

Vikings' demise on foreign soil – a case of ethnic cleansing?

The discovery of two mass
graves containing the
remains of Scandinavians
in Anglo-Saxon England

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Abstract

The discovery of two mass graves in England in 2010 containing the remains of Scandinavian men in their prime from the Viking age against the historical backdrop of Anglo-Saxon England has elicited questions as to whether or not they were victims of ethnic cleansing. Literature studies combined with the results from the post-excavation analyses render the conclusion that the victims in the grave, most likely, were not subjected to ethnic cleansing. It is more plausible that they were Scandinavian mercenaries who were executed during an intense period where a failing England was desperately paying for its own conquest with the Danegeld. The historical documents give the impression that a nation-wide genocide against Danes took place, however the archaeological material and analyses do not fully support this scenario.

Keywords: Vikings, Anglo-Saxons, England, ethnic cleansing, mass grave, St Brice's day, Scandinavia, isotope analysis

Abstrakt

Mot bakgrunden av den anglosaxiska perioden i England har upptäckten 2010 i England av två massgravar innehållande kvarlevor av vikingatida skandinaviska män väckt frågor om huruvida offren var utsatta för etnisk rensning. Resultat från analyser av materialet från utgrävningarna i kombination med litteraturstudier leder till slutsatsen att individerna i graven sannolikt inte var offer för etnisk rensning. Det förefaller mer troligt att männen var legosoldater vilka avrättades under den intensiva period då det skuldtyngda England betalade stora summor danagäld till vikingarna. I de historiska källorna beskrivs hur massmord av daner ägde rum över hela landet, dock finns det inget i det arkeologiska materialet eller i analysresultaten som stöder en sådan händelseutveckling.

Nyckelord: vikingar, anglosaxer, England, etnisk rensning, massgrav, Sankt Brice, Skandinavien, isotopanalys

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1 Introduction

This essay focuses on a set of questions associated with the discoveries of two mass graves, presumably containing the remains of “Vikings”, in 2008 (in Oxford) and in 2009 (at Ridgeway Hill) in England. The archaeological context and various post-excavation analyses imply that the mass graves contain the remains of men of Scandinavian origin and that these men had fallen victim to brutal deaths. The historical context, such as the events recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, suggests that these massacres could have been part of an “ethnic cleansing” carried out by the Anglo-Saxon population around 1000 AD. The reporting of these discoveries evokes several questions regarding the use of the concept ethnic cleansing and the term Viking, questions which are discussed in the essay.

1.1 *The aim of the study*

The aim of this essay is to analyse the reasons for why a group of male Scandinavians met their fate in two mass graves during the Viking age (most generally taken to run from c. AD 800 to c. 1050) in Anglo-Saxon England. The central question around which the analysis revolves is:

- Were they victims of ethnical cleansing?

This in turn gives rise to a set of related questions such as:

- Can the term ethnical cleansing be applied to this case, i.e. does it have a contemporary meaning or is it merely a modern invention?
- Was the documented Anglo-Saxon antagonism against Scandinavians manifested in reality or is it merely exaggerated propaganda?
- Were the victims Vikings and what do we mean by Vikings?
- Are both mass graves the results of ethnic cleansing or do they differ?
- Is the current analysis of the archaeological material sufficient to support the hypothesis of ethnic cleansing?

1.2 *Material and methods*

As part of this essay both empirical and literature studies are conducted in order to answer the question in focus. The material consists of the archaeological material and written sources. The archaeological material is simply the assemblage of skeletons in the two mass graves as the graves were devoid of any other artifacts. The written sources consist of primary sources and secondary sources. The former include the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (the major source), the Anglo-Saxon Charter as well as William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England, all of which are available online. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle online is based on the translation by Reverend James Ingram in 1823. Many of the primary sources or archival data are also referred to by the secondary sources, which are works of other historians and archaeologists as well as news reports. Yet one secondary source is a documentary

(Vetenskapens värld, episode 5) on the mass grave in Weymouth, which aired on Swedish national TV in February 2012.

A few words on the written sources are warranted. Much of the information on Viking raids in England comes from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Naturally, this chronicle cannot claim to fairly represent a comprehensive or even accurate account of the principal Viking-related events of England at the time. Firstly, the chronicle has its focus on the South of England, in particular the Wessex kingdom. Secondly, there are lacunae in the chronology of significant events when compared with other contemporary sources. For example, the Annals of St Bertin (a Continental European source), mentions a major Viking attack on England in 844 AD, whereas the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not (Logan 2005, p.125). Thirdly, the account of the Vikings must be seen through prejudiced Anglo-Saxon glasses and was likely, at times, a form of wartime propaganda. The Anglo-Saxons were not unfamiliar with conflict and violence, but, after all, the Vikings were not only brutal, they were also heathen and foreign. Likewise should the other historical documents be seen from their authors' eyes, coloured as they were by the circumstances at the time. Thus, one must take care when making interpretations of the past based on a few lines in the written records.

A descriptive and qualitative analysis is made to address the question whether or not the victims in the mass graves were subjected to ethnical cleansing. In order to investigate why the victims' lives were taken one must find out who they were, where and when they met their demise. Hence, empirical data from the post-excavation analysis of the graves is used, including the data from osteological analysis and isotope analyses.

One drawback with the choice of the particular archaeological material is that there are still on-going investigations and many results are yet unpublished. A major source of information on the excavations and analyses are the websites of Thames Valley Archaeological Services and Oxford Archaeology, the companies which excavated the two graves.

1.2.1 Osteological analysis

Osteological analyses of skeletal remains can reveal much of an individual's characteristics, including age, sex and body height. Visual inspection and X-ray provide clues on a variety of things such as the individual's state of health, profession and manner of death. The state of the bones can tell whether someone sustained injuries through violence, accidents or as a result of medical surgery (Düking, 1999). This type of forensic evidence also gives insight into how, and what type of, a weapon was used for executions. Swords not only produce marks that are distinctly different from those resulting from knives, but different types of swords leave characteristic marks which can be used to infer the type of swords used (Lewis 2008, p. 2007).

1.2.2 Isotope analyses

Analyses of isotopes are increasingly used to complement the archaeological studies. Analyses based on various naturally occurring isotopes in organic

material can be used to date material, to study the migration of humans and animals across isotopically different terrains and to determine their diet (and thus subsistence) and place of origin. The structure and diversity of human populations can be inferred from the archaeological record, such as a difference in the burial rites and grave goods within a site. Isotope analysis can contribute to the assessment of culturally distinct populations, and indeed immigrant populations in a particular area (Evans, Stoodley and Chenery, 2006).

1.2.2.1 Radiocarbon dating

Developed in the 1940's and a "Nobel Prize winner", radiocarbon dating is one of the most used methods in archaeology. Radiocarbon dating is based on the natural radioactive carbon (^{14}C) cycle in which all living organisms (and thus carbonaceous) participate. Radioactive carbon is produced in the upper atmosphere and all living organisms absorb radioactive carbon as part of their diet. The ^{14}C intake during the lifetime of the organism is in equilibrium with the activity in the atmosphere (true for almost all organisms). At the time of death the absorption stops and the ^{14}C present in the organisms begins to decay exponentially. Hence, then time of death can be calculated by measuring the remaining amount of ^{14}C and compare it with the amount present in the living organism (using calibrated references as the atmospheric ^{14}C concentrations have varied slightly with time). The radiocarbon dating method can be applied to bone material by extracting the protein collagen (the organic component of bone tissue), or more specifically one of its amino acids, hydroxyproline, which constitute 10% of the collagen. Today this method renders fairly accurate dating results, displayed as intervals with standard deviations (Possnert, 1999).

Notwithstanding the impact radiocarbon dating has had on the archaeological research, it is difficult to get a precise result due to contamination and underestimation of error in the laboratory. One source of error is the marine reservoir effect. This effect is due to the fact that organisms living in aquatic environments (reservoirs) do not have a ^{14}C intake in equilibrium with the activity in the atmosphere, hence affecting the apparent age of the material (Possnert, 1999). Thus, the radiocarbon dates of humans on marine diets are generally older than contemporary "terrestrial" dates and require some sort of marine calibration curve. The marine reservoir offset can at its worst result in dates that are 400 years too old based on a totally marine diet (the adjustment for humans remains from the Mesolithic Oronsay in Scotland is 400 years). However, due to local variations in the effect there is no universally applicable marine calibration curve (Renfrew and Bahn 2008, p.148).

1.2.2.2 Tracing the place of origin

Isotopes of the two elements strontium and oxygen can be analysed in order to trace an individual's place of origin. Strontium (Sr) is absorbed by humans and animals through food and is deposited in the skeleton and teeth. Tooth enamel undergoes virtually no compositional changes after its formation during the childhood years and is resilient to contamination after death. As the Sr-isotope composition in the enamel (the fraction of the isotopes $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$) is related to the biologically available Sr in the area of food production, this Sr-level constitutes a sort of signature of the individual's childhood place of residence.

Whereas the Sr-isotope system varies with local geology, the oxygen (O) isotopic system is a function of the climate. The level of O-isotopes in rainwater varies geographically and with weather. O-isotopes are absorbed and fixed into the bones and teeth mainly through the ingestion of drinking water. Hence, O-isotope ratios ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) in an individual's tooth enamel reflect the O-isotope composition in the rainwater at the individual's place of origin (Müldner, Chenery and Eckardt 2011, p. 282).

1.2.2.3 You are what you eat

Measurements of carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) isotopes in the skeletal remains of an individual, mainly collagen in bones and teeth (dentine), are useful when reconstructing the diet of that individual (Privat and O'Connell 2002, pp. 780). C-isotope ratios in the collagen reflect the ecosystem from which the food originated, for example one may distinguish between diets based on food from marine versus terrestrial ecosystems. Ratios of N-isotopes give an indication of the relation between plant and animal protein in the diet, thus placing the individual in the food chain. The isotope (C and N) composition of skeletal collagen provides information on the average ingestion of dietary protein during the final of years of the individual's life. The carbon isotope values in dentine, on the other hand, represent the childhood diet (from 0 to 12 years of age), whereas the diet over the last several years is reflected in the C-isotope values in bone apatite (Kosiba, Tykot & Carlsson 2007, p. 401). Thus, the analysis of samples taken from one and the same individual can yield different results depending on the part of the skeleton from which the sample is taken.

1.3 Delimitations

The purpose of this study is not aimed at conclusively solving the case of the two mass graves, i.e., who the victims were and why they ended up in these graves. Nor does it seek to give a comprehensive and detailed overview of Anglo-Saxon England during the Viking Age and the Viking raids. The scope of the essay is limited to addressing the question of ethnic cleansing in relation to these two discoveries.

1.4 Outline

In chapter two the discovery of and the research on the mass graves are presented. In the following chapter is described the historical context of the "meeting" between Vikings and Anglo-Saxons in the form of a short historical background. In chapter four the reader will find a discussion focusing on the posed questions in this chapter. Conclusions and reflexions and further potential questions are finally presented in chapter five.

2 Two discoveries of brutal massacres

The background to this essay is two separate discoveries of mass graves in England, presumably containing the remains of Vikings who met their end on English soil during the Anglo-Saxon period a millennium ago. Below is presented an overview of the two graves in Oxford and in Weymouth. The archaeological context and the post-excavation analyses are described.

2.1 *Violent deaths in Oxford*

In 2008 a team of archaeologists from Thames Valley Archaeological Services (abbreviated TVAS) carried out an excavation of a site in Kendrew Quadrangle, formerly Queen Elizabeth House, St John's College, between St Giles and Blackhall Road in Oxford. The excavation was part of the planning requirements for the construction of a new college building and on behalf of St John's College.

2.1.1 A bundle of skeletons

Deposits from several time periods were found during the dig but the most interesting discovery was a mass grave containing a bundle of skeletons. The grave was not part of an organised cemetery and there was no evidence of a formal burial: no grave goods or finds of any sort were found. Features above the grave date from the 12th century; the area was part of yard areas of medieval buildings. The mass grave was located on top of a ditch containing pottery from the Roman period as well as the Bronze Age (TVAS, 2012). The henge ditch was constructed during the late Neolithic and was circular, covering about 150 m in diameter. Sometime during the Anglo-Saxon time period at least 33 male and 2 juvenile bodies had been dumped on top of another in the top of the nearly silted-up ditch (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.84).

The remains were gradually unearthed after the first body part was found at 80 cm below ground level. In total, 34 to 38 individuals were uncovered at the site, all men in their prime and subjected to violence. Several analyses have been performed in order to establish who the victims were and under what circumstances they met their end. The date of the grave itself was estimated to somewhere between 100 BC and 1300 AD (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.84). Radiocarbon dating of the bones places the remains in the Anglo-Saxon period or Viking age England, more specifically in the 10th century. Modeled ages of the three dated skeletons from the grave gave an age period from 893 to 978 AD (Pollard, et al., 2012).



Figure 1 Overview of excavated skeletons. Courtesy of TVAS 2010.

2.1.2 The bones tell a tale

The osteological analysis of the bones from the grave revealed that all the men suffered severe injuries such as blade and puncture wounds to the head, pelvis and ribs (from stabbing in the back) as well as decapitation (and attempts to decapitation). Charring was found on some bones, but not in the soil surrounding them, suggesting burning of the bodies before burial. No evidence of cut marks on the forearms (associated with defense) was found, which would have indicated that the victims were trying to flee (Ord, 2011). Further, it was concluded that there were at least 35 male adults, of whom many had healed wounds, a characteristic of seasoned warriors (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.84). From analysing the muscle-attachment areas on the bones skeletons one could deduce that these men had very robust physiques. They were also men in their prime, aged between 16 and late 30s (Keys, 2010).

2.1.3 Isotopes tell a tale

A stable isotope analysis of some of the individuals was performed to determine the place of origin of the victims (Pollard, et al., 2012). C- and N-isotopes in the bone collagen (19 samples) were measured. Using dental enamel (13 and 6 samples) C-, O- and Sr-isotopes were also measured. The results from the analysis were compared to those of Viking sites as well as Anglo-Saxon sites and indicated a diet containing a higher percentage of seafood compared to that of a typical Anglo-Saxon diet. The victims show some degree of affinity with isotope data from purely Viking sites such as Birka in Sweden and Newark Bay

in Orkney (data which clearly differ from Anglo-Saxon sites' data), but the results are not conclusive (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.91). In particular, the N-isotope values of the three individuals that were subjected to radiocarbon dating indicated a significant marine protein dietary intake. Thus, the estimates of the dates could be to "old", i.e., the burial could potentially have taken place a few decades later (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.92). In addition, the results from the O- and Sr-isotope analysis show that a few individuals could have an origin from Scandinavia (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.98).

The results are intriguing since the victims were found in inland Britain and may, coupled with the victims' robust physiques, indicate that they may have been first or second generation Scandinavians (Sloan, 2010).

2.1.4 The case for ethnic cleansing

The archaeological team responsible for the discovery initially suggested the possibility that the mass grave is a result of ethnic cleansing of Scandinavians by Anglo-Saxons. More specifically, the mass grave was associated with the slaughter that took place on St Brice's Day, November 13 in 1002 AD (Sloan, 2010). According to historical documents, by order of King Aethelred the Unready, the inhabitants of Oxford, performed a massacre on Danes this very day (see chapter 3.4.1). The location of the grave, the manner of death (execution style), the dating of the victims and the analyses that indicate a Scandinavian origin of the victims all point to this hypothesis. However, in view of the more recent analyses, such as the radiocarbon dating, which places the time of death a few decades earlier, and a comparison with the other mass grave found in Weymouth, this hypothesis is now in question. There are similarities in the results from the isotope analyses between the two mass graves in Oxford and Weymouth. Hence, a new hypothesis is that the victims in Oxford too represent a mixed group of Scandinavian raiders who were rounded up and executed (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.97). Notwithstanding the similarities between the two graves, there is however still the possibility that the dates are too early due to the marine reservoir offset.

2.2 *Naked deaths near Weymouth*

Another mass grave was discovered in England a year later. A team from Oxford Archaeology uncovered a mass grave in June 2009 at Ridgeway Hill, near Weymouth in rural Dorset during an excavation in an area where a new relief road was to be constructed (Williams, 2009). The new road, running from Dorchester to the seaside town Weymouth, is nick-named the Olympic Highway as it is intended to ease transport congestion for the Olympic Games in London 2012 and incidentally also runs along an ancient Roman way.

2.2.1 Death on the highway

In the burial pit 51 skulls had been placed in a neat pile separate from the decapitated bodies, which were randomly distributed in the pit. There were more skeletons than skulls uncovered, indicating that a few skulls were missing from the grave. The burial pit was located near an ancient Roman way and in a quarry, later dated to the Roman period after examining shards of pottery. No

other pieces of evidence as to the victims' clothing were discovered, indicating that they had been stripped naked (BBC, 2010). Using radiocarbon dating, the remains of this second mass grave are likewise dated to the Anglo-Saxon period, the latest estimation being between AD 970 and AD 1025 (Dorset County Council, 2011). Furthermore, the grave is located in a place typical for executions during this period: near a main road and a parish boundary (Oxford Archaeology, 2009).



Figure 2 Excavation of burial pit at Ridgeway Hill, near Weymouth. The figure shows the distinct placing of the skulls relative to the skeletons. Courtesy of Oxford Archaeology 2010

2.2.2 The osteological analysis

As in the mass grave in Oxford, the remains belonged to tall robust men in their prime, with the majority in their late teens to 25 years of age and a few in their 30s. Analysis of the skulls concluded that a very sharp weapon, most likely a sword, had been used to sever the heads from the bodies, though there were no clean cuts. A few other wounds were identified, including on the pelvis, the hands and the chest (Oxford Archaeology, 2010). The bones showed signs of hard physical labour but no signs of defence or a battle prior to the execution. Nor has any old battle wounds been identified. One individual also appeared to have had a handicap in the form of a limp (Vetenskapens värld, 2012). But for the robust physique, there was one feature that inextricably linked the remains to Scandinavia, namely file marks (grooves) on the teeth of one individual. Similar teeth marks (perhaps as part of a ritual) have been seen on teeth from individuals in graves from the Viking age in Sweden (Dorset County Council, 2011).

2.2.3 The isotope analysis points to Scandinavia

The isotope analysis was carried out by NERC Isotope Geosciences Laboratories in Keyworth, south of Nottingham. The teeth from ten individuals in the mass grave were subjected to isotope analysis including strontium, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen (Oxford Archaeology, 2010). The results from the isotope analysis indicated that the individuals, whose samples were taken, grew up in an area with geology, a climate and a diet that is inconsistent with the area where they were buried. Their diet had been based on high protein content and the climate in which they had grown up was colder than in Britain, both pointing to Scandinavia. The results from the strontium isotope analysis displayed a great variation, thereby indicating different places of origin within Scandinavia, one individual is suggested to hail from north of the Arctic Circle. Based on the Sr-isotope levels, suggested places of origin include western and South Norway, and the West coast of Sweden and possibly Birka in eastern Sweden (Vetenskapens värld, 2012).

2.2.4 A case of brutal execution

The fact that some individuals in the group of victims were very likely Scandinavians, together with the gender, age and physique of the victims, point to the theory that they were invading Vikings. In addition, the dating of the burial indicates that the grave was a result of a conflict with invading Vikings during the reign of king Aethelred (Dorset County Council, 2011). Their manner of death gives the impression that they were discovered and taken by surprise and subsequently executed. The local Anglo-Saxon population at the time would probably not have hesitated to subject the Viking menace to a brutal on the spot execution. Another theory is that they were Scandinavians who had settled in England, or descendants of such settlers (Williams, 2009). This theory is supported by the lack of evidence of old battle wounds on the skeletons and the presence of a limp man in the party. It is not what would be expected from a warring party. If the executors were Anglo-Saxon, this could be a case of ethnic cleansing. A third suggested theory is that the group of Scandinavians were victims of a massacre carried out by other Vikings (Vetenskapens värld, 2012).

3 Vikings meet Anglo-Saxons

The Scandinavians, mainly Danes, sailed around the beginning of the 9th century west across the sea to assault the Eastern coast of England and began the era of “Viking” invasions in English history. Anglo-Saxon England during the beginning of the Viking Age was not united and consisted of four independent kingdoms: East Anglia, Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria with a strongly hierarchical society (Richards 2000, p.17). The Scandinavian state formation was also in its infancy at this time. In order to understand the context of the two mass graves one must take a closer look at the interaction between Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavians during this period in time.

3.1 *Traces of Vikings on English soil*

Several sources give witness to the Vikings’ activities on English soil, such as historical documents, archaeological evidence, place names and rune stones.

3.1.1 Documents talk

The Vikings themselves did not write down any contemporary accounts of the events (rune stones excluded). Though not the sole historical account of the Vikings in Anglo-Saxon England, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle opens a time window to Viking Age England. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does in fact consist of several earlier chronicles which were compiled into one during the end of the 9th century AD.

The annals of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in the year 789, mentions the first Viking raids with the following ominous words:

“And in his days came first three ships of the Northmen from the land of robbers.”

It is not necessarily a fact that the first raids started in 789, this is merely a place holder in history as the first recording of the raids occur in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the year of 789. This particular recording further recounts how the King’s reeve Beauduheard rode out to meet the Northmen, arriving in three ships from Hordaland in Norway, and was slain (Larsson 2008, p.37).

A few years later the infamous raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne took place. The annals of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in the year 793, mentions these raids: “...the ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God’s church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter.”

However, in the following year 794 the Viking army was not quite as successful as described in the Chronicle. The heathen army staged their attack at the mouth of the river Wear in Northumbria where one of their leaders was killed and many of the crew drowned in a storm. The survivors were shown no mercy and were executed as soon as they reached the shore (Larsson 2008, p. 40).

3.1.2 A Viking was here

The traces of the Vikings are also represented by the Scandinavian influenced place names in England. The impact of the Scandinavian invasions a

millennium ago on England and its society is reflected in the local nomenclature that still exists today, such as names of villages (ending with *-by*, such as *Whitby*) and words in the English language (*bread-bröd*) (Burenhult 1999, pp. 352). In general, the geographic distribution of Scandinavian place names is corroborated by the written sources, with a few exceptions. As expected, the majority of such places names are found within the area known at the time as the Danelaw. Scandinavian place names have been categorized into four types (Richards 2000, pp.45). The first three categories include names ending in *-by*, *-thorp* and the Grimston hybrid (a combination of Scandinavian and English such as Grimston and Olaveshide). The fourth category includes changes in the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon place names. However, using these place names as evidence for permanent colonization and extensive settlement is criticized by Richards. Firstly, some of the Scandinavian place names may have been adopted earlier as there were Scandinavian elements in the Anglo-Saxon invaders, and secondly, many of the names are just new names for earlier sites, not new locations (Richards 2000, p.47).

3.1.3 Archaeological evidence

The majority of our knowledge of the Viking activities in England derives from historical records as the archaeological evidence is scarce. Cemeteries, loot, hoards, fortifications and rune stones constitute the major part of the material record. Perhaps mass graves can now be added to that record as well. Remains of truly Scandinavian settlements or farmsteads in England from this period are few, if any. The cultural identification of rural find is made difficult since they are so few and any successful farmsteads likely grew into medieval villages (Richards 2000, p.49).

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recounts battles between Viking armies and the local inhabitants however, there is little archaeological evidence for this. One such piece of evidence that has been claimed to constitute the remains of an army is the burial deposit in a mound found in a vicarage garden in Repton, Derbyshire (Richards 2000, p. 25). The assemblage of bones, dated to originate from the latter half of the 9th century AD, consisted of the remains of adult robust men. Radiocarbon dating indicated that two assemblages from two different time periods had been placed together and the types of skeletal parts (mainly larger bones such as femurs) suggests that the remains were gathered from other places. It has been suggested that this deposit could be the remains of the Viking great army that over-wintered in 873-874 AD, which according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle made camp in Repton that winter. Since the victims did not die from battle wounds it is possible that the army was afflicted with disease and that they died during the campaign. Additionally, around the church Viking burials were found, with one containing an adult robust male of importance who had been buried with sword, scabbard and wearing a Thor's hammer (Graham-Campbell (ed.) 1994, p.128).

In burials, especially pagan burials, the identity becomes archaeologically visible. Several graves within the Danelaw region reveal burials with grave-goods (some of which are Scandinavian artefacts), representing a pagan burial ritual as Christians do not include goods in the graves. (Graham-Campbell (ed.)

1994, p. 135) The perceived threat of the Viking raids to London at the time is starkly illustrated in the hoards containing weapons found in the river Thames, including spear-heads and ax-blades specifically developed for battle with the Vikings (Keynes 2007, p. 157).

The extension of the payments of Danegeld is starkly represented in the hoards found in Scandinavia dating from the period 990-1040. More coins have been found in these hoards than are known from the whole of England (Richards 2000, p.39). Further evidence of the contacts with England includes objects found in Scandinavian graves such as Anglo-Saxon swords, mounts and rings.

3.1.4 Written in stone

Contemporary sources in Scandinavia recounting the Scandinavian meeting with Anglo-Saxon England comprise the inscriptions on rune stones. There are about 30 known rune inscriptions in the Nordic countries that recount travels to England. The majority of these inscriptions are found in Sweden, mostly in the areas of Uppland, Södermanland and Småland (Larsson 2008, p.205). One example is the Swedish rune stone found in Yttergårde in Uppland, a commemoration to a man named Ulf who was fortunate to receive no less than three gelds in England (Larsson 2008, p.206). Several other rune stones in the south of Sweden speak of family members who “ended their days in England”. One man called Gunnar, probably hailing from Nöbbelsholm in Småland, was laid to rest in a stone coffin in Bath in England by his brother Helge according to the commemorative rune stone (Larsson 2008, p.208-209).

3.2 *Two centuries of Viking visits*

“That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld

You never get rid of the Dane” (Rudyard Kipling, Poem: Dane-Geld)

The Viking activities on English soil lasted for a period of 230 years, changing England as previous invaders like Romans and Saxons had done. The character of the activities also changed during this period and thanks to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle it is possible to distinguish different phases during the two centuries.

Richards identifies four phases during which these activities occurred, each with different characteristics (Richards, 2000). The first phase can be said to span over the years 789 – 864 and is characterised as small groups of Vikings involved in sporadic raids and looting.

The second phase, stretching from 865-896, seems to involve large armies arriving in England, armies which permanently colonised the land. Phase 2 marks the advent of the “Great Army” in 866 and represents a change from sporadic attacks to campaigning armies (Graham-Campbell (ed.) 1994, p.125).

Between phase 2 and 3 (954-980 AD) there was a respite from attacks and a time of peace. In year 980 the raids on England were renewed and now included extortion of tribute (the famous Danegeld). These new Viking armies included men from modern day Sweden and Norway as well, in addition to Danes.

The final phase was the political conquest, between 1013 and 1066, as the Viking armies came with the purpose to conquer, which they also did. England was for a period of time ruled by the Danes Sveinn and Cnut (Richards, 2000).

Logan describes the Viking activities in England as waves instead of phases. The first wave (during the period 835-954) was shaped by seasonal surprise raids and colonising attacks. The second Viking wave took place between 980-1035. This time the Vikings' campaigns were undertaken for national reasons and the Danegeld became a hallmark of this wave. At the end of Cnut's reign in 1035 the second wave came to rest (Logan, 2005).

3.3 *The motives behind the raids*

The nearly 200 year long period of Scandinavian invasions and ensuing settlements took place along the East Coast of England, involving the kingdoms of York, Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex and East Anglia. The famous Viking longships certainly played a vital role in the success of the raiding, but they were not the reasons for these foreign expeditions.

Fellows Jensen outlines several proposed theories on the driving forces behind the raids and the settlements. There is agreement on the fact that the Scandinavian immigration must have been quite extensive in order to influence the English society, such as place names. As to the main motives behind the raids, there is less agreement. It has been suggested that the Danes carried out raids as a means to accumulate capital (the Danegeld ransom) to acquire land and settle down. This land hunger was to have been prompted by a population explosion in Scandinavia at the time. This explanation has been refuted in favour of the theory that the Danish Vikings were merely pirates who used the raids as a threat and forced the local population to buy peace. In this respect, the Danes resorted to colonisation when they could no longer exploit the land. As a comparison it has been noted that the Norwegian Vikings were driven by their hunger for new land (Fellows Jensen, 1975).

Richards also lists various causes for the Viking expansion including population growth in Scandinavia, escape from tyrannical power in Norway, struggle between elite groups in Denmark and acquisition of wealth and land (Richards 2000, pp.18). Yet one argument is that the early Viking raids (early 9th century), apart from being acts to acquire wealth by chieftains, also likely were part of the conflict between heathen Germanic cultures in the north and Christian kingdoms in the south and west (Myhre 1993; 1998 cited in Richards 2000, p.18).

According to Larsson, to go raiding gave glory to the young men in Scandinavia, on one hand due to the acquisition of wealth, and on the other hand due to the honour of being in battle. It was something than was expected by the young upper class males during the Viking age Scandinavian society (Larsson 2008, p. 62).

The Scandinavians did not suddenly appear on the coast of the British Isles, as it may seem in the written records, but was rather an extension of the political, cultural and economic contacts that were established before the eve of the

Viking age (Forte, Oram and Pedersen 2005, p.1). An example is how the commercial expansion in north-western Europe and the commercial links between north and west paved the way for piracy and raiding. Merchant ships sailed into the Baltic Sea to procure the region's main produce such as fur and amber from the trading centres. Hence, this made the Scandinavians familiar with not only the western European sailing ships but also the lands (Sawyer 2001, pp. 3).

As noted by both Richards (2000) and Logan (2005) the motives for the raids changed during the period of about 250 years with the Vikings switching between raiding, trading and settling. Important to note is that during this fairly long period of time the Scandinavian society underwent several changes as well, therefore influencing the motives for raiding. The early raids may have been focused on acquisition of wealth by chieftains, but as the Scandinavian state building proceeded, the focus shifted to the acquisition of land by individuals and later by kings (leader of states).

3.3.1 From hammer to cross

The Viking or Scandinavian interaction with Anglo-Saxon England included everything from raiding, trading to permanent colonisation. Given the question of ethnic cleansing in association with the two mass graves it is particularly interesting to study the assimilation of the Scandinavians to Anglo-Saxon society. The Anglo-Saxons were Christians who used Christian cemeteries for their funerals. The Scandinavians were heathens, hailing to the belief in *aesir* and *vanir*. Both peoples were, however, familiar with farming economy and originated from the same Germanic sphere of culture. It has been argued that the Vikings settled in two steps; first as warrior settlers and later as settlers that were protected by a military shield (Logan 2005, p.147). The assimilation into Anglo-Saxon society was facilitated by the rapid conversion to Christianity; there were only two to three generations from hammer to cross. Several Viking chieftains were baptised (such as Guthrum in 878 AD) and many coins that were issued during this time period had both cross and hammer (Logan 2005, p.152).

3.3.2 The Danelaw – the place where Danish law held sway

The Viking or rather Danish settlement in England was predominantly in the northern and eastern part of England, the so called *Danelaw*, a term officially used well after the Norman Conquest. This referred to a geographical area where Danish law was applied and was a result of a treaty in 884 between the Danish Viking chieftain Guthrum and Alfred the Great, King of Wessex. According to the treaty, northeast England was divided between Wessex and the Danish part (including Northumbria, East Anglia and parts of Essex and Mercia) along an old Roman highway (Ingelman-Sundberg 2004, p. 61). The Anglo-Saxon society in the Danelaw was established by the mid 10th century, however the term was not used until 1008. Under the kings Aethelred and Edgar there were laws that illustrated a certain distinction between Danes and Anglo-Saxons in the mid 10th century (Richards 2000, p. 13).

Many warriors settled down in the Danelaw and Danes immigrated along with their families to farm the land. Craftsmen and merchants immigrated to the cities in the area and in time the Scandinavians became part of the landowning upper class. Archaeological material from York, the Scandinavian stronghold in the North, gives evidence to the presence of a significant mercantile component in the city's economy during the Viking Age (Logan 2005, p.146). A strong testimony to the Scandinavian dominance in the Danelaw is the lack of documentary information about this particular region after 886 (Graham-Campbell (ed.) 1994, p. 134).

3.4 *English weakness*

The two mass graves have been dated to the period 960 to 1025 AD which is during the second Viking wave or during the third and fourth phases. The mass grave in Oxford has been associated with one particular event that took place during this time period, the massacre on St Brice's day. This warrants a closer look at the historical events in England during this period in time.

The establishment of the Danelaw did not permanently put an end to the Viking raids on English soil. The raids continued most ferociously during the reign of King Aethelred the Unready (meaning ill-advised), who ruled the kingdom of Wessex from 978 to 1016. The success, and persistence, of the Viking raids in England can of course be attributed in part to the cleverly constructed Viking ships, but also to the inherent weakness present in England at the time.

The period between 954 and 980 gave England a rest from the Viking raids during the reign of King Edgar 'the Peaceable', however this peace was not free from internal struggle (Logan 2005, p.22). The invasions recommenced in 980 and the famous Battle of Maldon in 991 starkly represented the English weakness against the Scandinavians. The ruler that had the misfortune to symbolise this weakness was King Aethelred, the Unready, whose rule of England was described by the medieval historian William of Malmesbury described as occupying the kingdom rather than governing it (Keys, 2010).

During the first raids in the middle of the 9th century, England was weakened by the internal strife between the four kingdoms Mercia, York, Wessex and East Anglia (Burenhult 1999, p 352). At the onset of the resurgence of Viking raids in 980 after a peaceful period, the dissensions in King Aethelred's regime weakened the English resistance to the raids as pointed out by Keynes (2007). The Anglo-Saxons warred during the respite from the Viking attacks instead of building up an army and lacked the policy and effective defence against the Vikings (Richards 2000, p.35).

After suffering defeat in the battle at Maldon in 991 the English had to pay tribute money (*gafo*) to the Danish Vikings. The attempts to buy the raiders off resulted in more than 100 000 pounds of silver ending up in Scandinavia. Given the situation where the English continued to pay for a peace that never came and which ended with a Danish king in England, one cynical observation is that England in fact paid for its own conquest (Logan 2005, p.155). The policy of tribute money, beginning after the battle of Maldon, characterises the weakness in Aethelred's regime. The undermining of the English resistance was further

exacerbated by internal dissensions within the King's inner circle including murders and plots (e.g. the murder of the king's high reeve Aefic). According to the royal charter from 993 granting privileges to Abingdon Abbey the raids were seen, among the upper circles, as divine punishment for the wrongdoings of the King himself (Keynes 2007, p.153-154).

The King hired part of the Viking army as mercenaries to protect the English from further raids, however, several such groups of mercenaries turned against the King and broke faith, both in 997 and 1001 (Keynes 2007, p.153-154). Despite the tribute paid by the harrowed English, the Viking raids did not cease and during the period from 991 to 1005 England was assailed by a second wave of Scandinavian invasions.

There were a few attempts by the king to strengthen the fleet and the army in order to defend against the Vikings, however, in waiting for the enemy to attack the courage failed and the end result was a retreat further inland. During the year 1000, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, there was a short hiatus in the attacks as the Viking fleet had sailed to Normandy. Once again, king Aethelred failed to build an effective defence as he chose to wage war in Cumberland and Isle of Man instead (Larsson 2008, p.65). Not surprisingly, the Vikings continued their success the following year.

Hence, with a few exceptions such as the resolute resistance offered at the battle of Maldon, England was perceived as weak. Officials and generals seemed irresolute and incompetent. Not only did the Vikings find a weak England tempting, they were also assisted by the Normans. Descendants of Norsemen and rulers of Normandy, the Normans provided the Vikings with harbours which were convenient resting places after a raid (Cavendish, 2002). The extent of the impact of these invasions on England can be inferred from the English', rather desperate, response to the same. It was during this time that the King found out about a plot where Danish mercenaries conspired to kill him and his counsellors, a knowledge that precipitated the massacre of St Brice's Day (Keynes 2007, pp.153; Keys, 2010).

3.4.1 St Brice's Day Massacre

The massacre of St Brice's day has been recounted in several historical documents. Saint Brice of Tours was a cleric in Merovingian Gaul who succeeded St Martin as Bishop of Tours at the end of the fourth century and who, at his death in 444, was revered as a saint. In England he was commemorated on his festival day on November 13 (Cavendish, 2002). Suffice it to say, the English were fed up with the seemingly relentless Viking onslaught. Their antagonism towards the Danes in view of the geopolitical situation was manifested on the festival of St Brice in 1002 when King Aethelred ordered a massacre of all the Danish men who were in England.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, cited in Logan 2005, p.158):

“The king ordered that all the Danes in England be killed on St Brice’s Day because he had learned that they conspired to kill him and his counsellors and then take possession of his kingdom.”

The massacre that took place in Oxford though was also recorded by the king himself in the royal charter of 1004 that was issued to rebuild the church of St Frideswide's, today Christ Church Cathedral. The charter illustrates the fierce antagonism towards the Danes who were described in not so friendly words as (Anglo-Saxon charter S909, cited by Wates 2002):

“...a decree was sent out by me, with the counsel of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockle [weeds] amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination...”

The charter recounts how the Danish community in Oxford took refuge in the monastery of St Frideswide, which was set on fire by the mob. According to the historian William of Malmesbury, the Dane Gunhilde, sister to Sveyn Forkbeard, King of Denmark, along with her husband Pallig (supposedly a turncoat mercenary) and her son, were said to be amongst the victims of the massacre. Later, perhaps as revenge, King Sveyn’s army of Danes attacked England again (Larsson 2008, p.67).

In the mid twelfth century the historian Henry of Huntington (cited in Logan 2005, pp.158) wrote:

“In a treacherous plot he ordered all the Danes who were living peacefully in England to be put to death on the same day, namely the feast of St Brice. Concerning this crime, in my childhood I heard very old men say that the king had sent secret letters to every city, according to which the English either maimed all the unsuspecting Danes on the same day and hour with their sword, or, suddenly, at the same moment, captured them and destroyed them by fire.”

The almost contemporary historian William of Malmesbury writes (Giles 1847, p.170):

“...besides the Danes, whom, from light suspicion only, he ordered to be all butchered on the same day throughout England; which was a dreadful spectacle to behold; each one compelled to betray his dearest guests, now become dearer from the tenderest connexions of affinity, and to cut short their embraces with the sword..”

4 A case of ethnic cleansing?

The central question is of course if these victims, given both the archaeological context and the historical context, were subject to ethnic cleansing. To be able to discuss the answer to that question a subset of questions need to be addressed.

- Can the term ethnical cleansing be applied to this case, i.e. does it have a contemporary meaning or is it merely a modern invention?
- Was the documented Anglo-Saxon antagonism against Scandinavians manifested in reality or was it merely exaggerated propaganda?
- Were the victims Vikings and what do we mean by Vikings?
- Are both mass graves the results of ethnic cleansing or do they differ?
- Is the current analysis of the archaeological material sufficient to support the hypothesis of ethnic cleansing?

4.1 *The concept ethnic cleansing*

The term ethnic cleansing bears many connotations and is often used synonymously with the terms pogrom and genocide. Genocide is defined in the Cassell Concise English Dictionary as “the intentional and systematic destruction of a national, racial, ethnical or religious group”. Pogrom is defined as “an organized attack, usually with pillage and massacre, upon a class of the population”. These heinous acts against humanity are still carried out today and it would therefore be useful to study similar historical events to be able to understand the driving forces behind (and hopefully prevent) present day actions.

The Geneva conventions consist of four treaties and three additional protocols, all relating to humanitarian treatment and international law. Although the term genocide is not used in the Geneva conventions, the act of genocide would be a breach of the provisions stated in the conventions and would represent war crimes in the context of an international armed conflict (ICRC, 2004).

In 1946 in the United Nations General Assembly, the countries Cuba, India and Panama presented a draft resolution (which led to resolution 96 (I)) that addressed the issue of genocide committed in peacetime and the subjection of the act of genocide to universal jurisdiction (Schabas, 2008). Then on 9 December 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted by Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly. The genocide convention bans any acts that are committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. The convention further declares that the act of genocide itself as well as conspiracy or incitement to commit genocide as well as attempts to commit and complicity in the commission of genocide, all be illegal (UNTS, 1948).

Notwithstanding the lack of a proper legal analysis of the purported mass murders of Scandinavians in Anglo-Saxon England, it is fairly probable that the

declaration of King Aethelred to eradicate all Danes in England in 1002 would today constitute a breach of the provisions in the Genocide Convention. Likewise, the events on St Brice's day that were described in the royal charter issued by the same King two years later, most certainly would be deemed as an act of genocide.

4.2 All Vikings were Scandinavians but not all Scandinavians were Vikings

Who were these victims in their prime and were they in fact Vikings. If so, why were they in England? There are obvious lacunae in the historical and archaeological records as to the variety of nationalities, leadership, organisation and intentions within the uniform mass of Viking raiders. Thus, the question is difficult to answer.

4.2.1 What is a Viking?

The term "Viking" has been used synonymously with the term Scandinavians and Danes throughout this essay but this bears some considering. All Vikings were presumably Scandinavians but all Scandinavians were definitely not Vikings. As such, the term is problematic and its derivation obscure.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle refers to the Scandinavian visitors as Northmen, Danes or simply heathens. In addition there are five occurrences of the term *wicings* in the Chronicle (Richards 2000, p.11). The first occurrence of the term however is before the Viking Age, in a 7th century Old English poem, and its first appearance in the modern English language is dated to 1807 according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Forte, Oram and Pedersen 2005, pp.3). To the Franks the Scandinavians were known as Northmen or Danes; to the Irish they were pagans and foreigners and to the Slavs they were the Rus (Saywer 2001, p.2).

The term is also found in Scandinavian sources and interestingly in Old Scandinavian the words *víkingr* and *viking* refer to sea warrior and military expedition respectively. On the etymological meaning of the word there are various theories. As the word *vik* means bay or inlet the term Viking could mean someone who dwells in the bay. Alternatively, a Viking could also be someone away from home as the word *víkja* means to move or turn aside (Brink 2008, p.6).

The contemporary association with the term Viking is a sea warrior out on warfare and robbery. However, the "Viking" expeditions did not only include warfare and piracy but also colonisation and some Scandinavians who set out were traders and settlers. Notwithstanding the obscurity of the precise derivation of the word Viking, it should be understood as encompassing all Scandinavians who participated in the settlement process (be it peaceful or violent) in Northern Europe during the Viking Age.

4.2.2 Scandinavian state formation

It is generally thought that the first raids were carried out by people from Norway but it is not unlikely that the ships contained warriors from entire Scandinavia (Graham-Campbell (ed.) 1994, p.124). The supposed lack of distinction by the Anglo-Saxons between Swedes, Danes and Norwegians may have been due to the fact that they all looked similar and sounded the same. To boot, the distinction of nationalities may have been pointless as this period in time saw the formation of the Scandinavian kingdoms and states (king and administration), sharpening the boundaries between different nationalities. Moreover, the Viking warriors, regardless of their nationality, would have been loyal to their army leaders (Richards 2000, p.13).

Evidence of the Scandinavian state formation is found on rune stones, coins and in written records. Written contemporary sources indicating Scandinavian states and kingdoms include the Frankish annals (*Regni Francorum* AD 813), *Vita Anskarii* (Life of Ansgar) and “*Book of Roads and Kingdoms*” by Ibn Khordadbeh in the Caliphate. In the Frankish annals AD 804 it is also mentioned how the Danish nobility and Godfred, King of the Danes, came to Sliesthorp to make a treaty with Charlemagne. From the literary sources it is noted that the term *suiones* was used in the West while the term *Rus* was used in the East for the people of Sweden. (Jansson, 2008) Furthermore, the national distinction between Danes and Swedes (*svear* and *götar*) is implied through written sources such as *Gesta Hamburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (the history of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen written by Adam of Bremen around 1075 AD) and *Landamaeri* (the border treaty between the Kings Emund the Old (*Emund Slemme*) and Sveyn Forkbeard from the middle of the 11th century AD) (Sawyer, 1991).

The Swedish King Olof Skötkonung issued the first Swedish coins in the town of Sigtuna around AD 995 with the inscription *Rex Svevorum*, meaning the King of the Svear. The King’s hegemony was also likely to have been influenced by the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Ros 2002, p. 174).

Thus, there is already at this point in time some distinction between Danes, Swedes and Norwegians. As evidenced by the existence of the “legal territory” called the Danelaw there was a huge “Danish” community present in England at the time, a community that was becoming more integrated with the Anglo-Saxon population. Contrary to the statement on the formation of Scandinavian states, the historical sources convey that there may in fact have existed a contemporary understanding of the distinction between Scandinavians, albeit perhaps not in England.

4.2.3 Vikings six feet under?

Since there were no artifacts to be found in the two mass graves, it is above all the various analyses of the skeletons in the two mass graves that have given insight into the identities of the victims. The robust physique of the men in their prime and the results from the different isotope analyses imply that the victims hailed from Scandinavia and that very likely they constituted two mixed groups (a mix of Norwegians, Danes and Swedes).

The ethnic identity in England at the end of the first millennium AD has been subject to much debate. Despite some support (from isotope analyses) for the fact the Scandinavians sustained a marine diet, the general assumption that just Vikings ate more fish may be too simplistic (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.98).

Additionally, it is difficult on genetic grounds to positively identify Vikings in Anglo-Saxon England, although some genetic evidence can reflect the Scandinavian influx in certain areas (Richards 2000, p.14). Therefore, with the above in mind, the distinction between Viking and Anglo-Saxon at this period of time may not be obvious, rather there may have been a more mixed population.

4.3 *Manifestation of Anglo-Saxon antagonism*

Can one really speak of ethnic cleansing in relation to these mass graves and are they connected in any way? Are both massacres a result of King Aethelred's issued edict to terminate all Danes in the kingdom or is just a coincidence and part of the contemporary hostile sentiment towards anything "Scandinavian" that the massacres took place?

4.3.1 A case of exaggerated propaganda?

Written contemporary English records convey a harsh tone at the mentioning of "heathens" and no distinctions between people from the different Scandinavian regions are made; they are all referred to as "Danes" (Graham-Campbell (ed.) 1994, p. 122). King Aethelred was bogged down by the heavy payments of Danegeld to the raiders that assailed England during his reign and with bought mercenaries that overstayed their welcome. The desperate situation demanded radical measures, hence the order to kill all Danes. Given the lack of ethnic distinction between Scandinavians (by the Anglo-Saxons) the term Danes would probably have meant all who were unfortunate to be of Scandinavian origin.

It is unlikely that King Aethelred's order was issued to rid England of all Scandinavians, something which would have included eradicating all established Danes in the Danelaw. Such a policy, sanctioned by the king, of ethnic cleansing would likely have affected the many settlers, traders and craftsmen. A large part of the population in England at the time was of Scandinavian or partly Scandinavian origin and they were also loyal subjects (Ian Howard, 2010, cited in Keys, 2010).

Nevertheless, this event was recorded by several sources indicating that it was a nation-wide massacre. One can assume that the written records (such as the royal charter by king Aethelred) reflect the sentiments of the ruling elite, but it is unclear whether or not the common population harboured the same hatred. The historians Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury in the 12th century almost seem to commiserate with the victims of the massacre. Their rendition of the event on St Brice's day gives the impression of a horrid massacre of an assimilated and loyal part of the population. Although there may have been a loss of lives in several places, it is improbable that all the Danes or Scandinavians were victims of the edict issued by King Aethelred. Such a

nation-wide act would have resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives and would, consequently, have warranted more attention in the historical records. It is believed today that the order intended to target mercenaries and new Danes that came during the second wave of Viking attacks (Logan 2005, p.159; Richards 2000, p.35).

The Danes established and inhabited the Danelaw, a considerable part of England. Nothing suggests though that national identity made the Danes act as a group in areas of dispute, political allegiance rather than race was important. The Scandinavians converted to Christianity and epigraphical evidence shows that they quickly absorbed the English language. Notwithstanding the rapid assimilation of the Scandinavians into Anglo-Saxon society, they may have been subject to resentment and prejudice, as they were after all still foreigners and wealthy enough to buy farms (Richards 2000, p.14).

The Vikings were, during the second wave, acting in the form of organised crime, using extortion to gain wealth, something which surely would have instigated feelings of antagonism with the Anglo-Saxons. However, this kind of behaviour was not only attributed to Vikings at the time, although they did it on a massive scale. It has been proposed that the antagonism between the two groups was part of a wider clash of ideologies, where on one hand Vikings preferred loose confederations, and where Anglo-Saxons on the other hand strived for an ordered centralized government (Keys, 2010).

4.3.2 Raiders or settlers?

Based on the archaeological material and the post-excavation analyses two clues on the identities of the victims in the graves are quite apparent. First, the victims in both graves, stripped of all belongings, had been summarily executed. Second, the results from the isotope analyses point to a Scandinavian origin for the victims.

One hypothesis is that the victims in the grave under St John's College were victims of the massacre that took place on St Brice's day and that the corpses were dumped in a ditch near the city's northern exit (Keys 2010). According to the written sources this massacre targeted the community of Danes in the town, thus including women (most notably the royal Gunhilde) and presumably children. However, based on the most recent analyses of the archaeological material this hypothesis needs to be discussed.

The prevalence of public execution at the time is illustrated by the discovery of several execution cemeteries in England, containing remains of executed victims of all ages over many centuries (Keys 2010). The grave at Oxford, with many individuals buried at the same time, does not follow the typical pattern for an execution cemetery, thus supporting a massacre scenario.

The victims showed sign of burns which could coincide with the burning of the Danes in St Frideswide's. However, if the mass grave is the result of the massacre of all Danes on St Brice's day one would expect more variation in gender and age of the victims, including women and children. Why is it then that only deceased males were found in the grave? Perhaps it is because they were

in fact mercenaries or “new” raiders, which could be supported by the fact that the victims showed signs of being seasoned warriors.

The dating of the victims places their death sometime before 1002, thereby excluding the possibility that they were part of the infamous massacre that year. Yet at the same time Pollard et al. (2012) allow for the possibility that the high marine dietary intake of the victims could contribute to misleading (too early) dating results, thus the mass grave could still be connected to the St Brice’s day massacre. By comparing the datasets from the isotope analyses of samples from both mass graves, it becomes clear that there are some shared features between the Weymouth and the Oxford individuals (Pollard, et al. 2012, p. 97). Therefore, it is suggested that it is more likely that the victims found in the Oxford mass grave represent a captured raiding party, rather than Danish inhabitants of Oxford.

The burial pit found near Weymouth represents a typical Saxon execution place since it was located on a main road and close to prehistoric barrows. One theory suggests that invading Vikings landed on the coast and were discovered and overcome by the local Anglo-Saxon population (Williams, 2009). But why were these individuals killed in this manner of execution? The evident lack of visible battle wounds and signs of “messy” decapitations conjures up an image of unwilling captives meeting their end. Death by decapitation has been interpreted as a sign of capital punishment, of honourable execution or as a ritual act to prevent the dead haunting the living (Müldner, Chenery and Eckardt 2011, p.282). Given the fact that the victims were not only decapitated but also stripped naked indicates that the massacre was intended to be as humiliating as possible, perhaps fuelled by the fierce antagonism towards Danes or Scandinavians that pervaded Anglo-Saxon England at the time.

The dating of the victims indicates that they met their end during the period when Aethelred struggled with paying the Danegeld and when the infamous massacre of Danes took place. In turn, the results from the isotope analysis suggest that the remains represent a group of individuals from several places in Scandinavia, possibly pointing to a group of invading raiders or a band of mercenaries. As described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 794, the survivors of a failed Viking invasion were promptly executed on the spot by the local population. It is not unlikely that a similar scenario took place at Ridgeway Hill. There are however a few facts that put the hypothesis on the raiding party in question, most notably the lack of old battle wounds (expected in seasoned warriors) and the presence of a seemingly limp individual in the group. On the other hand, one can argue that signs of healed serious battle wounds on the skeletal parts are not telltale evidence of seasoned warriors since the probability to survive such wounds at the time was low (Andreeff, 2012).

Based on the analyses, the archaeological record and the historical context, both graves may be the result of execution of mercenaries or invading raiding parties. So far only two mass graves of this kind have been discovered, neither of them in the area known as the Danelaw. The mass grave in Repton is within the Danelaw but it differs as to the archaeological context; the grave is located in the vicinity of obvious Viking burials, the majority, but not all, of the individuals

are male and they had not been executed. It is logical to assume that a nationwide ethnical cleansing would leave more extensive traces, with mass graves scattered over the whole of England and also revealing more variation in gender and age of the victims. The question becomes: how many mass graves are needed to represent evidence of a nationwide ethnic cleansing of Scandinavians? Perhaps the future will reveal more graves of the kind.

Rather than being the vestige of an Anglo-Saxon pogrom, the mass graves may be the result of the hostile actions targeted exclusively at treacherous hired Viking mercenaries and those who posed a military threat to the state. The mass graves in Oxford (a royal administrative centre) and near Weymouth (south coast of England) also represent locations where mercenaries would have been stationed (Keys 2010).

4.4 *A thorough analysis?*

Can a few represent the many? Isotope analysis of tooth enamel from 10 out of 51 individuals in the mass grave at Ridgeway Hill places their origin in a climate colder than Britain's and indicates a high protein diet. Are these results representative of the whole group buried in the grave and enough to infer that all of them were Scandinavians? Likewise, only three individuals from the Oxford site were subjected to radiocarbon dating and although many more individuals were sampled for isotope analysis it did not include samples from all individuals in the grave. Nonetheless, time and financial constraints naturally limit to which extent the analysis is carried out.

Isotope analysis constitutes a valuable tool in the interpretation of the material record, however the results may not always render a precise interpretation of the context. Radiocarbon dating, a method that has truly pioneered the archaeological field, gives at best an age interval, making it difficult to match the archaeological material with an entry in the annals of history. The marine reservoir offset is potentially affecting the age results of the individuals with a high marine protein intake, which could be the case in the Oxford mass grave. The radiocarbon dating, which places the burial to a time period before the St Brice's massacre, could therefore be incorrect but it is difficult to make a precise correction (Pollard, et al. 2012).

An isotope (C and N) analysis of all three skeletal tissues, bone collagen, bone apatite, and tooth enamel (dentine) yields information on the whole diet as well as changes over an individual's lifetime. There are also isotopic differences between various parts of the skeleton (such as ribs and femurs from the same individual), something which was observed in the isotope analysis of the Oxford skeletons (Pollard, et al. 2012, p.89). Consequently, this difference encumbers the comparison with samples from other sites. In order to obtain a better picture of the individuals' dietary history, and thus their lives, such a comprehensive analysis could be performed on the skeletal remains in both mass graves. It is highly conducive to the discussion on their demise to establish the victims' life history, not just their origin. It is relevant to know whether these men had spent their last couple of years in England (indicating that they could have been settlers or hired mercenaries) or in Scandinavia (implying that they could have been visiting traders or simply invading raiders).

In order to obtain a credible and accurate picture of the past, many pieces of the puzzle are needed. Bone analysis complements the isotope analysis in establishing the origin of the victims in the mass graves. The fact that the victims were muscular men with more developed arms (from rowing the longboats) lends credence to the suggested conclusion that they were Viking warriors but does not in itself positively exclude another origin. One more piece to the puzzle could be a DNA-analysis of the skeletal material, if possible. Analysing the available DNA could aid in further establishing the place of origin, the gender, certain diseases and potential kinship between the victims. As part of the investigations of the burial site in Weymouth, samples have been taken from the soil around the bodies in order to detect traces any rotted textiles, which could add a piece to the puzzle (Oxford Archaeology, 2009).

The written records undoubtedly shed some light on the motives behind the mass graves but may also limit and obscure the interpretation of the material. Andrén (1997) outlines different fields within historical archaeology, one of which is named the historical tradition. Here archaeology serves as gap filler in the sense that material studies are conducted in order to expand scarce written records. In this case, the written records are also doing the opposite. The written record is used to support and explain the material and vice versa. But does the existence of these written records constrain our ability to surmise the motives for the victims' demise and the context surrounding these two mass graves? One must bear in mind that the historical records are always coloured by the sentiments and prejudices at the time. Given a situation where there were no available written records, how would we interpret the material from and the context of these two graves?

5 Conclusions and reflexions

It is of course an enticing and surprising statement, “the ethnic cleansing of Vikings”. That Vikings, awe-inspiring and brave seafarers who have a given place on the historical stage as bloodthirsty raiders, could be victims of ethnic cleansing is both surprising and thought-provoking. The term Viking is taken to represent those who went overseas to trade, raid or settle. Although several contemporary sources do distinguish between Swedes, Danes and Norwegians during the period of Scandinavian state formation, it is clear that the Anglo-Saxons or English in their written documents did not.

Whereas the statements in the historical documents represent both incitement of and the act of committing genocide, there is not enough archaeological evidence to support this. The treatment of the victims found in the two mass graves is evidence of deep disrespect. Was it just the manners of the time or was it in fact an expression of a deep-rooted antagonism against all Danes?

The ordering of the massacre on St Brice’s day should be seen as a police action, born out of the desperation and failure by king Aethelred, against Viking mercenaries, who broke their word, and raiders, not as an eradication of all people of Scandinavian or Danish origin. The local population were certainly wary of Viking raiders but given the assimilation of Scandinavian settlers, it seems unlikely that they would commit a state-sanctioned genocide of those being of Scandinavian origin.

At this point, given the present day information, it seems likely that the individuals in the graves were Vikings (from all over Scandinavia) and that they represented mercenaries who met their demise during king Aethelred’s futile efforts to gain control of the kingdom.

Archaeology projects may not always have the luxury of analysing every piece of material in great detail and a selection of samples are used to represent the entire collection of artefacts, in this case all the skeletons in the graves. In addition, there are margins of errors associated with the results from the isotope analyses.

One obvious conclusion of this study is the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to solve mysteries of the past. More points of view and results from independent research areas will mitigate the risk of trying to mould the archaeological record to the written word. The intention and sentiments conveyed in the historical sources do speak of ethnic cleansing and genocide, however, the archaeological evidence cannot quite corroborate this. Nonetheless, the two mass graves do lend support to the theory that there were massacres of mercenaries taking place in England around the time of King Aethelred’s reign.

In view of the on-going investigations, the mystery surrounding the two graves continues to unfold.

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