

# Britain and Ireland 900–1300

*Insular Responses to Medieval European Change*

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*Edited by*  
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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12 pt [CE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Britain and Ireland, 900–1300: insular responses to medieval European change / edited by Brendan Smith.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 57319 X

1. Great Britain – Civilization – 1066–1485.
2. Great Britain – Civilization – European influences.
3. Ireland – Civilization – European influences.
4. Great Britain – Civilization – To 1066.
5. Culture diffusion – History – To 1500.
6. Social change – History – To 1500.
7. Civilization, Medieval. I. Smith, Brendan, 1963–

DA185.B75 1999

941 – dc21 98–42845 CIP

ISBN 0 521 57319 X hardback

# Contents

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<i>Contributors</i>	<i>page</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>		ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>		xii
1 The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment		1
ALFRED P. SMYTH		
2 The changing economy of the Irish Sea province		39
BENJAMIN T. HUDSON		
3 Cults of Irish, Scottish and Welsh saints in twelfth-century England		67
ROBERT BARTLETT		
4 Sea-divided Gaels? Constructing relationships between Irish and Scots c. 800–1169		87
MÁIRE HERBERT		
5 The 1169 invasion as a turning-point in Irish–Welsh relations		98
SEÁN DUFFY		
6 Killing and mutilating political enemies in the British Isles from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth century: a comparative study		114
JOHN GILLINGHAM		
7 Anglo-French acculturation and the Irish element in Scottish identity		135
DAUVIT BROUN		
8 John de Courcy, the first Ulster plantation and Irish church men		154
MARIE THERESE FLANAGAN		

9	Coming in from the margins: the descendants of Somerled and cultural accommodation in the Hebrides, 1164–1317	179
	R. ANDREW McDONALD	
10	Nobility and identity in medieval Britain and Ireland: The de Vescy family, c. 1120–1314	199
	KEITH J. STRINGER	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	240
	<i>Index</i>	264

# 1 The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment

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*Alfred P. Smyth*

Assessments of the effects of Scandinavian raiders in the ninth and tenth centuries have focused for over three decades on an agenda set by revisionist historians – an agenda which has obscured and sometimes trivialized many of the complex issues involved in an analysis of annalistic and other records. An over-zealous approach, driven by a desire to show that Scandinavian raiders were not numerous and that they were no more destructive to church property and personnel than were the native Christian opposition, has too often led to conclusions which fly in the face of historical evidence and common sense. Revisionists must also take responsibility for polarizing historical arguments in relation to the destructive power of the Northmen. In their zeal to promote an image of Scandinavian raiders as yet one more political, cultural and religious grouping in Western Europe – little different from their Christian neighbours in most respects – they either minimized evidence which did not fit their preconceptions or else they distracted historians' attention away from those negative effects which Vikings wrought on Western society, to concentrate on the economic and material benefits which later Scandinavian colonists supposedly brought to a conquered people. At best, the books in 'Viking' studies fail to balance: at worst they are intellectually cooked.

The self-congratulatory mood of post-revisionists in medieval Irish studies gives cause for concern, not least because of serious shortcomings in the intellectual debate.<sup>1</sup> There is little disagreement over the fact that in all parts of the Christian West, indigenous violent elements existed long before Northmen arrived in the ninth century, and I have long ago shown how several aspects of Norse kingship and warrior cults

<sup>1</sup> See P. Holm, 'Between apathy and antipathy: the Vikings in Irish and Scandinavian history', *Peritia*, 8 (1994), p. 168, for an uncritical and embarrassing appraisal of an Irish historian who in that writer's opinion had 'introduced the essential historical methodology of source criticism (*sic*) in this and later valuable revisionist work'.

appealed to elements within the native Christian aristocracies.<sup>2</sup> This rapport between warriors led, in turn, to military alliances and inter-marriage from the earliest stages of the Norse invasions. It is also possible to contrast the hostility which the churches in Wessex and Ireland showed against the Northmen, with the very definite evidence for cooperation between the churches of York and Chester-le-Street (Lindisfarne) with Danish rulers in Northumbria. Different political circumstances dictated different approaches, but whenever a native Christian aristocracy survived to resist Scandinavian attack, the church invariably backed its own kings – even to the point of Frankish, West Saxon and Irish churchmen personally going into battle against the pagans. In Northumbria, on the other hand, where native Anglian Christian kings had been annihilated by the Northmen, the archbishops of York were left with no choice but to do business with the invaders, just as Christian bishops in Francia had been forced to come to terms with earlier Germanic barbarians in the fifth century.<sup>3</sup> As for the inter-monastic violence for which there is definite evidence in Ireland prior to the Viking age, this is a subject which has not been properly evaluated by historians on any side of the debate. By the eighth century some Irish monasteries had not only become very rich, but they had also grown to fill a vacuum in Irish economic and social life – a life which had hitherto been exclusively agrarian. The monks had inadvertently triggered the growth of monastic townships from the seventh century onwards, thereby giving monasticism a monopoly on urban development – with all the economic and political advantages that implied. Monasteries had attracted communities of craftsmen, agrarian tenants and serfs, and of course, merchants. This must have created a conflict of interest *vis-à-vis* the warrior aristocracy, which unlike their counterparts in England, for instance, had no coinage to control and no traditional rights over markets in these novel and burgeoning monastic townships. When, therefore, we read of battles between Irish monasteries and of Irish kings attacking monasteries, it would be naïve to conclude that professed monks or ordained clergy had begun to slay each other out of personal spite. However unedifying such violent engagements may have been, they were unquestionably the result of dynastic rivalry and economic tension at a *secular* level within the church and in society at large. The situation was unquestionably aggravated by the fact that senior church

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850–880* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 128–33, 149–53; Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: the History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (repr., Dublin, 1987), i, pp. 49–53.

<sup>3</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, i, pp. 41–6; ii, pp. 91–4; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 18–20.

offices within monastic 'cities' or *civitates* had become hereditary and were no doubt largely controlled by the lay aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> We are reminded of Carolingian and later Capetian control of certain key monasteries in Francia. But none of this evidence can be used to suggest that *all* monks had become corrupt politicians or that all monks had abandoned their celibacy. The rise of the Céili Dé movement of monastic reformers and ascetics had already established itself in the Irish midlands prior to the Scandinavian onslaught, which clearly shows that however decadent monastic culture had become, there was an influential element within monasticism which still strove after the ideals of the Desert. Iona is a good example of a most powerful and wealthy monastery whose leaders, although drawn from the leading Uí Néill dynasty, maintained their celibacy and high spiritual standards right up to the time of Norse inroads, and Iona was also a centre which like so many others on the Irish mainland, had developed *dísert* sites where anchorites and lay penitents could get on with the business of praying, at one remove from the high politics of the monastic *civitas* itself. To imply, therefore, that *all* monastic communities in pre-Viking Ireland had become degenerate and violent places, or to misuse the already flawed statistics of pre-Viking monastic 'burnings' and raidings as presented in the raw figures of a much misquoted paper by Lucas in 1967, is to present a grotesque distortion of the historical evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Discussions on the extent of Norse destructiveness on Western society have been obfuscated by the parading of economic benefits which accrued from the growth of Norse towns and from the injection of money into the Western economy through payments of Danegeld. No one would deny the impressive contribution which the Scandinavians made to town life in the English Danelaw and in Ireland.<sup>6</sup> But those settlements were founded initially at the cost of native lives and livelihoods. Clergy who had been terrorized by Norse raiders, or those landowners who had been driven off their lands in the Vale of York, may have benefited as much from trading in the markets of York as the Plains Indians benefited from the opening up of the American West by European colonists in the nineteenth century. As for the notion that Danegeld prized money and other frozen assets out of monasteries and into general circulation, we need only remind ourselves that Northmen did not operate charities for the benefit of their victims. Danegeld went

<sup>4</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, ii, pp. 134–40.

<sup>5</sup> A. T. Lucas, 'The plundering and burning of churches in Ireland: 7th to 16th century', in *North Munster Studies: Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney*, ed. E. Rynne (Limerick, 1967), pp. 172–229.

<sup>6</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, pp. 191–258.

into the Scandinavian economy, as the multitude of pennies from the reign of Æthelraed the Unready found in Scandinavian hoards demonstrates.<sup>7</sup> As for the undoubted Norse contribution to the growth of towns in tenth-century England and Ireland, that was part of a colonization process which was scarcely a boon to those who lost their lives or were dispossessed in the earlier era of piracy, slave-raiding, and violent confrontation.

Arguments relating to Norse destructiveness have tended to hinge on technical matters such as the size of each Norse ship and the numbers of men in each ship. The technical approach has its uses in sanitizing Norse violence and taking attention away from the effects of the more barbarous levels of ninth-century Scandinavian society on the culture of the Christian West. It took the crews of only sixty-seven ships to bring about the notorious sack of Nantes on the Feast of John the Baptist (24 June) in 843.<sup>8</sup> The 'numbers approach' does not take account of the devastating effect of even smaller bands of Northmen – well armed and with surprise and mobility on their side – attacking an unarmed population. We are reminded of the *Chronicle's* statement that in 896 only six enemy ships were involved in a raid on the Isle of Wight where they 'did great harm there, both in Devon and everywhere along the coast'.<sup>9</sup> It only took one Northman – with a different and more regressive set of cultural values – to torch an undefended monastic library which had taken two and a half centuries to accumulate, or to slay a monastic scholar who carried that accumulated wisdom in his or her head. The debate regarding numbers cannot be side-stepped since it has an obvious bearing on levels of destructiveness, as has the more intangible issue of relative levels of violent behaviour *vis-à-vis* different cultural groups in the early middle ages. If, for instance, we were to accept all Sawyer's arguments regarding the smallness of scale of the Scandinavian invading force described as the 'Great Army' (*micel here*) in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* between the years 865 and 878,<sup>10</sup> we would find it difficult to account for the phenomenal military successes enjoyed by the Danes during that thirteen-year period. It is one thing to acknowl-

<sup>7</sup> P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (2nd edn, London, 1971), pp. 117–19. Sawyer pointed to the fact that there were 1,000 Frankish coins in the Cuerdale hoard (dating to c. 900; *ibid.*, p. 101). It also needs stressing that there were close on 1,000 coins of Alfred the Great in that same hoard – many of which may have been collected as loot and Danegeld. See C. S. S. Lyon and B. H. I. H. Stewart, 'The Northumbrian Viking coins in the Cuerdale hoard', in *Anglo-Saxon Coins: Studies presented to F. M. Stenton*, ed. R. H. M. Dolley (London, 1961), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> *The Annals of St-Bertin*, ed. J. N. Nelson (Manchester, 1991), s.a. 843, p. 55, and n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. D. Whitelock, *EHD*, i, s.a. 896, p. 189.

<sup>10</sup> Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, p. 123; Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700–1100* (London and New York, 1982), pp. 93–4.



edge Danish successes by stating that they conquered the English kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia and that they brought Alfredian Wessex to the very brink of defeat. It is another thing to view that phenomenal success in the context of what had gone before.

Because pre-conquest English history is conveniently compartmentalized between pre-Viking, Viking and post-Viking periods, we encounter strange anomalies in Anglo-Saxon studies when we choose to move freely back and forth across the historiographical air-locks which divide these 'periods' off, one from another. Seventh- and eighth-century English history has been viewed as a relentless struggle between leading contestants in a 'Heptarchy' which curiously consisted of only three major players – Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. That struggle was once viewed by Stenton and by others as promoting the evolution of a unified English polity. Yet during that era when England was ruled by its native kings, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex were rarely, if ever, capable of imposing their rule over each other or over their neighbours to the extent of permanently replacing tributary kingships and indigenous aristocracies with puppets and colonists of their own choosing. Mercian rulers in the eighth century might require subject-kings of Kent, for instance, to seek ratification for land-grants, or Mercia might likewise install the West Saxon Beorhtric as their client-king in Wessex (c. 800), but there never came a point in the Mercian supremacy when even after military victory Wessex could ever be viewed as being fully annexed – not to say colonized – by its more powerful Midland neighbour. So in spite of constant jockeying for military advantage, an old-style *Brytenwealda* or 'Wide Ruler' had to confront the political realities of dealing with two or three other potentially rival overlords whose armies were intact and whose magnates were in control of patronage throughout their own shires and lesser territories. How then, we may well ask, did a 'Great Army' of Danes succeed in accomplishing in eleven or thirteen years what the most able native English warlords had failed to accomplish in over three centuries? This simple but grim reminder of overwhelming Danish military superiority has rarely if ever been acknowledged by historians. It was the Danish kings, Ivar and Halfdan, and later on, Olaf Gothfrithsson – rather than their English predecessors – who first came close to qualifying for that elusive title of *Bretwalda* or 'Ruler of Britain'. The Danes not only annihilated three leading English royal dynasties, but in the case of the Mercians, their war-machine – which had been the glory of Penda, Æthelbald and Offa – surrendered to the invaders without apparently offering a single battle. The Northumbrians and East Angles were each brought separately to their knees and their dynasties destroyed after only one battle – an

extraordinary ordering of events when we recall how obdurate the relatively small Kentish kingdom had been in defending its independence against the might of Offa. Yet if we were to accept revisionist interpretations of ninth-century history, we would have to conclude that a force made up of hundreds rather than thousands of Scandinavian ‘travelling warriors’ redrew the political map of the whole island of Britain (including all of what is now Scotland and its Isles)<sup>11</sup> in that short period from 866 to 880.

We cannot argue that English armies were a spent force by the time the Great Heathen Army landed in 865. Kirby reminds us that although Mercia had experienced dynastic discord in the early ninth century, it was still a force to be reckoned with in the 820s.<sup>12</sup> Although Mercian power had been eclipsed by Ecgberht of Wessex temporarily in 825, even Stenton conceded that when Wiglaf returned to the Mercian kingship in 830, Mercia again got the upper hand, controlling most of Berkshire and perhaps also Essex and London.<sup>13</sup> We have definite evidence for Mercian control of parts of Berkshire in the reign of Wiglaf’s Mercian successor, Brihtwulf, in 843–4.<sup>14</sup> And by the middle of the century, although the balance of power between Mercia and Wessex had by then tilted marginally in favour of Wessex, nevertheless, Æthelwulf, the West Saxon king, went on a joint expedition with Burgred of Mercia against the Welsh in 853, and Æthelwulf married off his daughter, Æthelswith, to that same Burgred later in the same year. Wessex was compelled to deal with its Mercian neighbour through diplomacy rather than brute force. And even if we were to argue, in the face of good evidence to the contrary, that Wessex alone possessed the only credible warband to resist Viking attack in the mid-ninth century, we would still have to explain the remarkable Danish successes in that kingdom – successes which but for a great element of luck would eventually have toppled the West Saxon leadership as they had toppled that in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Ecgberht of Wessex is seen by Anglo-Saxon historians as laying the foundations for later Alfredian expansion through his subjugation of the Cornishmen and his casting off the Mercian yoke in 825 and 829. Yet that same successful king who had supposedly ‘conquered the kingdom of the Mercians’ according to the partisan *Anglo-Saxon*

<sup>11</sup> A. P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland A.D. 80–1000* (London, 1984), pp. 141–74.

<sup>12</sup> D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1991), pp. 188–9.

<sup>13</sup> F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (2nd edn, repr., Oxford, 1967), p. 233; Kirby, *Earliest English Kings*, pp. 191–2.

<sup>14</sup> Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, p. 192; A. P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), p. 4.

*Chronicle*,<sup>15</sup> was defeated by as few as twenty-five or thirty-five ships' crews of Viking raiders at Carhampton in 836. The *Chronicle* – never keen to elaborate on a West Saxon defeat – laconically records that battle as though it were some isolated skirmish. But Carhampton was almost certainly a royal estate (it was so in Alfred's time) and there is evidence to suggest that Scandinavian invaders, bent on conquest or on obtaining significant loot, massed their armies around such key centres.<sup>16</sup> It may be no coincidence that in 843 the invaders attacked Carhampton yet again, and again they won a victory – this time against Ecgberht's son, King Æthelwulf. In 843, the laconic reporting of the *Chronicle* is supplemented by the *Annals of St-Bertin*, which source may be referring to the Viking victory at Carhampton when it tells us that: 'The Northmen launched a major attack on the island of Britain, in that part which is largely inhabited by the Anglo-Saxons. After a battle lasting three days, the Northmen emerged the winners: plundering looting, slaughtering everywhere, they wielded power over the land at will.'<sup>17</sup>

Sawyer argued for a scaling down in our assessment of the size of Viking fleets and the consequent numbers of warriors which they carried. While he was willing to accept the many references in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to small fleets of under forty ships, he dismissed the round figures of 200 or 250 ships which invaded Kent in 892 'as [no] more than an attempt by the Chronicler to indicate large fleets'.<sup>18</sup> Sawyer dismissed an estimate of 350 ships given by the *Chronicle* under 851 as 'likely to be exaggerated' because it was not strictly contemporary,<sup>19</sup> yet the numbers given for the 892 fleets were indeed a contemporary estimate and included, incidentally, an additional fleet of eighty ships led by Hæsten at Milton Regis in Kent. Sawyer's approach was in truth both selective and subjective, and failed to take into account that Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Frankish annalists offer consistent contemporary estimates for fleet sizes ranging from a few ships to as many as 200 and above, for larger fleets. If we agree with Sawyer that Anglo-Saxon, Frankish and Irish annalists could accurately count and report on fleets of four, six, sixteen, thirty-two, forty, sixty and eighty ships,<sup>20</sup> how then can we deny that even if reports of 100 or 200 ships are estimated in round figures, that they are none the less accurate

<sup>15</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, EHD*, i, s.a. 829, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson (ed.), *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a. 844, p. 59. Sawyer suggested that the record of the 843 raid on Carhampton was a duplication of the annal for 836. Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 21.

estimates in relation to those reliable numbers for smaller fleets? When we use contemporary annals from different countries to exercise a control over estimates for Norse fleet sizes, and when we do this over a sufficiently wide time-span, we find a remarkable consistency in reporting.<sup>21</sup> An account in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance, which describes a Danish pincer-movement in Devon and the Cornish peninsula in 893, reports that a fleet of forty ships ‘went north around the coast and besieged a fortress on the north coast of Devon’. The other part of that pincer – a fleet on the south coast at Exeter, consisted initially of 100 ships, but may have been reduced to 60 if the northern contingent were included in the chronicler’s total figure.<sup>22</sup> The number of ships involved in this operation together with the pincer tactic was replicated earlier in Ireland in 837 when two fleets, each of 60 ships, had swept across the territories between the Boyne and the Liffey.<sup>23</sup> In Francia in 861, Weland’s crews of 200 ships on the Seine acted in unison with another Norse fleet of 60 ships on the river Tellas.<sup>24</sup> The numbers of ships for large and medium-sized war parties in Anglo-Saxon England tally well with figures found in Frankish, Irish and Iberian annals. The Northman, Weland, whose fleet almost certainly attacked Winchester in 860, commanded 200 ships on the Seine in 861, while Ivar, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, led 200 ships back to Dublin from Dumbarton in Strathclyde in 871. Guthrum lost 150 ships off Swanage in a storm in 877 and he still had enough men to capture Exeter immediately afterwards, and to overrun parts of western Wessex in 878. The Islamic chronicler, Ibn Adhari put the number of Viking ships which attacked Seville in 843–4 at eighty. He reported that four Norse ships were captured and that later thirty ships were burnt by the Moslems and 500 Norsemen were slain.<sup>25</sup> The burning or breaking up of captured ships – a sure indication of the menace they posed even when bereft of their Norse crews – is vouched for in Spanish, Frankish, English and Irish annals.<sup>26</sup> Ibn Adhari quoted a letter from the governor of Lisbon to the ruler at Cordoba in 843–4 ‘that *madjus* (“Heathens” or Northmen) had been seen on the coast of his province in fifty-four ships

<sup>21</sup> I have argued elsewhere for accepting the existence of large fleets of up to 200 ships and above. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, ii, pp. 197–8, 218 n. 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, i, pp. 32–3.

<sup>23</sup> *AU*, s.a. 836 (*recte* 837), pp. 294–5. (Unless otherwise stated all *AU* references to years before 1132 are to the 1983 edition of the *Annals of Ulster* edited by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill.)

<sup>24</sup> Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> J. Stefánsson, ‘The Vikings in Spain from Arabic (Moorish) and Spanish sources’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Club: Society for Northern Research*, 6 (1909), pp. 35–6.

<sup>26</sup> Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 134; Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, ii, pp. 197, 251.

and in the same number of smaller vessels'.<sup>27</sup> He also reported a Norse expedition of sixty-two ships off the western coast of Iberia in 859–60, while twenty-eight ships were sighted in 966.<sup>28</sup> If we accept that each ship carried, say, 30 men then the army which attacked Carhampton in 836 and 843 may have been 1,000 strong while the invaders of Kent who began King Alfred's Last War, could have been as many as 5,000 or 6,000 men.

The West Saxon armies which Æthelwulf bequeathed to his sons, King Æthelraed and his younger brother Alfred, were hammered time after time by the Great Army which took Reading in 871. There is an inescapable conclusion that the Great Army, which had already well-nigh conquered the whole of Anglo-Saxon England by 876, consisted of a massed force of warriors, the like of which had never been seen in England before. Even in distant heroic days when the English had themselves come as invaders they, unlike the Danes, had edged forward much more cautiously and much more slowly along the river valleys and across the lowlands of Britain. Alcuin, writing home from the Carolingian court to his native Northumbria at the very beginning of the Scandinavian migrations, was the first English writer to see that Northmen were no ordinary raiders, but rather a force which could undo everything which the English had accomplished in Britain over three centuries. Alcuin's knowledge of Danish military capability must have been considerable due to his Frankish connections. For too long, this scholar has been dismissed as an elderly monk whinging about the restoration of discipline and the need for decent behaviour in monasteries and between English kings. Already in his letter to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne, written soon after 793, Alcuin was aware that the Norse attack – 'the calamity of your tribulation'<sup>29</sup> – could be merely 'the beginning of greater tribulation'. He subjected King Æthelred of Northumbria to a history lesson, which showed how clearly he grasped the threat posed even by that first piratical raid back in 793:

Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples. And where first after the departure of St

<sup>27</sup> Stefánsson, 'Vikings in Spain', p. 35. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (Oxford, 1869–71: repr. 1964), iii, pp. 472–3; *EHD*, i, p. 778. A detailed discussion of Alcuin's letters written back to Northumbria in the wake of the Scandinavian attack in 793 will be found in D. A. Bullough, 'What has Ingeld to do with Lindisfarne?', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22 (1993), pp. 95–115.

Paulinus from York [in c. AD 634] the Christian religion in our race took its rise, there misery and calamity have begun. Who does not fear this? Who does not lament this as if his country were captured?<sup>30</sup>

These were prophetic words. Seventy-three years and numerous devastations later, Alcuin's 'country (*patria*)' – the land of the Northumbrian Angles – collapsed in the face of the onslaught of the Great Army, and York was to become the centre of power for a Scandinavian dynasty for almost a century afterwards.<sup>31</sup> Alcuin's comment conveys the sense of disbelief regarding the sudden and unexpected capability of Northmen to cross the North Sea, but he also provides clear evidence for the slaughter of monks (*sanguine aspersa*) and the despoliation of an immensely rich monastery. In his letter to Bishop Higbald he mentions that the raiders 'poured out the blood of saints around the altar' and he refers to the survivors as 'you who are left'.<sup>32</sup> He reveals, too, that in addition to the slaying of monks, 'youths' – perhaps the inmates of the monastic school – had been taken captive by the pagans, and there is a hint that they might be ransomed through the influence of Charlemagne.<sup>33</sup> Sawyer's use of a later account of this Lindisfarne attack written some 'three hundred years later', to reduce the evidence for the catastrophe which befell Lindisfarne in 873 to the level of a tale 'which grew with the telling' and which was full of fanciful 'elaborations',<sup>34</sup> failed to take seriously repeated contemporary comments by a scholar of Alcuin's standing. Sawyer failed, too, to give due weight to the account in northern versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* regarding the 'ravages of heathen men [who] miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter'.<sup>35</sup> This notice of the destruction of a particular English church by Scandinavian raiders is almost unique in any version of the *Chronicle* reporting on ninth-century events and the reference to *man sleht* ('murder' or 'slaughter') supports Alcuin's references to loss of life. Alcuin's account has all the ingredients associated with Norse terror which reappear in accurate and contemporary accounts of subsequent raids – the element of surprise, loss of life, looting and slave-raiding with the possibility of ransom. Even Page, in an uncritical and speculative mood, conceded that while the Lindisfarne raiders may have been viewed by their own

<sup>30</sup> Haddan and Stubbs (eds.), *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, iii, p. 493; *EHD*, i, p. 776.

<sup>31</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*.

<sup>32</sup> Haddan and Stubbs (eds.), *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, iii, p. 472.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, p. 473; *EHD*, i, pp. 778–9. <sup>34</sup> Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, pp. 94–5.

<sup>35</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Version E) s.a. 793*, in *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer and J. Earle, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1892–9, repr. 1965), i, pp. 55–7.

kind as ‘young men of good family’, they might nevertheless have been ‘hired killers’.<sup>36</sup>

Sawyer likewise played down the effects of dislocation endured by monastic communities which were forced to flee before the Northmen. He cited Wallace-Hadrill’s views on the flight of people from Périgord and Limousin to Turenne in the Haut-Limousin as being based on a sermon of Adhemar of Chabannes – ‘a most unreliable source’.<sup>37</sup> But we do not have to depend on Adhemar of Chabannes for evidence of dislocation of monastic communities. We know from near-contemporary sources such as Odo of Cluny’s *Life of Count Gerald of Aurillac*, for instance, that the relics of St Martial were moved out of the way of Norse raiders from Limoges to Turenne.<sup>38</sup> And since the relics and treasures of a monastery were at the core of its spiritual *raison d’être* we can be certain that in some instances the monastic community as a whole followed in the wake of their founders’ relics. The classic Frankish example of this is provided by a series of moves up the Loire made by the monks of St Philibert between 836 and 875 when they were displaced by Northmen from their island home on Noirmoutier.<sup>39</sup> But other instances of long-term and more temporary dislocation abound, as in the case of the canons and nuns of Cologne and Bonn who fled from the Northmen with their relics and treasures to Mainz in 881.<sup>40</sup> In Northumbria the monks of Lindisfarne were eventually forced from their home with the relics of St Cuthbert in 876. The wanderings of the Lindisfarne community and their eventual settlement at Chester-le-Street provide evidence both for the resilience as well as the long-term dislocation and permanent rehousing of monastic personnel in the Viking age.<sup>41</sup> Important monasteries on off-shore locations such as Lindisfarne and Iona found themselves in the front line of Viking attack. Iona was first attacked – probably by raiders connected with the Lindisfarne assault – in 795. The Hebrides were again raided in 798 and in 802 Iona was again attacked and burnt by heathen raiders. The *coup de grâce* was delivered in 806, when sixty-eight members of Iona’s monastic community (*familia*)

<sup>36</sup> R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths* (London, 1995), p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> *Vita Sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis comitis*, in *MPL*, 133 (Paris, 1853), p. 666; *St Odo of Cluny: Being the Life of St Odo of Cluny by John of Salerno and the Life of St Gerald of Aurillac by St Odo*, ed. G. Sitwell (London and New York, 1958), p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis* (London, 1970), p. 169.

<sup>40</sup> *The Annals of Fulda*, ed. T. Reuter (Manchester and New York, 1992), s.a. 881, pp. 90–1.

<sup>41</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, i, pp. 42–4.

were slain.<sup>42</sup> The fact that a 'new monastic city' (*noue civitatis*) was laid out for construction in the following year at Kells in Ireland shows that a community decision had been taken by then to abandon Iona as the headquarters of the community. And when Kells was completed in 814, Cellach resigned the office of superior (*principatus*) and Diarmait was appointed in his place.<sup>43</sup> Cellach's death on Iona in 815 shows that the mother house was not abandoned altogether, but henceforth in the Viking Age, Iona would constitute a *désert* or 'desert' site where anchorites risked their lives to maintain a physical association with the saints of their church.<sup>44</sup> Sawyer's conclusion regarding Frankish monasteries, that 'although many houses were destroyed by Viking raiders, losing their libraries and treasures, many recovered in a remarkable way',<sup>45</sup> does not help the discussion. It is indeed true that the monks of Tours were back in business in August 854,<sup>46</sup> in spite of an attack by Northmen in the previous year, and communities too numerous to mention all across the Christian West drifted back to sites hallowed by the lives of holy founders as soon as the Northmen had disappeared. But that is a fact of doubtful significance in relation to the relative violence of any one raid. It was already clear to visitors brave enough to filter back to the pavement cafés in Sarajevo in 1996 that the city had begun its painful recovery after four years of bombardment and siege. Such a recovery speaks only of the resilience of the human spirit, and will, one hopes, never be used by historians of a later age to deny the genocidal nature of total war in the Balkans between 1992 and 1996. The Life of Odo of Cluny written by John of Salerno *c.* 943, yields much incidental information on the dislocation of monastic communities during the Viking wars in Francia. We are told that monks abandoned their monasteries to return to live with their relatives during the Scandinavian invasions;<sup>47</sup> that the Northmen 'were cruelly laying waste' the countryside around Poitiers and Tours at a time when two monks of the Fleury community happened to have been captured and bound by Norse raiders;<sup>48</sup> and that Odo's nephew

<sup>42</sup> Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, pp. 145–7.      <sup>43</sup> *AU, s.a.* 813, pp. 270–1.

<sup>44</sup> I cannot agree with conclusions reached by Professor M. Herbert (*Iona, Kells and Derry: the History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba*, Oxford, 1988 p. 68) on the status of Iona in the years immediately after 814. She argued 'that initially Kells was to function as a place of safety for personnel and precious objects from Iona, and was not designed to replace its mother-house'. But a place of refuge for personnel and their all-important relics would suggest that Iona survived at best with a token community made up of zealots like the unfortunate Blathmac.

<sup>45</sup> Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, p. 97.      <sup>46</sup> Nelson (ed.), *Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 77, n. 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Sancti Odonis abbatis Cluniacensis secundi*, in *MPL*, 133, p. 76; Sitwell (ed.), *St Odo of Cluny*, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Sitwell (ed.), *St Odo of Cluny*, pp. 54–5; *Vita Odonis*, p. 67.



and nurse were taken captive during another devastating Norse raid around Tours and carried off on an eight-day journey to the far side of a deep river.<sup>49</sup> The Life of Odo also tells us of the removal of relics out of the path of Norse raiders<sup>50</sup> and more crucially that the monks of Fleury – one of the leading Benedictine houses of Francia – were scattered ‘through fear of the enemy’.<sup>51</sup>

The debate surrounding the temporary or permanent abandonment of monastic centres has often been narrowly focused on the lives of professed monks and has seldom taken account of the wider implications for monastic tenants. Sawyer did address this issue in passing and drew the following conclusions:

It is likely that the raiders also forced many laymen, especially landowners, into exile, but there is nothing to suggest that there was any significant displacement of whole populations. Bishops and their households, monastic communities and secular lords naturally took to flight, but that does not mean that the peasantry abandoned their lands.<sup>52</sup>

There are several gratuitous assumptions here which do not stand up to scrutiny, and it can be misleading to discuss higher clergy in isolation from the ecclesiastical and monastic economy as a whole. Early medieval monasteries and bishoprics lay at the centre of great estates which depended on church lords and their entourage for their administration. By driving off a bishop and his household from his see, or an abbot and his monks from a monastery, the Northmen had dealt a serious blow to agrarian organization, and since we now know that Scandinavian raiders were interested in seizing corn and livestock, ecclesiastical estates were easy targets. We also now know that from the very beginnings of Norse piracy contemporary sources constantly refer to the taking of captives. The idea therefore of ‘the peasantry’ remaining on estates which had been stripped bare of produce; which were lacking in farm managers; and where they would have been easy targets for slave-raiders, simply does not hold up. We learn from a charter issued by Bishop Wærferth of Worcester that the bishop was forced to lease off church lands at Nuthurst in Warwickshire ‘because of the very pressing affliction and immense tribute of the barbarians’ in 872.<sup>53</sup> Later on, Bishop Denewulf of Winchester remonstrated with King Edward the Elder (*c.* 900) not to force the Winchester clergy to lease their estate at Beddington in Surrey because it had once been ‘quite without stock and stripped bare by heathen men’. The stock which the bishop had managed to restore to the lands at Beddington included – in addition to 9 oxen, 114 pigs and

<sup>49</sup> *Vita Odonis*, pp. 69–70; *St Odo of Cluny*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>50</sup> *St Odo of Cluny*, p. 84 and n. 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79; *Vita Sancti Odonis*, p. 80.

<sup>52</sup> Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

160 sheep – 7 bondsmen who, as in the case of the livestock, had replaced predecessors presumably carried off by Northmen.<sup>54</sup> It was no doubt such monastic tenants – servile and free – who went to make up the 3,000 captives taken by the Dublin Northmen from monasteries in Meath (Brega) in eastern Ireland in 957 together with ‘a great spoil of cattle and horses’.<sup>55</sup> Ealhburg, a female landowner in Kent, was unable to pay her food-rents to St Augustine’s in Canterbury (c. 850–60) ‘because of the ravages of the heathen army’ which had stripped her lands bare of produce and very probably also of its workforce.

It is clear from a wide range of contemporary sources from across the Christian West that a major objective of the Northmen was to acquire loot by way of monastic treasure or from the ransom of high-status captives or of high-status ecclesiastical cult objects such as Gospel Books and reliquaries. Those archaeologists who purvey the ‘benign Viking’ theory sometimes argue that parts of Christian shrines found their way back to graves in the Scandinavian homeland by way of trade with monastic communities. Such ideas fail to take into account that cult objects ‘under worship’ and at the heart of a particular saint’s pilgrimage centre were never negotiable to believers, much less to non-believers. Indeed, one of the reasons why monasteries may have served as banks offering a ‘safe deposit’ facility to local lay lords was that their strong-rooms enjoyed immunity from attack and theft within an otherwise violent Christian society in the early Middle Ages. Lucas was correct in attributing this ‘banking’ role in regard to frozen assets to early Irish monasteries.<sup>56</sup> It is clear from the Life of St Dunstan, for instance, that in tenth-century England it was considered normal for King Eadred (946–55) to deposit part of his treasure for safe-keeping in Glastonbury.<sup>57</sup> ‘All the best’ of King Eadred’s ‘goods’ included, incidentally, not only ‘the ancient treasures of preceding kings as well as various precious things he [Eadred] had acquired himself’ but also ‘many title-deeds (*cartulas*)’ from the royal archive. The whole point of placing treasure and all-important charters from secular lords in a monastery was to ensure they enjoyed the same ‘off-limits’ status as church reliquaries and other cult objects. This point is made clear in the reporting of the ravages of Lothar, son of Louis the Pious, in the Annals of St-Bertin. Lothar invaded the territory of his brother, Charles the Bald, in 841 and ravaged the Le Mans region with ‘rape, sacrilege and blasphemy’: ‘He lost no time in carrying off whatever treasures he could

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–6. <sup>55</sup> *AU*, s.a. 950.

<sup>56</sup> Lucas, ‘Plundering and burning of churches’, pp. 199–200.

<sup>57</sup> *Sancti Dunstani Vita Auctore B* in *Memorials of St Dunstan*, ed. W. Stubbs, RS (London, 1874), p. 29; *EHD*, i, 829.

find deposited in churches or their strong rooms for safe-keeping – and this, even though the priests and clergy of other ranks were bound by oath to preserve those things.<sup>58</sup> Writers who would use evidence such as this to highlight the violent nature of ninth-century Christian society would do well to consider that the incident is reported as a remarkable event; that it is condemned in the strongest terms; and that it demonstrates the otherwise sacrosanct nature of treasure placed under monastic protection and under monastic oath. Lucas could find no early references to the physical desecration of shrines or relics by the Irish prior to the Norse invasions, and rightly surmised that early references to ‘profanation’ of shrines referred to the breaking of oaths taken on reliquaries rather than to physical damage.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, severe ecclesiastical sanctions, laid down in Penitentials and the *Cáin Adamnáin*, operated against any would-be thief or vandal who dared to purloin an Irish Gospel Book or shrine.<sup>60</sup>

Ó Corráin, following Lucas, pointed to the fact that ‘the bullion value of the great bulk of the Irish metalwork of the time [of the Northmen] was very small’,<sup>61</sup> as though an art dealer might value a painting because of the price paid for its once blank canvas and for its paint, or a pot for the value of its clay. Reliquaries made of gilt bronze or containing gold filigree on a gilt bronze field must have seemed to any raider as though they were made of solid gold and silver. But the key point regarding looted reliquaries and other cult objects was that Northmen were well aware that their monastic custodians would pay any ransom to have the bones of their patrons and holy founders returned to them. In 859, the monks of St Denis – the richest monastery in Francia – had ‘the bones of the blessed martyrs Denis, Rusticus and Eleutherius removed to Nogent, one of the *villae* belonging to St Denis in the Morvois district. There on 21 September the bones were reverently placed in reliquaries.’<sup>62</sup> Why would the monks of St Denis move the bones of their patron saints out of the path of the Northmen if they had not feared for their safety? As for reliquaries, their exquisite craftsmanship rendered them valuable in their own right, but they acquired added value through their association with the bones of holy men and women in churches where they became sanctified by association. Even secular objects of intricate workmanship could also fetch high prices in the early Middle Ages regardless of their crude bullion value. A ninth-century West

<sup>58</sup> Nelson (ed.), *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a. 841, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Lucas, ‘Plundering and burning of churches’, pp. 180–1. <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>61</sup> D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 89; Lucas, ‘Plundering and burning of churches’, p. 212.

<sup>62</sup> Nelson (ed.), *Annals of St-Bertin*, s.a. 859, p. 91.

Saxon belt, whose owner was close to the Alfredian dynasty, was valued at the price of a West Saxon estate,<sup>63</sup> and a reliquary executed in the style and quality of say, the Tara Brooch, would have been instantly recognizable even to the most uncouth Northman as a treasure beyond price. In short, Northmen were quick to learn that regardless of ‘bullion value’, an ecclesiastical cult object was worth whatever a monastic community might be willing to pay to get it back. Ealdorman Alfred has left us his own record of how he and his wife, Wærburh, ransomed the Golden Gospels (now in Stockholm) ‘from the heathen army for pure gold’, probably in 871–2, and then presented that codex to Canterbury Cathedral.<sup>64</sup> Those Gospels may well have been encased within a sumptuous metalwork shrine which would have excited the greed of its looters in the first instance, but for Ealdorman Alfred and the clergy of Canterbury it was the early Gospel text which they wished to retrieve and the Northmen were well aware of that. Earlier in Ireland in 824, Heathens plundered Bangor in Co. Down ‘and destroyed the oratory and shook the relics of Comgall from their shrine’. It may have been the precious reliquary, inlaid with gold, silver and enamel, which the Northmen were after on that particular early raid. Eight years later we read of the shrine of Adomnán (abbot of Iona and biographer of St Colum Cille) which was seized from Donaghmoyne (Co. Monaghan).

The monks of St Martin’s moved the body of their saint from Tours to Cormery and moved other treasures to Orleans in 853, having had advance warning of an impending Viking attack.<sup>65</sup> That attack, which the Northmen had launched from Nantes on 8 November, was ‘known about beforehand with complete certainty’ because no doubt, as in Ireland, the Northmen had become well known for raiding churches on or close to patronal festivals, and St Martin’s feast fell on 11 November. The Lindisfarne community managed to preserve the relics of St Cuthbert in 793,<sup>66</sup> and Iona clearly managed to save the relics of Colum Cille in spite of sustaining heavy casualties among its monks in 806. Scandinavian raiders did not shrink from extracting information as to the whereabouts of monastic treasure by torturing captured monks. This evidence was played down by revisionist historians in the face of early accounts by distinguished writers such as Walafrid Strabo. Walafrid’s *Life of Blathmac* shows that this Irish monk had wilfully returned to Iona with his companions in 825 in the knowledge that he would face martyrdom at the hands of Northmen – ‘a pagan horde armed with

<sup>63</sup> Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, p. 398.      <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.      <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> The fact that the Lindisfarne monks managed to save some of their church treasures is not an argument against contemporary accounts of loss of life on that raid. (Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, p. 94.)

malignant greed'. Blathmac and his companions – like the monks of Tours – had prior warning of an attack and some among them fled 'by a footpath through regions known to them'. When the raiders arrived

they came rushing through the open buildings . . . and after slaying with mad savagery the rest of the associates, they approached the holy father to compel him to give up the precious metals wherein lie the holy bones of St Columba. But [the monks] had lifted the shrine from its pediments, and had placed it in the earth, in a hollowed barrow, under a thick layer of turf; because they knew then of the wicked destruction [to come]. This booty the Danes desired, but the saint remained with unarmed hand and with unshaken purpose of mind.<sup>67</sup>

It may be that by 825, the relics of Colum Cille (i.e. his physical remains as distinct from the reliquary) had already been divided out between the community of Kells and others in Scotland. It seems from this early account, however, that some at least of Colum Cille's bones had been reinterred under the turf of Iona after the first Scandinavian onslaught. The Northmen would have rightly surmised that Colum Cille's reliquary must have been one of the most dazzling cult objects in the entire repertoire of early Irish monastic metalwork. That reliquary – whatever its eventual fate – would seem to have survived at Kells in the charge of the new abbot, Diarmait, who took Colum Cille's relics (*minna*) from Ireland to Scotland, and back to Ireland again, in 829. Blathmac refused to yield to the Northmen's threats and 'therefore the pious sacrifice was torn limb from limb'.<sup>68</sup> Whatever the condition and exact whereabouts of the relics and reliquary in 825, and whatever the precise details of Blathmac's ordeal, he was tortured to death. From Francia we have an account of the torture of four monks at St-Bertin of whom only one survived.<sup>69</sup> We are reminded of Blathmac's suffering in the account by Abbo of Fleury (c. 986) of the slaying of King Edmund of East Anglia by the Danes in November 869: 'His ribs were laid bare by numberless gashes, as if he had been put to the torture of the rack, or had been torn by savage claws.'<sup>70</sup> Frank argued that Abbo's reference to 'rack' (*eculeus*) and 'claw' (*ungula*) as instruments of torture used on the unfortunate Edmund was nothing more than part of a stock motif and vocabulary drawn from late antique and early medieval writers and hagiographers.<sup>71</sup> But if that were so it is curious that Abbo first attributed a form of death

<sup>67</sup> *Walafridus Strabo: Vita Sancti Blathmaic Martyris*, ed. E. Dümmler in *M.G.H Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, ii (1884, repr. 1978), pp. 299–301; Anderson, *Early Sources*, i, p. 264.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>69</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Vikings in Francia*, Stenton Lecture (Reading, 1975), p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 211.

<sup>71</sup> R. Frank, 'Viking atrocity and Skaldic verse: the rite of the blood-eagle', *EHR*, 99 (1984), pp. 341–3.

to Edmund which is borrowed from the Life of St Sebastian and then felt it necessary to add in a different form of torture and death altogether. And because writers borrow motifs from a late antique repertoire does not in itself invalidate the message which those borrowed motifs may contain. Revisionists who hold that allusions to Norse brutality and to human sacrifice in Old Icelandic literature belong to the realm of literary motif in a heroic genre, argue in the face of evidence from Icelandic sources themselves as well as from much earlier accounts of Norse behaviour in the written records of their victims and their enemies. The concentration by Frank on evidence for and against the practice of 'blood-eagling' rituals in the ninth century – to the exclusion of evidence for other forms of ritual slaying – was as flawed methodologically as it was intellectually disingenuous.<sup>72</sup> The key passage is a stanza from *Knútsdrápa*, composed c. 1030–38, the conventional translation of which runs:

And Ivar  
who dwelt at York  
Carved the eagle  
on Ælla's back.

If this translation is accepted, then this poem shows that by the early eleventh century the tradition that Ivar (one of the leaders of the Great Heathen Army in England), had slain King Ælla of Northumbria (in AD 867) by scoring an eagle's image on his back, was in wide circulation at that time. Frank argued, however, that mistranslation of this stanza in the twelfth century led to a 'chain of guesses' in the thirteenth which resulted in the invention of more embroidered Norse accounts of this ghoulish rite, such as the following passage from *Orkneyinga Saga*: 'Einar carved the bloody-eagle on his [Halfdan's] back by laying his sword in the hollow at the backbone and hacking all the ribs from the backbone down to the loins, and drawing out the lungs; and he gave him to Odin as an offering for his victory.'<sup>73</sup>

Frank offered her own alternative translation of the stanza in *Knútsdrápa* with an interpretation which supposedly had eluded Icelandic writers and scholars of the twelfth century. She would have us believe that through a judicious rejigging of Old Icelandic syntax, we ought to read: 'And Ivar who dwelt at York, had Ælla's back cut by an eagle',<sup>74</sup> so in her interpretation, it was the eagle that did the carving, and what we really have here is an allusion to the slaying of King Ælla in battle and the subsequent eating of his corpse by the bird of battle. Deprived of the

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 332–43.

<sup>73</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 191.

<sup>74</sup> Frank, 'Viking atrocity and Skaldic verse', p. 337.

evidence from this crucial early stanza from *Knútsdrápa*, the case for believing any longer in ‘blood-eagling’ might collapse. Frank’s interpretation of the key stanza was but the opinion of one linguist, and in her own words, her conclusions boiled down to this: ‘Ella’s back may have been incised with the picture of an eagle, but it could also have been lacerated by a real one.’<sup>75</sup> Her analysis of Norse references to *blóðörn* or the ‘blood eagle’ quickly ran into the sands of antiquarian debate on how eagles may or may not devour their prey, and she was challenged relentlessly in her interpretation of the textual evidence by Einarsson.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, her concentration on textual evidence for one particular rite of human sacrifice in Old Norse culture to the exclusion of all others, and her parading of linguistic detail, created a false impression that her conclusions had more wide-ranging significance for historians than they actually had. I have never at any point suggested that Archbishop Ælfheah of Canterbury, who was murdered by Northmen in 1012, was subjected to the blood-eagle ritual by his Scandinavian captors,<sup>77</sup> but I have suggested, given that human sacrifice was practised throughout Scandinavia before its conversion to Christianity, that the murder of captives such as Ælfheah may well have had a ritual significance. Furthermore, in relation to the ‘blood-eagle’ rite itself, it was clearly Frank and her self-proclaimed ‘pro-viking opposition’ who had become obsessed with the demonic aspects of Norse paganism.<sup>78</sup> We have only to turn to the pages of Adam of Bremen (d. 1076) to appreciate that the ritual slaughter of human beings was still a regular and bloody spectacle at Old Uppsala as late as his time.<sup>79</sup> My own views are best summed up by Einarsson, who reiterated in 1990 what I first stated back in 1977:

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>76</sup> ‘With this [i.e. Frank’s interpretation of the ‘blood-eagle’ stanza in *Knútsdrápa*] I am convinced that no experienced Icelandic reader of skaldic poetry could possibly agree’, B. Einarsson, ‘*De Normannorum Atrocitate*, or on the execution of royalty by the aquiline method’, *Saga-Book*, 22, i (1986), pp. 79–82, and p. 80. To which Frank modestly replied: ‘It, is of course, an undeniable advantage [for Bjarni Einarsson] to have Icelandic as mother tongue’ (R. Frank, ‘The blood-eagle again’, *Saga-Book*, 22, v (1988), p. 288). The debate strayed ever further off the point with Frank denying any need to discover an ‘ornithological reality’ in skaldic verse (R. Frank, ‘Ornithology and interpretation of Skaldic verse’, *Saga-Book*, 23, ii (1990), pp. 81–3), but with Einarsson sticking to his scholarly guns (B. Einarsson, ‘The blood-eagle once more: two notes’, *Saga-Book*, 23, ii (1990), pp. 80–1).

<sup>77</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles*, p. 214.

<sup>78</sup> Frank, ‘Viking atrocity and Skaldic verse’, p. 332.

<sup>79</sup> *Magistri Adam Bremensis: Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (IV, 27), ed. R. Buchner in *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters*, ix (Darmstadt, 1968), pp. 470–2.

It goes without saying that Sighvatr's verse is not proof that King Ella [of Northumbria] was in fact executed by the aquiline method [in 867] some 150 years and more before the lines were composed. But it must be counted evidence showing that there was a Scandinavian tradition about it already in the first third of the eleventh century, as there probably also was about the killing of Hálfðan, son of Haraldr hárfagri [king of Norway, c. AD 930], by the same method.<sup>80</sup>

No historian who seeks a genuine understanding of pre-Christian Norse society can ignore the inherent brutality in Norse accounts of ritual slayings, even if they do date from the thirteenth century, when there is at least the possibility that they are accurately interpreting earlier eleventh-century texts. And whether or not Irish, English or Frankish victims of Norse savagery were subjected to 'blood-eagling' matters less than the realization that Northmen practised rites of human sacrifice on their captives until late into the eleventh century if not beyond. What was that 'bloody spectacle' (*visum cruentum*) which the Northmen put on for the benefit of the besieged Frankish garrison at Paris in 885?<sup>81</sup> That is impossible to say, but we need at least to be aware of the probable rites involved – the same Norse 'rites' perhaps which Pippin II of Aquitaine embraced in 864 in place of his Christianity, and which he paid for with his life before a Frankish tribunal at Pîtres. And when we read in the Annals of Ulster that in 833 'Lough Brickland (Co. Down) was plundered to the detriment of Congalach son of Echaid, and he was killed afterwards at the ships'<sup>82</sup> we need no longer concur with commentators such as Ó Corráin or Nelson, and assume that captives were either 'not much the worse of their experience'<sup>83</sup> or that they were killed in custody because they might have offended their hosts by offering 'some resistance' – for which there is no evidence.<sup>84</sup>

Not all Northmen were hostile to Christianity *per se*, but however violently the native aristocracy may have behaved towards Christian cult-centres, it is the exception rather than the rule to find Christian rulers perpetrating acts of sacrilege against the persons of individual churchmen, and equally exceptional to find evidence for the desecration of sacred relics. Attacks against monastic townships and inter-monastic feuding were another matter, involving, as they did, secular power struggles and infiltration and interference by rival segments of the warrior aristocracy in church politics. It was largely Norse greed, rather

<sup>80</sup> Einarsson, '*De Normannorum Atrocitate*', p. 80; Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, pp. 190–4.

<sup>81</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Vikings in Francia*, p. 10. <sup>82</sup> *AU*, s.a. 832, pp. 290–1.

<sup>83</sup> Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 90.

<sup>84</sup> Nelson (ed.), *Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 91, n. 10, where that writer suggests Bishop Immo of Noyon was slain in 859 by Northmen as a captive on the march because he may have offered them resistance. There is no evidence to support such an idea. Besides, any resistance would have been extremely difficult if not impossible for captives who had been surprised in a night attack.