 May 2022.

¹³⁴ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 6, BBC 2, 20 Apr 2017.

¹³⁵ B. Korte, 'Heroic affect and structures of national feeling on British television: 1990s *Sharpe* vs. 2010s *The Last Kingdom*,' *Journal of European Popular Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2020, p. 112.

particularly the EU referendum, make the creation of a hero to unite England particularly appealing for a British audience at this time.¹³⁶

3.2: Race and white nationalism

While themes of immigration and intercultural harmony between Saxons and ‘Vikings’ or Danes in England would certainly evoke reminders of modern-day discourse amongst an audience, in many ways it is also a distinctly non-radical or revolutionary way of addressing such topics. In both shows, both cultures are played almost entirely by a cast of white actors, and neither the Saxons nor the Danes bear any resemblance or heritage connection to minority ethnic groups experiencing oppression, discrimination, or xenophobia in the Anglophone West. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 1, both ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cultures have, throughout the last several centuries, been imbued with an explicitly racial (white) identity, used to further colonialist, imperialist, racist, and even genocidal regimes and actions in the British Empire and the USA’s imperialist sphere. Within recent years, racially charged usage of Norse symbology has increased to the point that a lot of imagery such as Thor’s hammer or any kind of runic symbol is frequently seen to be a marker of a far-right, white supremacist political ideology, especially in the USA where Neo-Nazi groups frequently carry and display such symbols at their rallies, riots, and notably violent coups such as the storming of the US Capitol building on 6th January 2021.¹³⁷ Both shows reinforce this perceived whiteness and racial exclusivity of the ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cultures through their casting, intentionally or not, and contribute evidence for white supremacist groups to use reconstructed and manipulated versions of these cultures as “authentic” historical justification for their ideology and actions.

This is amplified by the series’ treatment of non-white ethnic groups when they are occasionally included. In *Vikings*, the Muslim population of Algeciras appear in Season 4B as the victims of Bjorn, Floki, Rollo, and Halfdan’s brutal raid. During this, Floki’s wife Helga kidnaps a child, Tanaruz, who she wishes to raise as her own daughter, but the girl spends the next several episodes relatively non-verbal and evidently traumatised, before she is so distraught by her situation when taken on another raid that she stabs Helga and kills herself.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Korte, ‘Heroic affect and structures of national feeling,’ p. 111-112.

¹³⁷ K. Romey, ‘Decoding the hate symbols seen at the Capitol insurrection’, *National Geographic*, 13 Jan 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2021/01/decoding-the-hate-symbols-seen-at-the-capitol-insurrection>, accessed 14 May 2022.

¹³⁸ ‘The Reckoning,’ *Vikings*, Season 4B, Episode 10, History, 1 Feb 2017.

The tragedy of this, as portrayed by the show, falls more on the loss of Helga for Floki than Tanaruz' incredibly horrifying experience as the victim of a violent raid that orphaned her and then saw her forcibly kidnapped and taken to a distant country where she was unable and unwilling to communicate with her captors.

In Season 5A, Bjorn and Halfdan return to the Mediterranean where they accompany Euphemius, a Byzantine commander to Kairouan, in modern day Tunisia, where they meet the Emir Ziyadat Allah. The Arab people are portrayed as particularly violent, beheading pleading guards who had failed in their duty, and Bjorn and Halfdan only narrowly escape beheading themselves due to a conveniently timed sandstorm,¹³⁹ which they are somehow able to escape through despite their presumable lack of experience in desert environments compared to the locals. Additionally, while they are visiting, Euphemius disappears, and it is revealed to Bjorn and Halfdan that the meal they are being served is Euphemius' body.¹⁴⁰ *Vikings* thus portrays one Muslim population as almost natural victims of superior white 'Viking' strength and physical violence, and another as violent cannibals,¹⁴¹ which certainly would not help dismantle any potential Islamophobic sentiments among an audience where these are particularly tied up with immigration debates.¹⁴²

Aside from the Muslim inhabitants of Spain and Africa, and the Mi'kmaq people in Season 6B, there is one other non-white character in *Vikings*. In Season 4A, we are introduced to Yidu, a Chinese slave who is freed by Ragnar and grows close to him, providing him with a hallucinatory 'medicine' that he becomes addicted to. They exchange secrets and develop a sexual relationship, but when she seemingly becomes concerned about his reliance on the drugs and denies him more, he becomes angry. Yidu threatens to reveal the secret he entrusted in her, ultimately the only source of power she has over him, but Ragnar asserts his own ultimate physical dominance and drowns her.¹⁴³ The introduction of a female East Asian character, only for her to fall into a role as a provider of drugs and sex, and with her

¹³⁹ 'The Prisoner,' *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 5, History, 20 Dec 2017; 'The Message,' *Vikings*, Season 5A Episode 6.

¹⁴⁰ 'The Prisoner,' *Vikings*, Season 5A, Episode 5.

¹⁴¹ Drawing from medieval romance tropes, see H. Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 113-114.

¹⁴² F. Perraudin, 'Third of Britons believe Islam threatens British way of life, says report', *The Guardian*, 17 Feb 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/17/third-of-britons-believe-islam-threatens-british-way-of-life-says-report>, accessed 14 May 2022.

¹⁴³ 'Portage,' *Vikings*, Season 4A, Episode 8, History, 7 Apr 2016.

emotional connection to Ragnar (the secrets they shared) ultimately turned against her to result in her violent death at the hands of a white man, only adds further to the show's subtle implication that the 'Viking' identity is superior *because* of its whiteness. That 'Viking' characters are able to make and maintain bonds with the Saxons that they never do with characters from non-white cultures or ethnic groups also reinforces that these bonds are a result of their shared whiteness.

In *The Last Kingdom*, non-white characters are even more glaringly lacking. In Season 5, a black Saxon bishop, Father Benedict is introduced, whose storyline is that he is a gambler with significant debts owed to Aethelhelm, a primary antagonist of the season, which allows him to be forced into helping reunite Aelfweard with Aethelhelm as part of their plans to further divide the Saxons and Danes.¹⁴⁴ Once his debts are paid through this deed he does return to Edward's court and provides crucial information about Aethelhelm's plans to Aldhelm, even though this outs him as a traitor.¹⁴⁵ Father Benedict is thus a minor character, and though well-intentioned, due to a self-inflicted weakness (the gambling debts) he is left with little agency in the plot and is subservient to two more powerful white men, one the antagonist of the series who is able to puppet Benedict's actions, and the other the king, whom Benedict must flee from to avoid facing harsh punishment. The argument is of course not that all non-white characters should be of upstanding moral values, but when one person of colour is the only exception to his character's cultural group being portrayed as entirely racially homogenous, and his narrative is then one directed entirely by and for the white characters around him because his lack of agency is a self-inflicted condition, it is easy to see that racial biases are played out by the creators of *The Last Kingdom* as much as they are in *Vikings*.

As has been noted, the Saxons are the only culture outside of the Norse to be featured in all six seasons of *Vikings* (they are absent from 6A, but return in 6B and are otherwise present in both parts of the other two split seasons). At points, we also continue to follow the narratives of the Saxon characters even when there are no 'Viking' characters involved in their story, for example towards the end of Season 4A, following Ecbert's dealings with Kwenthrith and Mercia while the 'Vikings' are in Kattegat and Frankia, or the end of Season 5A after Ivar's army leaves York and returns to Kattegat but the show continues to follow

¹⁴⁴ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 5, Episode 7, Netflix, 9 Mar 2022.

¹⁴⁵ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 5 Episode 8, Netflix, 9 Mar 2022.

Alfred's ascension to the throne of England. These narratives outside of the 'Viking' story are a privilege not afforded to any other culture or society portrayed in the show, and while they are not frequent, this is only because the 'Viking' characters are so routinely wrapped up in narratives concerning the Saxons and England that they have some reason to be involved with the Saxon characters throughout every season of the series. Both Ragnar and Ivar feel personal connections to Wessex and the Saxons, Ragnar because of his relationship with Athelstan and Ecbert, Ivar because of watching Ragnar meet his end there, after spending time with Alfred as a child in Ecbert's court. Both Ragnar and Ivar meet their final fate in England, drawn there by these personal connections. Meanwhile, English characters are shown to have benefitted on a personal and cultural level from their interactions with the Norse, such as Judith's sense of freedom, Ecbert's open-mindedness about pagan religions (which is also passed down to Alfred), and Athelstan's sense of family and love that he finds living and travelling with Ragnar.

In *The Last Kingdom*, the action very rarely leaves English shores, and the story deals more exclusively with the Saxons and Danes than any other culture or society, giving it a narrower scope than the overall geographically expansive *Vikings*. While the show is thus less able to contrast the Saxon-Dane relationship with other relationships between the Saxons or Danes and other cultures, it is able to devote more time to the nature of this relationship and connection. Like *Vikings*, the Norse characters in *The Last Kingdom* are shown to be deeply drawn to England from very early on.¹⁴⁶ Even when settled peacefully in territory that becomes fully under their control, they are repeatedly drawn even further into Saxon territories out of desire to fight and rule there, with most action in early seasons taking place in Northumbria and East Anglia, but in Seasons 4 and 5, Mercia and Wessex are more frequently threatened. Similarly, the Saxons and especially Alfred and Edward find themselves repeatedly having to turn their attention to Dane threats, or having to negotiate with Danes to secure the stability and safety of their lands. Like the Saxons of *Vikings*, Saxons in *The Last Kingdom* positively gain and benefit from personal connection with Danes, primarily from bonds of loyalty (e.g. Uhtred's oaths to Alfred and Edward), love (e.g. Beocca and Thyra, Uhtred and Aethelflaed, or Erik and Aethelflaed), or a more tolerant understanding of their people (e.g. Alfred, and Young Uhtred).

¹⁴⁶ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 1, Episode 1.

These personal connections and connected destinies draw on ideas of shared Germanic identity discussed in Chapter 1, especially in connection with the foundation of England as a nation. Norse characters in *Vikings* frequently feel that it is their ‘fate’ to settle in England, defeat English kings, or conquer English lands. In Season 2 of *The Last Kingdom*, Alfred calls Uhtred ‘a Saxon who is also a Dane; the very embodiment of the England that must emerge,’¹⁴⁷ and Uhtred’s closing monologue to Season 2 references his own ‘fate’ tying him to both Saxons and Danes.¹⁴⁸ Both identities are thus given a pre-determined and divine ancestral connection to the foundation of England and English identity that is very reminiscent of the spiritual and kinship connection between ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and other Germanic cultures espoused by eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars. That such pan-Germanism was used to justify white supremacist racial movements in the past, and that both *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* continue to reinforce the whiteness of their constructed Saxons and ‘Vikings’/Danes with very prominently white casting, demonstrates either a willingness to maintain this racial aspect of ‘Saxon’ and ‘Viking’ identity, or an unconscious reveal of how deeply ingrained whiteness is into the Anglophone cultural memory of these peoples. *Vikings* has previously been shown to fall into other stereotypes glorified by white nationalist groups, for example romanticisation of hypermasculinity through tattoos and the masculine body,¹⁴⁹ so white casting is evidently not the only way these biases are played out.

Intentional or not, these biases and predominantly white casting allows for an ambiguity which white supremacist and nationalist groups can appropriate for their own explicit, racialised and racist purposes.¹⁵⁰ One way to solve this is not just through simple inclusion of characters of colour – when done in a reductive and careless manner this can serve to contribute to the problem as demonstrated by the shallow plotlines of Yidu and Father Benedict, or at the very least be a disappointing missed opportunity.¹⁵¹ Rather, deliberate inclusion that explicitly challenges the traditionally white racialised memory is possible, and should be perfectly acceptable within a fictional television series. This would

¹⁴⁷ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 3.

¹⁴⁸ *The Last Kingdom*, Season 2, Episode 8.

¹⁴⁹ A. A. Taylor, ‘Tattooed Vikings, Racial Politics, and the Imaginary Middle Ages’, *Estudios del Discurso*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019, p. 67.

¹⁵⁰ R. F. Burley, ‘Ambiguous Images: “Vikingness,” North American White Nationalism and the Threat of Appropriation,’ in P. Hardwick and K. Lister (eds.), *Vikings and The Vikings: Essays on Television’s History Channel Series*, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 2019, p. 361.

¹⁵¹ Burley, ‘Ambiguous Images,’ pp. 386-387.

‘collapse the ambiguity’¹⁵² with which white nationalists can manipulate for their own, harmful rhetoric and action.

There has, eventually, been some active response in this particular direction. While *Vikings* ended in 2020, a spin-off show had already been announced: *Vikings: Valhalla*, produced by History and MGM for Netflix. The first season was released on 25th February 2022, following the lives of Leif Erikson, King Cnut, and other Norse figures of the late Viking Age. Notably, the character of Jarl Haakon, inspired by but not explicitly based on the historical Hakon Eiriksson, is played by a mixed-race woman of African American and Swedish descent. While this was praised by many, it has also met significant backlash on social media, with cries of ‘wokism’ that ‘distracts’ from the ‘historical leads.’¹⁵³ Questions of genuine historical accuracy in this particular casting aside (because this is notoriously difficult to study in the medieval past, and ‘ethnicity’ was not necessarily a concept even familiar or of any relevance to the medieval peoples of England and Scandinavia¹⁵⁴), if many of these commenters are legitimately so concerned with historical accuracy, they should have been turned away from History’s *Vikings* titles long before the launch of the spin-off series, as the original show had been noted for its many inaccuracies of timeline, places, people, events, behaviours, and objects by scholars already after the release of the second season.¹⁵⁵ Historical fiction does not have the freedom of rigorous academic works to skirt around the unknown and ambiguous, and must inevitably be inventive in order to construct a fully realised narrative and world for its story – this becomes the ‘pseudo’ element of ‘pseudo-history’ category into which *Vikings* and its successor fall.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately much of this backlash was a response to a deeply embedded and racially-coded cultural memory of ‘Viking’ identity being challenged by the presence of a person of colour, a challenge that many took personally.

¹⁵² Burley, ‘Ambiguous Images,’ pp. 387-388.

¹⁵³ Jed @ Hollywood Scholar ‘REVIEW: *Vikings: Valhalla* Season 1’ *Geeks + Gamers*, 25 Feb 2022, <https://www.geeksandgamers.com/review-vikings-valhalla/>, accessed 15 May 2022.

¹⁵⁴ J. M. Harland, ‘“Race” in the Trenches: Anglo-Saxons, Ethnicity, and the Misuse of the Medieval Past,’ in *Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages*, online essay series for *The Public Medievalist*, 17 Feb 2017, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-in-the-trenches/>, accessed 15 May 2022; and Downham, ‘Viking Ethnicities’, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Puchalska, ‘*Vikings* Television Series’ p. 102.

¹⁵⁶ Burley, ‘Ambiguous Images,’ p. 364-365.

3.3: *Personal cultural identity in the twenty-first century*

The personal aspect of cultural identity has been brought to the forefront of identity discussions through media and online discourse in recent times. With the advent and rise of social media, every individual is far more able to express their personal opinions and identity to a wider variety of people across the globe, allowing for a greater variety of diverse and unique personal perspectives from many cultural identities to be seen and heard than through traditionally published media. Further to this, growing awareness of marginalised communities and their struggles, and a desire for greater representation and treatment of these communities has encouraged more individuals to speak openly and frequently about their personal experiences as part of their cultural or ethnic groups, as well as other identity groups such as gender or sexual orientation. Discussions of cultural and ethnic minority representation in popular visual media such as film and television has particularly taken on a personal aspect, stressing the importance of audiences and particularly individuals from minority backgrounds being able to ‘see people like yourself’ in media.¹⁵⁷ This exemplifies well the connection between cultural identity and personal identity, where representation of the group is expressed through an individual, and related to emotionally by other individuals on a personal level. This also makes the whiteness of *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* take on an even more exclusive and personal aspect, as non-white viewers are entirely excluded from experiencing this type of personal connection with the characters on-screen, reinforcing that these identities are not ‘for’ them. Social media political ‘pockets,’¹⁵⁸ for example tweeting about *Vikings: Valhalla* and creating a storm of outrage over the supposed inaccuracy¹⁵⁹ and illegitimacy¹⁶⁰ of a single person of colour participating in a reconstruction of “Viking” identity, reinforce this exclusivity to a repetitive and violently scathing degree – it is not ‘their’ history, it is ‘ours.’

¹⁵⁷ S. Boboltz and K. Yam, ‘Why On-Screen Representation Actually Matters’, *Huffpost*, 24 Feb 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/why-on-screen-representation-matters_n_58aeae96e4b01406012fe49d, accessed 15 May 2022.

¹⁵⁸ A. B. R. Elliott, ‘Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages,’ *History Compass*, Vol. 16, 2018, p. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Avery (@SouthRnNorseman), ‘So they cast a black woman to be Jarl...’, Twitter, 28 Feb 2022, <https://twitter.com/southernorseman/status/1498088763515449354?s=21&t=ovSNMoixTNoRfdkaxV27ng>, accessed 15 May 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Liberal Hivemind (@LiberalHivemind) ‘So, I started watching Netflix’s *Vikings: Valhalla*...’, Twitter, 3 Mar 2022, <https://twitter.com/liberalhivemind/status/1499228601782312961?s=21&t=ovSNMoixTNoRfdkaxV27ng>, accessed 15 May 2022.

Modern personal connections to ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity also exist outside of popular culture, and even in the supposedly more objective and ‘grounded’ world of academia, where British scholars have been known to refer to themselves, entirely inaccurately, as ‘Anglo-Saxon,’¹⁶¹ or how scholars of colour have been questioned about their place in ‘Anglo-Saxonist’ studies because of a perceived lack of personal identity connection to the people of early medieval England due to their non-whiteness.¹⁶² This is particularly reminiscent of how Victorian interest in Scandinavia was frequently driven by a perceived personal ancestry on the part of the scholars and historians. Personal connection to identities from the past has even now become mathematically measurable, with DNA ancestry kits claiming to help individuals discover ‘am I part Viking?’¹⁶³ enforcing a personal identity informed by a connection to a past identity that is now legitimised by supposed scientific accuracy. Ultimately, we can see that the notion of personal connection (in particular, whiteness and genealogical ancestry) has not only helped form the cultural memory of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity but has actually become a requirement to access and engage with this memory and thus the modern cultural identity that is informed by this memory.

The medium of television has also contributed to the personal connection viewers can feel when engaging with the past through reconstructed fiction works like *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*. This is not only through the narrative focus on character and relationships, but through the format itself, especially with the advent of new ways to consume series. Thanks to streaming services, no longer do audiences have to crowd around an actual television once a week to tune in at a specific time for a new episode – one can open their laptop, tablet, or even phone and watch an entire season, or even an entire series anywhere at any time and as many times as they like. This makes viewing able to be more personalised to an individual, as they have much more freedom to choose what they watch and when, while ease of access from any device also brings these shows into an even closer and more personal sphere than the television first did when it allowed visual media into the family home.

Television and similar visual media such as cinema can, on the surface, be seen as a ‘one-way’ communication from media to viewer, with no ability for the audience to engage

¹⁶¹ Rambaran-Olm, ‘Misnaming the Medieval.’

¹⁶² M. Rambaran-Olm, ‘Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy’, *Medium* [web blog], 28 Jun 2018, <https://mrambaranolm.medium.com/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>, accessed 15 May 2022.

¹⁶³ A. Swayne, ‘Are you part Viking’, *AncestryDNA* [web blog], 14 Sep 2017, <https://blogs.ancestry.co.uk/cm/are-you-part-viking/>, accessed 15 May 2022.

with or interrogate what is being presented to them, a passive receiver. It is true that viewers are unable to directly confront a television programme and question the way it has presented information, causing in viewers of historical fiction television and film a generally lowered sense of ‘connection to the past’ particularly in comparison to more direct personally engaging activities, for example speaking with a history professor or visiting a museum. This does not mean audiences do not individually engage on their own active level with television and film however, and rather than simply accepting whatever is fed to them, most reach some level of individual judgement with regards to what they accept and what they reject as authentic from a historical fiction piece.¹⁶⁴

I argue that with the rise of social media and the internet, it is now much easier for television viewers to engage critically in this active way, through fan communities, forums, blogs, and social media pages dedicated to the discussion of popular shows. Many fans create entire social media accounts dedicated to discussing their favourite shows online, using clips and images from the show as well as fan-made artworks of characters and events in the series to decorate or post on their profiles, creating a kind of micro-identity for themselves based around their personal favourite media and their interpretations of the narrative and characters.

Fan-made stories, known as ‘fanfiction’ are often created and shared on blogs and websites such as Tumblr, LiveJournal, and Archive Of Our Own (AO3), and are notable for their frequent focus on romantic relationships between characters (known colloquially as ‘ships’), whether those characters are actually romantically involved in the canonical series or not. This phenomenon demonstrates that television’s focus on interpersonal relationships (romantic or not) remains a very effective method to engage viewers on a personal level with the narrative and characters.

Sometimes, fanfiction works are even created on a political level of engagement with the show, responding with more explicit parallels to the contemporary political relevance of the themes of the show that the creators, working entirely with the historical world, cannot address directly. For example, *The Last Kingdom*, likely through its themes of national and cultural unity, has inspired several explicitly anti-Brexit fan works.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ P. B. Sturtevant, *The Middle Ages in Popular Imagination – Memory, Film and Medievalism*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 71.

¹⁶⁵ M. Mussies, ‘Not King Alfred’s Brexit’ *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol. 36, 2021.

While most audiences consuming a television show are not as actively engaged as this, if a show is popular it is easy to come across some interpretation or opinion of a particular scene or storyline online and to comment one's own opinion publicly, adding personal interpretation and engagement with this media to one's overall online image and identity. In some cases, commenters may not have even viewed or consumed the actual media itself, but feel compelled to comment anyway based on what they have seen or heard from other sources about the film or series, perhaps justifying why they do not watch it. Websites like Letterboxd are even designed around creating a profile specifically to engage with and review particular films they have seen, giving users an identity that is entirely personalised by and constructed around the media they have consumed and their responses to it.

Social media also does allow audiences to occasionally interrogate media in a more personal and direct way, through communicating with show creators, writers, directors, and actors, who are able to respond to viewer questions in a more informal and communicative manner than a traditionally published interview by a journalist, clarifying their intentions for the interpretations or message of a series. Because of its longform structure where even if a season is released all at once, usually future seasons have not been fully created or written by the time a number of episodes are released to the public, fan and viewer responses on social media directed at creators of television specifically can have a legitimate impact on the direction the creators choose to take a series.¹⁶⁶ Sometimes, after networks announce a cancellation of a particular series, protests from fans online have caused networks to change their minds and 'bring back' the show.¹⁶⁷

Further, with the advent of streaming services, and thus more permanent catalogues of selected programming available for viewing, audience engagement can contribute to the creation of a 'television canon' through influence over which series are selected for inclusion in these catalogues.¹⁶⁸ Reactions and responses to series thus may help construct what is remembered and what is not, for example, 1969's *Alfred the Great* is not currently available

¹⁶⁶ e.g. C. Harnick, 'The Good Wife': Backlash Over Kalinda And Nick Storyline Prompts Early Ending', *Huffpost*, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/the-good-wife-backlash-kalinda-husband-story_n_2026014, accessed 16 May 2022.

¹⁶⁷ A. Oswald, '16 Times fans saved TV shows from cancellation', *Insider*, 13 Jun 2018, <https://www.insider.com/fans-saved-tv-show-2018-6>, accessed 16 May 2022.

¹⁶⁸ B. Hagedoorn, 'Television as a Hybrid Repertoire of Memory: New Dynamic Practices of Cultural Memory in the Multi-Platform Era,' *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2013, p. 63.

on any digital streaming, rental, or even purchase platform, thus consigning the construction of Alfred as a reluctant and bitter ruler to the forgotten corner of media history. Both *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, however, have both been generally well received by audiences, and remain prominent titles on Amazon Prime and Netflix in many countries, indicating that despite their ending, they will remain part of the western canon of memory of the ‘Vikings’ and ‘Anglo-Saxons’ for an indefinite future. Further, the spin-off series created for *Vikings* and the spin-off movie for *The Last Kingdom* indicate both series generated enough support from audiences and financial success to justify these further projects, which will in return continue to generate interest in the original series themselves.

The ‘passive’ nature of television audiences remains a significant feature of the medium however – once an episode has been created and released, it is rarely altered due to any kind of audience engagement, and even interrogation on social media with series creators can only help serve to adjust audience interpretation, not the fixed text itself. This can result in a general distrust of the medium, especially with regard to historical fiction film and television which frequently, as both *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* do, make a claim to a degree of authenticity. Distrust and a fear of being manipulated into believing historical truth from an obviously constructed fictional story is not limited to any area of the political spectrum. The aforementioned backlash to the casting of Caroline Henderson in *Vikings: Valhalla* is frequently framed in terms of ‘woke’ media deliberately attempting to manipulate historical truth, while on the other hand criticisms of ‘white-washing’ of history (the practice of casting white actors as non-white people from history) have been levelled at Hollywood with increasing intensity in the last decade.

Conclusion

Vikings and *The Last Kingdom* are the most successful series fictionalising the medieval Norse and English periods that the Anglophone West has seen since television began. Both series creators clearly recognise the significant impact of a narrative approach focusing on personal relationships and identities of individual figures to effectively engage the audience with questions of cultural identity. By focusing their narratives around known literary and historical figures like Ragnar and Alfred, whose personal identities have for centuries already been connected to the construction of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identities together, the series quickly establish this particular inter-cultural dynamic and interaction as their central theme.

The television format allows the show creators to develop the personal identities of their characters over long periods, through deep and complex personal relationships with other characters that reflects wider themes of cultural identity and interaction. These themes are enforced by the longform delivery of the series, playing out over weeks, months, and years for the audience who over time can begin to feel personally invested in the characters and their on-screen relationships, thus allowing them to also connect more closely to the cultural memory being constructed within the series.

Intentionally or not, however, the creators of both shows are directly influenced by modern politics and an ingrained politically and racially charged memory of these identities that has been disseminated to the viewers through aspects of the shows presentation of these identities. Without directly acknowledging the more harmful engagement that is enabled by the overall white casting of both shows as well as the distinctly unempowering plotlines that do involve characters of colour, both series allow themselves to be left open for appropriation by white nationalist groups who can continue to reinforce a racialised and exclusive memory of ‘Viking’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity by holding up these series as justification. Both series seemingly deliberate emphasis on inter-cultural unity is thus undermined by this allowance of racist appropriation, as it may ring hollow for modern audiences to watch a narrative about cultural unity between two cultures that have been remembered for centuries as having a shared ‘Germanic’ connection, which itself allowed both identities to become exclusive for those deemed outside of these racialised groups.

There is hope for the future – *Vikings: Valhalla* does seem to have taken a more decisive stance to remove the ambiguity of racial politics for which it stands, but this is

somewhat too late for the legacy of the original *Vikings*, where this was never ultimately addressed. Resultingly, opponents to the changes in the new series can still cling to *Vikings* and hold it up as a vehicle of traditionally racialised memory of ‘Vikings’ and ‘Anglo-Saxons.’ Meanwhile, *The Last Kingdom* is also receiving a spin-off, in this case as a feature film, *Seven Kings Must Die*. Unlike *Vikings: Valhalla*, however, this is intended to simply conclude Uhtred’s story rather than begin a new narrative, and will thus likely feature a significant amount of returning cast members. As of May 2022, no new cast announcements have been made.

Overall, I hope to have shown why more scholarship on this media is needed, by demonstrating the way that these shows construct and contribute to the cultural memory of these identities, bringing together many elements of the previous canon of memory to the forefront of public consciousness. In this space, they continue to interact with past and contemporary political and racial aspects of cultural identity, but here they are much more accessible than traditional academia, leading to greater public engagement with and interest in the medieval, while also leading to easier engagement and appropriation from white nationalist groups and those with extreme racial ideologies.

There is still room for much further exploration of other ways identity is constructed in the series; visuals have been considered with regards to race and tattoos, but there is certainly far more to the overall costuming and visual aesthetics of the show that contributes to the visual construction, from the weapons, armor, even make-up and hairstyling, to the larger sets and landscapes themselves. Religion is also inevitably a distinctly important theme in both shows, as a definer of identity as well as a primary source of conflict; this would certainly warrant a paper of its own to unravel. It is thus important for academics to engage more frequently with these series and the many different ways they, as lengthy and elaborately constructed multi-media texts, approach medieval identities.

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Appendix: Plot Summaries

Vikings

Vikings totals eighty-nine episodes, each around 44 minutes in length across six seasons (Seasons 1 comprising of nine episodes, 2 and 3 of ten episodes, and Seasons 4, 5, and 6 comprising of twenty each, but delivered in two “parts” of ten episodes, henceforth labelled 4A, 4B, 5A, 5B, etc.), and was released over seven years between 2013 and 2020. The show follows the life and adventures of Ragnar Lothbrok (Travis Fimmel) and his surrounding family, friends, and enemies. The first episode begins in the year 793, covering about 90 years in total as it ends during the reign of King Alfred (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo), in approximately the 880s.

Ragnar (Travis Fimmel) is both a warrior and a farmer, living on a small farm near the fictional Scandinavian town of Kattegat with his wife, Lagertha (Katheryn Winnick) and children. Season 1 follows Ragnar and the other Vikings’ early raids on Northumbria, where they are generally successful. Their contact with the English is primarily through Ragnar’s English slave Athelstan (George Blagden), who grapples with being torn from his life as a Christian monk, and tries to understand his pagan captors, as Ragnar slowly forms a friendship with him. Political unrest in Kattegat ends with Ragnar as Earl.

In Season 2, the Vikings begin to raid Wessex. The king, Ecbert (Linus Roache) and his son Aethelwulf (Moe Dunford), prove a more capable match for the Vikings than the Northumbrians. Ragnar is drawn into even greater political turmoil at home, but emerges as King. Athelstan forms a bond with Ecbert after returning to England with the Vikings, but remains torn in his loyalties and faith.

In Season 3, after believing they established a settlement in Wessex, the Vikings turn their attention to Paris. The Franks are a formidable opponent at first, with defences that prove destructive to the Norse invaders, they are ultimately defeated through a clever ploy from Ragnar. Ragnar’s continued friendship with Athelstan sparks seeds of doubt in his friends about Ragnar’s faith. Athelstan is killed by Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård) for it, but not before he fathers a son to Aethelwulf’s wife Judith (Jennie Jacques) in England.

In Season 4A, the Franks are finally able to mount a defence against the Vikings, with the aid of Ragnar’s brother Rollo (Clive Standen). Ragnar spirals, dealing with drug addiction and repeated failures in Wessex and Paris, and abandons his kingship of Kattegat. Meanwhile,

tensions mount in England between Ecbert and Aelle of Northumbria (Ivan Kaye), as Ecbert successfully manoeuvres to become king of both Wessex and Mercia.

In Season 4B, Ragnar's son Bjorn (Alexander Ludwig), leads the Vikings further afield, to Spain and the Mediterranean. Ragnar gives himself up to die in England at the hands of Ecbert and Aelle, where he is thrown into a snake pit. Ragnar's sons, now all adults, are told by Odin (André Eriksen) of his death and hear his dying cry, and gather a great army to take revenge. They blood-eagle Aelle, but allow Ecbert to take his own life after sacking Winchester. Aethelwulf is now king of Wessex and Mercia, but is on the run.

In Season 5A, Ragnars sons are divided. Sigurd (David Lindström), is killed by Ivar (Alex Høgh Andersen). Bjorn returns to the Mediterranean, reaching Sicily and Egypt. Ubbe (Jordan Patrick Smith), Hvitserk (Marco Ilsø) and Ivar rule in East Anglia, but become further divided in their ambitions. War for Kattegat ensues between the divided brothers and Lagertha. Floki leaves Kattegat and discovers Iceland, and attempts to establish a settlement. In England, Aethelwulf dies, and Judith secures the throne for her son by Athelstan, Alfred, over her elder son by Aethelwulf, Aethelred (Darren Cahill).

In Season 5B, Ivar becomes the tyrant king of Kattegat, declaring himself a god. Alfred is insecure in his rule over his older brother, leading Judith to poison Aethelred. Bjorn, Ubbe, and Lagertha settle in England and make peace with Alfred, helping him fight off other Norse invaders, the "black Danes". Eventually Bjorn returns to Kattegat, and Ivar is overthrown, fleeing east.

In Season 6A, Ivar becomes embroiled in Kievan Rus politics, allying with Prince Oleg the Prophet (Danila Kozlovsky), who wishes to conquer his "homeland" of Scandinavia. Harald Finehair (Peter Franzén) is crowned King of All Norway by election. Ubbe and his family go to join the colony in Iceland. Hvitserk kills Lagertha, and Bjorn banishes him in revenge. Hvitserk joins Ivar and the Rus, who mount a successful attack on Bjorn and Harald.

In Season 6B, Bjorn is still alive and his presence terrifies the Rus forces, and they are defeated. Ivar strengthens his friendship with the young Rus heir Prince Igor (Oran Glynn O'Donovan), and helps free him from Oleg. Ivar returns to Kattegat and decides to raid Wessex once more. Harald and Hvitserk join him. Alfred is ultimately victorious; Harald and Ivar are killed, and Hvitserk is baptised. Meanwhile, Ubbe and the Icelanders, having discovered Greenland, find their way even further west and discover North America, but come into conflict with a group of First Nations Mi'kmaw.

The Last Kingdom

The Last Kingdom consists of forty-eight episodes, each approximately 55 minutes in length, across five seasons (Seasons 1 and 2 with eight episodes each; 3, 4, and 5 with ten), and was also released over seven years between 2015 and 2022. It follows the life of Uhtred, a Saxon son of the lord of the Northumbrian hold Bebbanburg (modern-day Bamburgh), who is kidnapped by Danes as a child and raised as part of their family.

The first season primarily follows Uhtred as an adult (Alexander Dreymon) after most of his adoptive family is slaughtered by another group of Danes. Blamed for the death of his adoptive father, Ragnar (Peter Gantzler), Uhtred is forced out of Dane society and seeks alliance instead with Alfred of Wessex (David Dawson), who ascends to kingship after his brother King Aethelred's (Alec Newman) death and is forced to deal with increasing threats of various Dane and Viking attacks. Uhtred becomes a vital ally for Alfred in defeating the forces of Guthrum (Thomas W. Gabrielsson) and Skorpa of the White Horse (Jonas Malmjö), but this alliance further estranges him from his remaining Dane family: his adoptive brother, Young Ragnar (Tobias Santelmann), and fellow Saxon-turned-Dane friend, Brida (Emily Cox).

In Season 2, Uhtred continues to aid Alfred in his plans to unite England by focusing on the north, where the Dane threat is the strongest. An alliance with Guthred (Thure Lindhardt) backfires and Uhtred is taken as a slave to Iceland for a while where he meets Irishman Finan (Mark Rowley) who becomes his closest companion. After his return, Uhtred continues to serve Alfred, but Alfred becomes increasingly more distrustful of Uhtred and his intentions because of his strong will and occasional violent acts. Alfred struggles to maintain peace as tension between Saxons and Danes puts his own daughter Aethelflaed (Millie Brady) in danger, giving him a hard choice between what is good for the kingdom and what is good for his family.

In Season 3, Alfred's health wanes. Uhtred captures a Dane seer, Skade (Thea Sofie Loch Næss), who puts a curse on him. Uhtred accidentally kills a Christian priest and is outlawed from Wessex. Alfred's disgruntled nephew Aethelwold (Harry McEntire) attempts to unite the Danes against Alfred, but once united, he conspires with Cnut (Magnus Bruun) to kill Young Ragnar. Uhtred initially joins them, but is torn away by feelings of duty to Aethelflaed and deserts them. Uhtred and Brida reunite and seek answers for how to avenge Young Ragnar and free Uhtred from his curse. Uhtred kills Skade and returns to Winchester

and reconciles with Alfred before he passes, and allies himself with Alfred's son Edward (Timothy Innes) who becomes king. Edward and Uhtred defeat the Dane army with help from the Mercians, led by Aethelred (Toby Regbo), though both Dane leaders, Haestan (Jeppe Beck Laursen) and Cnut, survive. During the battle, Uhtred and Brida kill Aethelwold, avenging Young Ragnar.

Season 4 sees Brida and Cnut united and attempting to overthrow Mercia and Wessex. Uhtred finally makes an attempt to retake Bebbanburg, but is defeated by his uncle Aelfric (Joseph Millson) and Aelfric's son Wihtgar (Ossian Perret). Edward's army joins the Mercians to defeat the Danes at Tettenhall. Brida learns of Cnut's role in Young Ragnar's death and kills him. Aethelred is gravely injured in the battle and is killed by his army commander Eardwulf (Jamie Blackley), leaving a power struggle for the Mercian throne. Aethelflaed is eventually crowned Queen, but only because she undertakes a vow of chastity so no Ealdorman can marry her to usurp Aethelred's children's claim. A new Dane warlord, Sigtryggr (Eysteinn Sigurðarson), aligns with Brida after raiding the Welsh settlements and invades Wessex, taking Winchester while Edward is in Mercia. Uhtred, having earned Edward's trust in Mercia, helps arrange a truce between Sigtryggr and Edward.

Season 5 takes place several years after the events of Season 4. Uhtred has been made a lord of Rumcofa (modern-day Runcorn). Brida and her daughter by Cnut, Vibike (Emili Akhchina), have gone to Iceland and started a fanatical cult based around Vibike as a seer. They return to England and Brida attacks Uhtred's son, Young Uhtred (Finn Elliot), and captures Eoferwic (modern York), where Uhtred's daughter, Stiorra (Ruby Hartley), rules alongside Sigtryggr. Uhtred unites groups of Danes and Saxons against Brida, defeating her forces, and Vibike is killed. Meanwhile, Aethelflaed dies of incurable cancer, but instead of allowing the Ealdormen of Mercia to choose their new ruler, Edward usurps the throne of Mercia, merging it into his own kingdom with Wessex. Aethelhelm (Adrian Schiller), Edward's father in law, conspires to create further hostility between the Saxons and Danes, and Edward and Sigtryggr go to war. Edward and the Saxons win, but Aethelhelm's betrayal has been revealed. Aethelhelm flees north to Bebbanburg, where he allies with King Constantin of Scotland (Rod Hallett), and Wihtgar. Edward, Uhtred, and Stiorra's Dane forces unite in a final battle, defeating Constantin and Wihtgar. Uhtred claims Bebbanburg as his birth right. He tells Edward he will not allow Northumbria to become part of Edward's England because of the turmoil Edward has caused, but reassures him that a future king will unite the lands.