Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures

Donna-Beth Ellard

Published by Punctum Books

Ellard, Donna-Beth.  
Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures.  
Project MUSE.  

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84197

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2919926
From the Death of Egbert to the Death of Alfred\(^1\) is the second volume of Sharon Turner’s four-volume History of the Anglo-Saxons. Although a history of the eighth and ninth centuries, its narrative is crafted around a medieval Scandinavian poem that was quite popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries called Krákumál. Krákumál was Turner’s poetic inspiration while writing a history that entwines the arrival of the Vikings with the rise of Alfred. In From the Death of Egbert, Turner explains that the Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok, on an ill-fated adventure to Northumbria, is captured by King Ella and

\(^1\) From their First Appearance above the Elbe, to the Death of Egbert and From the Death of Egbert to the Death of Alfred are the first two volumes of Turner’s History of the Anglo-Saxons. They were printed in 1799 and 1801, respectively, with London printers, T. Cadell and W. Davies. In 1802 these volumes were reprinted by Longman and Rees, which likewise printed the last two volumes of the four-volume History (From the Death of Alfred to the Norman Conquest [1802] and The History of the Manners, Landed Property, Government, Laws, Poetry, Literature, Religion, and Language, of the Anglo-Saxons [1805]) and each successive edition (1807, 1820, 1823, 1828, 1836, 1852). Given the longevity of this relationship between Turner and Longman, I have chosen to cite the 1802 Longman edition in this chapter.
thrown into a pit of snakes.\(^2\) In Ella’s snake pit, Ragnar composes *Krákumál* before dying from the bites of venomous vipers. The sounds of *Krákumál* ring out across the open seas, and Ragnar’s ‘Death-song,’ as Turner calls it, heralds the vengeful expedition of ‘the Northmen’ to Anglo-Saxon England.\(^3\) Upon arrival in Northumbria, they ‘inflicted a cruel and inhuman retaliation on Ella for their father’s sufferings. They cut the figure of an eagle on his back…to tear out his lungs.’\(^4\) Turner continues, explaining that Ella’s ‘blood eagle’ is not simply a revenge act but a ‘dismal sacrifice’ that precipitates a Scandinavian politics of conquest and colonialism.\(^5\) Once in Northumbria, ‘the invaders did not depart’ but extended their Viking vengeance across Anglo-Saxon England by conquering and colonizing its kingdoms.\(^6\) If Ragnar’s Death-song is Turner’s poetic invocation, then Ella’s death by blood eagle is the history called forth from it. This strange, singular, and likely apocryphal event sets in motion the coming of the Northmen and of Alfred. It serves as a fantastic trauma and a primal scene by which Turner’s narrative of early English history arcs from Ragnar’s colonial ambitions toward Alfred’s Anglo-Saxon nation.

Could Ragnar and Ella be the mythical fathers of Anglo-Saxon history? I pose this question in relation to another: might Sharon Turner be a father of Anglo-Saxon historians? Allen Frantzen calls Turner the ‘first modern historian of Anglo-Saxon England,’ and Claire Simmons, in a statement echoed by Sarah Foot, goes so far as to rate his multi-volume *History of the Anglo-Saxons* as ‘the most important single impetus to Anglo-

---

2 The stories of Ragnar and Ella are recounted in a number of texts from medieval Scandinavia and from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The spelling of names and places varies in these texts, and, unless otherwise indicated, I use Turner’s spellings for consistency.


4 Ibid., 123.

5 Ibid., 124.

6 Ibid.
Saxon studies.’7 Turner’s History has been called ‘pioneering’ and ‘immensely detailed and influential.’8 Its historical breadth, archival research, and bibliographic citations signal milestones in the field’s professional development. While Turner’s importance to the history of Anglo-Saxon studies is well noted, Turner’s scholarship is unequivocally disavowed. Written and revised as Britain sailed toward the national-imperial horizons of its Victorian Age, Turner’s History envisions the Anglo-Saxon past as a romantic narrative that anticipates an English future. Consequently, as many scholars have explained, the historical integrity of Turner’s labors in the British Museum is compromised by his Whiggish commitments, nationalist fervor, and imperialist beliefs. Likewise, the racist and colonialist uses to which later editions of his History were put in the post-bellum American South and in settlement-period Australia have further jaundiced its academic legitimacy outside of England.9

Guided by the psychoanalytic research of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and the sociopolitical implications of their work on transgenerational haunting, this chapter examines Sha-

ron Turner’s *History of the Anglo-Saxons* as a crypt in which the unmourned losses and unacknowledged traumas of British colonialism are secreted. I argue that Turner, a historian inspired by the Old Norse poem *Krákumál* and driven by imperialist ideology, is haunted by a restless colonial other whose encrypted form stirs the pages of his *History* and makes ‘incomprehensible signals.’ Turner narrativizes these signals as the blood-eagle, ‘a cruel and inhuman retaliation’ that rips apart Ella’s body and tears out his lungs so that his Northumbrian kingdom might be conquered and colonized. Turner, moved by the ghostly sounds that emerge from his narrative voice, buries Ella’s blood-eagled body within his *History*, which becomes a crypt across which Ella strays. This chapter suggests that Turner, an ambiguous father of Anglo-Saxon studies, has transmitted Ella’s blood eagle, an encrypted specter of empire, to his children. I contextualize scholarly commentary on the blood eagle within late twentieth-century decolonization, arguing that scholars of the 1980s and 1990s return to the blood eagle and act out the trauma that Turner has passed on to them to try and heal (or re-inter) the hidden wounds of colonialism. This chapter analyzes Turner’s historical work in order to ask what twenty-first-century future—what state of academic unmindfulness and unmourning—has been imagined for Anglo-Saxonists through over two centuries of wrestling with these encrypted ghosts of empire. It then turns to twenty-first-century visions of the blood eagle, the spectral presence of which has stirred, again, in the wake of 9/11 and also on the eve of Donald Trump’s inauguration. While ghosts, as Stephen Frosh writes, may ‘come from the future,’ the blood eagle reminds Anglo-Saxon studies that it urgently needs to look more closely at how it minds its past.

Although Turner cites an impressive breadth of medieval sources in his *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, his preface credits

a popular poem as the primary impetus for the entire project. In Turner’s 1802 Longman preface, he claims that the ‘Death-song of Ragnar Lodbrog’ and Ragnar’s death in Northumbria prompted his research for the *History*. Turner was not alone in finding inspiration in the Death-song. *Krákumál*, as it is known by contemporary academics, is a skaldic poem that dates from the late twelfth century. The poem’s subject and speaker is Ragnar Lodbrog, a Volsung descendant and Viking king\(^\text{12}\) who celebrates the bloody outcomes of past battles as he awaits death in the Northumbrian king Ella’s snake pit. The poem’s bellicose images collapse the ethical, physical, and temporal distance between Ragnar’s body and that of cultural Others. In earlier stanzas, Ragnar claims, for example, that his skirmishes near Hjaðningavágr and Northumbria were neither ‘like placing a fair maiden in a bed’ nor like ‘kissing a young widow.’\(^\text{13}\) These remarks, which locate battle in negative proximity to sexual relations, loosen the ethical distinction between hostile and hospitable acts, and they lay the groundwork for subsequent, material elisions between enemies and allies. Ragnar contemplates the aftermath of battle in which men lay dead atop one another, and he considers single combat among unidentifiable warriors.\(^\text{14}\)

These remarks, which recognize no lexical difference between

\(^{12}\) According to *Ragnars saga* (*The Tale of Ragnar Loðbrok*), Ragnar marries into the Volsung line by wedding Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild of the *Völsunga saga* (*The Tale of the Völsungs*). He inherits the throne of Denmark from his father, also named Sigurd.


\(^{14}\) ‘*Hverr lá þverr of annan*‘ . . . ‘*Hitt telk jafnt, at gangi / at samtogi sverða / sveinn i moti einum / hrókkvit þegn fyr þegni*’ (*Den norsk–islandske skjaldedigtning*, 642, stanza 16, l. 2; 654, stanza 23, ll. 2–4).
mutually hostile warriors, anticipate Ragnar’s own heroic celebrations in the dwellings of Óðinn. In death he will drink beer from ‘the curved-tree of skulls.’\textsuperscript{15} By way of an elaborate kenning that references a drinking horn, Krákumál emerges as an oral poem that locates future action in the present tense and transforms Ragnar’s empty mouth into a site for poetic consumption. In ode to his own death, Ragnar drinks the dead.

Krákumál’s emphasis on orality engages a rigorous discussion about the psychopolitics of incorporation, a concept that emerges in the psychoanalytic work of Abraham and Torok. As Abraham and Torok explain, when we do not mourn the death of a loved one — when we deny that we have lost an object of our affections — we refuse to abide the often painful and lengthy process of grieving. In a defensive act that violates the ethical, physical, and temporal constraints of mourning, we open our (psychic) mouth and fantastically ‘swallow whole’ their figure.\textsuperscript{16} Through these illicit acts of ‘eating’ the dead, we magically incorporate their spirit, their drives, and their urges within our psyche as a self-preservative mechanism that shields us from the painful process of identity reconfiguration that is enacted across the time of mourning. As Ragnar lies dying in Ella’s pit, his thoughts about the past relax the conceptual distance between war and love, foe and friend, self and other. Consequently, they prepare Ragnar for contemplating his future. As he envisions himself at Óðinn’s banquet table, Ragnar fantasizes a scene of incorporation. He presses his open mouth upon the skull of an unidentifiable other, fantasizing an act of consumption that encodes a prohibition against mourning into the poetic fibers — its kennings — of Krákumál’s skaldic verses. Soon after, Ragnar predicts, ‘Viðrir’s switch [glossed frequently as Óðinn’s spear] will stand fast in Ella. The slaying of their father will cause my

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Hitt lægir mik, jafnan / at Baldr’s fóður bekki / búna veitk at sumblum; / drekkum bjór af bragði / ór bjúgviðum hausa’ (Den norsk–islandske skjaldeigntning, 655, stanza 25, ll. 2–6).

\textsuperscript{16} Abraham and Torok, The Shell and the Kernel, 126, 128.
sons’ hearts to swell with rage.’ Instead of grieving his death, Ragnar’s sons will incorporate their father’s libidinal energies: they will devour and ingest his Volsung-Viking spirit, and they will cleave their sense of self to the corpse of their Odinic father. As a consequence, ‘Viðrir’s switch will stand fast in Ella.’ If Krá-kumál gestures toward the effects of incorporating Ragnar, then other medieval Scandinavian texts make these gestures clear. Ragnar’s sons arrive in Northumbria, murder Ella by blood-eagling him, then conquer and colonize Anglo-Saxon England.

In Krá-kumál, psychological acts of incorporation hasten toward political acts of incorporation: in devouring, cannibalizing, and swallowing whole one’s beloved father, one exacts a similar terror upon one’s unloved enemy. In short, prohibitions against mourning become directed toward policies of colonialism.

As a poem that explores the psycho-politics of incorporation, it is not infelicitous that Krá-kumál is published first in English by Thomas Percy in 1763, a year that evidences the success of Britain’s resounding colonial victories in both the Seven Years War and in the French and Indian War. Percy’s interests in translating Krá-kumál and other skaldic poems are underwritten by his investments in an English identity that is secured by association with ‘a “Norse poetic” empire.’ As Robert Rix points out, Percy argued that ‘a central feature of Norse poetics [was]…

17 ‘…Viðris / vǫndr í Ellu standi; / sonum mínun mun svella / sinn fǫður rāðinn verða’ (Den norsk–islandske skjaldedigtning, 655, stanza 27, ll. 5–8).
18 See Saxo Grammaticus’s Danish chronicle, Gesta Danorum (Deeds of the Danes), Book IX; the Icelandic prose works Ragnars saga (The Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok), Chapter 15; and Bátr af Ragnars sonum (The Tale of Ragnar’s Sons), Chapter 3.
19 While ‘Indian’ is an inappropriate term for the native and indigenous peoples of North America, I invoke this word, and repeat it throughout this chapter, within the context of eighteenth-century colonial history and according to its use by Percy and his contemporaries.
the inclination to make “poetical fiction” out of “poetical history”…[and] Percy believed this method of composition was embodied in Ragnar’s epicedium.\(^2\) Ragnar’s epicedium, which he titles ‘The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrok,’ is the first among Percy’s Old Norse translations. In selecting ‘The Dying Ode,’ Percy lays claim to his literary inheritance from ‘the northern nations’ and pronounces himself implicitly a son of Ragnar.\(^2\) By making these genealogical claims, Percy finds himself entangled in the not-so-poetical history that follows from \textit{Krákumál’s poetical fiction}. In his preface to ‘The Dying Ode,’ Percy writes, ‘war in those rude ages was carried on with the same inhumanity, as it is now among the savages of North-America: their prisoners were only reserved to be put to death with torture. Ragnar was accordingly thrown into a dungeon to be stung to death by serpents.’\(^2\) Percy measures the ‘inhumanity’ of Ragnar’s death by snake-bite against the ‘savagery’ of indigenous North Americans. He draws the medieval brutalities of Anglo-Scandinavia into dialogue with Britain’s wars in North America. \textit{Krákumál} acts according to what Gabrielle Schwab calls a screen memory, a story that ‘focus[es] on histories of violence elsewhere in order to split them off from one’s own violent histories…to cover up or work through another affectively closer history that would be more problematic to deal with.’\(^2\) While Ragnar’s death is a screen memory that shields Percy from the ‘affectively closer history’ of British colonialism, Ragnar’s poetic legacy has directed him into ethically troubled waters. By way of poetry, have Ragnar’s English descendants taken inside themselves Ragnar’s Volsung-Viking spirit? Have they responded to their father’s skaldic verses by incorporating his libidinal drives? In an act of gross unmourning, have they unleashed these Ragnarian energies upon North America in the vengeful-cum-colonial pursuit.

\(^2\) Rix, ‘The Afterlife of a Death Song,’ 12.
\(^2\) Ibid., 23–24.
of their French and ‘Indian’ enemies? In 1763, Percy screens these questions but does not dare answer them.

In subsequent decades, Krákumál’s popularity keeps time with Britain’s colonial actions in North America and elsewhere across the world, and in 1782 Rev. Johnstone’s Lodbrokar Qui- da; or The Death-Song of Lodbroc is published. In language that echoes Percy’s preface, Johnstone explains the longevity of Krá- kkumál:

[D]uring the rude periods of society, the safety, both of nations and of individuals depends upon making themselves objects of terror. Hence, while the captive Indian mitigates his torments by the recollection of his exploits, he tramples, as it were, on the cruelty of his enemies…The Lodbrokar-qua- da shews, that a similarity of manners prevailed in the north; and, indeed, men, in the same degree of civilization, will act, and think, nearly in the same way.

Johnstone’s statements regarding the ‘captive Indian’ and the ‘cruelty of his enemies’ reverberate against Percy’s prefatory rhetoric of the ‘torture’ of ‘prisoners’ and the ‘inhumanity, as it is now among the savages of North-America.’ Unlike Percy, however, Johnstone identifies the prisoner as an ‘Indian’ who is no longer destined for death but remains captive to a cruel enemy. Johnstone’s revisions extend the horizons of colonization from North America to the Americas and to India. They implicate this ‘Indian’ as a hostage held for the unforeseeable future and imply, moreover, that an unspecified ‘cruelty’ locates the jailer in the same alliterative space as his ‘captive.’ Johnstone’s prose keeps pace with Britain’s imperial actions, tightening the bond between colonial subject and colonizer and entrapping Ragnar

25 For a list of available translations, see Frank Edgar Farley, Scandinavian Influences in the English Romantic Movement (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1903), 58 ff.

26 James Johnstone, Lodbrokar Quida; or The Death Song of Lodbroc; now first correctly printed from various Manuscripts, with a free English translation (Printed for the Author, 1782), 94, author’s emphasis.
within his rhetoric: ‘while the captive Indian mitigates his torments by the recollection of his exploits he tramples, as it were, on the cruelty of his enemies.’ In the acoustical space between the ‘captive Indian’ and the ‘cruelty of his enemy’ — between the alliterative ties that link colonial subject and colonizer — Ragnar lies, silently, in the absence–presence of pronouns. Imprisoned together, Ragnar and the ‘Indian’ ‘mitigate’ their pain, ‘recollect [their] exploits,’ and ‘trample upon’ their jailers. In the same darkling pit, they stage a pyrrhic victory: because the sounds of Ragnar and the ‘Indian’ can be heard only within the confines of Johnstone’s English prose. After two decades of simultaneous acts of translation and colonization, after two decades of employing an Old Norse poem that screens a modern English history too close to bear, Krákumál’s translators have held hostage, swallowed whole, and incorporated Ragnar and the ‘Indian.’ One a beloved father, one an unloved Other, Johnstone unknowingly ventriloquizes their defiant recollections.

Johnstone’s comment appears in ‘Notes to the English Reader,’ the final appendix of Lodbrokar Quida, an edition that is not written for the casual reader. As Margaret Clunies Ross has explained, it is a collaboration between British diplomat James Johnstone and Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin.27 A ‘self-consciously accurate and scholarly production,’ Lodbrokar Quida is meant for the aspiring scholar-translator of Old Norse.28 Its bilingual text of 29 stanzas is preamble to a robust critical apparatus of 77 pages: (i) ‘Epicedium,’ a Latin translation of the poem; (ii) ‘Glossarium,’ an extensive Old Norse-Latin glossary of words, phrases, and figures; and (iii) ‘Notes to the English Reader,’ a description of places and events referenced in each stanza. In the last appendix of Lodbrokar Quida lie Rag-

---

nar and the ‘Indian,’ not simply held captive but buried alive together under a mountain of scholarly effects.

To return to the language of Abraham and Torok, Ragnar and the ‘Indian’ have been incorporated, entombed, and, moreover, encrypted within the final pages of *Lodbrokar Quida*:

[When] this segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality… [is] untellable…[it] causes a genuinely covert shift in the entire psyche. This shift itself is covert, since both the fact that the idyll was real and that it was later lost must be disguised and denied. This leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego.²⁹

A crypt emerges from incorporation. It is built when our grief and shame prohibit us from mourning our losses or grieving our traumas. Instead of giving voice to our pain, we ‘disguise’ and ‘deny’ it. We stage a psychic defense against suffering by depositing these secret losses, unshared traumas, and ‘untellable’ pains within ourselves. Trapped in ‘a sealed-off psychic space,’ they linger in deep and profound silence, inhabiting us as ‘exquisite corpses’ against which we unknowingly and unconsciously brace our subjectivity.³⁰ Ragnar and the ‘Indian,’ England’s unmourned and unmournable relations, are corpses that disguise the losses and deny the traumas of British colonialism. Though hidden from view, their captive shapes sound out — in Johnstone’s own words — the ‘savage’ violence, the ‘inhuman’ brutalities, the ceaseless ‘torments,’ and the constant state of incorporation that is necessary to build and sustain an empire. For all their noise, however, Ragnar and the ‘Indian’ cannot be found. ‘[S]ealed off’ in the ‘psychic place’ of Johnstone’s ego, they are ‘inaccessible to [his] conscious self.’ Consequently, as Johnstone ventriloquoizes the sounds that come from within his psychic crypt, he misrecognizes them as scholarly artifacts and encodes them into his scholarly apparatus. *Lodbrokar Quida* becomes, as

²⁹ Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 141.
³⁰ Ibid., 120–23.
Esther Rashkin writes, a ‘fictional saga’ that is ‘perturb[ed] and propel[led]’ by ‘unspeakable secrets’. It is a literary work that is produced by ‘subjects [who] deploy different practices and techniques to act on their world and themselves in their struggle to transcend psychic distress and create new paths for survival.’

As these corpses make their way from Johnstone’s unconscious to the final appendix of his scholarly edition, each section of the critical apparatus serves as a partition that erects the crypt of Lodbrokar Quida according to what Abraham calls anasemia, a process by which the meaning of signs is problematized through fracture: ‘allophemic slippages, demetaphorization, spiraling language’ — ‘words buried alive’ that are ‘relieved of their communicative function’ yet articulate ‘that the desire was in a way satisfied, that the pleasurable fulfillment did take place.’ In anasemia, signifiers shatter into ‘angular pieces… internal (intra-symbolic) partitions, cavities, corridors, niches, zigzag labyrinths, and craggy fortifications’ as the semiotic effects of a refusal to mourn, to acknowledge, and to give voice to one’s secret grief and shame. By way of anasemia, one incorporates these others in order to encrypt them within the unspoken, unsignified, and most unknown corridors of the unconscious. Each scholarly appendix of Lodbrokar Quida functions as an anasemic partition that silences and fragments Ragnar’s Old Norse voice and encrypts Ragnar and the ‘Indian’ within its pages. The Epicedium presents Krákumál first as a Latin text, a move that signals it as a learned poem written in a language worthy of extensive exegesis. To these ends, the Glossarium aids the aspiring reader’s perusal of Krákumál’s Old Norse lexicon. It provides the Latin equivalents of difficult Old Norse grammar and vocabulary, and it glosses unfamiliar figures of Scandinavian mythology and saga with extended Latin explanation.
While serving as helpful reading aids, the Epicedium tempers the Old Norse poem, and the Glossarium fractures the signifiers of its 29 verses across 42 pages of the edition. By way of ana-
semic gloss, the oral poetics of Krákumál are given a ‘thorough
dissection and explanation.’ Its kennings are demetaphorized,
and its semantics are relieved of their communicative function,
breaking Krákumál’s acoustical surfaces into a thousand irregu-
lar and angular pieces and cleaving them to Latin, a language
meant to be studied but unspoken by the gentleman scholar. The
Epicedium and Glossarium stage a rigorous defense that sets
about to render the Old Norse sounds of Krákumál completely
incomprehensible and entirely mute. Such a project is necessary
to make ready the crypt for its occupants. ‘Notes to the English
Reader,’ the last appendix, introduces the figure of Ragnar and
his Scandinavian context in modern English prose. It assembles
the angular pieces of Ragnar’s shattered voice into English terms
that misrecognize Krákumál as a pastime of scholars and poetic
translators and therefore fail to take note of the bodies buried
within.

Lodbrokar Quida’s illicit acts of entombment do not occur
without consequence to Johnstone or to his ‘English Reader.’
As Schwab states, ‘no one colonizes with impunity…histories
of violence create psychic deformations not only in the victims
but also in the perpetrators.’ As an English Reader pores over
Lodbrokar Quida, Ragnar’s Old Norse cries of unmourning
shatter into silent Latin fragments, which are then reassembled
into an English account of Ragnar. Once apprised of his dying
body, this ‘English Reader’ approaches Ragnar’s bilingual text,

35 Ross, The Norse Muse in Britain, 176.
36 Consider Shippey’s remarks regarding the ‘oddity’ of Lodbrokar Quida
   as ‘the most self-consciously accurate and scholarly production of [all
   translations of Krákumál]’ and ‘at the same time the most dictional and, in
   a sense, unfaithful’ (‘The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrog,’ 169). Consider
   also Shippey’s further comment regarding Johnstone’s faithless English
   translations: ‘For all his care Johnstone seems almost afraid of his subject,
   or at least exposing it to English-speaking readers’ (169).
37 Schwab, Haunting Legacies, 48.
fashioning her scholarly self by vocalizing and ventriloquizing a poem, the acoustics of which are shaped according to the encrypted outlines of its captive corpses. The ‘English Reader’ of *Krákumál* is inhabited by the dead. She suffers from the effects of extreme psychic splitting but cannot perform the painful and conscious work of self-analysis. After poring over its multiple critical partitions and multi-lingual chambers, the ‘English Reader’ becomes, like the poem itself, a ‘subject particularly resistant to analysis,’ a subject carrying within herself a ‘puzzle of shards about which we would know nothing: neither how to put it together nor how to recognize the pieces.’

From *Lodbrokar* *Quida* emerges an English scholar-translator of Old Norse poetry who is so terrified, so guilty, and so ashamed of England’s ceaseless colonial pursuit of incorporation that she has encrypted its effects within herself. She has constructed her subjectivity against the voices of Ragnar and the ‘Indian,’ and she ventriloquizes from the crypt of *Krákumál* their captive cries.

*Krákumál* achieves a ‘paradigmatic status’ in the eighteenth century. Its ‘extraordinarily high evaluations’ among antiquarians and poets anticipate the twenty-one English translations, partial ‘paraphrases,’ and ‘elaborate [literary] creations’ that emerge during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Peter Mortensen quips, ‘Regner’s death-defying laugh could be heard throughout the period’ as the most popular medieval Scandinavian text in England. Among *Krákumál*’s most devoted English Readers is Sharon Turner, who not only references Percy’s translation and cites Johnstone’s edition but, moreover, frames *From the Death of Egbert to the Death of Alfred*— the second volume of his *History of the Anglo-Saxons*— according to the encrypted acoustics of its anasemic translations. *From*
*the Death of Egbert* begins in Denmark, where Ragnar Lodbrok, an undefeatable sea king, builds ‘two ships of a size which the North had never beheld before,’ loads them with soldiers, and sails toward England. Turner explains that the unwieldy size of these ships makes them un navigable, and they run aground off the Northumbrian coast. Ragnar is captured by the Anglo-Saxon king, Ella of Northumbria, and thrown into a pit of snakes, where he composes *Krākumál* before dying from their poisonous venom. Turner describes the enraged responses of Ragnar’s sons, his Danish kin, and ‘all the fury, and all the valour of the North’ who set out to redress Ragnar’s murder and colonize Anglo-Saxon England. No kingdom is safe from ‘the Northmen,’ Turner explains, and in a final battle against Ragnar’s relations, King Ethelred of Wessex is killed.

From the ashes of complete defeat, Alfred emerges as its new leader, fighting the Northmen continuously across Anglo-Saxon England and meeting them, finally, at sea. In a statement that resolves the two ships of an unprecedented size by which Ragnar sailed to Northumbria, Turner argues that Alfred builds ‘vessels…full-twice as long as theirs,’ which are ‘swifter, higher, and less unsteady’ than those of his enemy. Alfred’s ship design and naval strategy acoustically and materially outperform those of Ragnar. Once his enemies have departed, Alfred extends his Wessex ‘sovereignty,’ first, over all Anglo-Saxons, then over the Welsh. By way of sustained engagement with Ragnar’s Northern ilk, Alfred has incorporated Ragnar’s military drives, his seafaring spirit, and his colonial urges. By modeling his *History* upon *Krākumál’s* psycho-politics of incorporation, Turner explains that Alfred wrests power from his colonial oppressors and fashions an English nation.

Upon declaring Alfred an English sovereign, Turner announces Alfred’s death, concludes his historical narrative, and

---

43 Ibid., 2:118.
44 Ibid., 2:153.
46 Ibid., 2:246.
begins an epicedium, a Death-song, to Alfred. From an early age, Turner explains, Alfred ‘was an eager auditor, and was industrious to commit them [“Saxon” poems] to memory…. It was always one of his principle pleasures to learn Saxon poems, and to teach them to others.’ As a king, Alfred’s literary pursuits turn towards Latin. Alfred learns by keeping a ‘little book’ of devotions close to his ‘bosom’ and by gathering together and inscribing ‘diversified extracts’ of Latin conversation and scripture within it. Turner does not narrate the time Alfred spends in Latin study or labors in his Latin translations because Alfred learns instead by incorporation. By keeping a little book close to his heart, Turner explains that Alfred magically swallows whole these Latin fragments, and, after a time, writes his Preface to Pastoral Care and translates Orosius, Bede, and Boethius into the vernacular language. Braced against Krákumál’s psycho-politics of incorporation, Turner’s Epicedium reveals that Alfred’s political projects—he armed resistance to Ragnar’s Northmen—have occurred simultaneous to his personal projects of translation. With the eighth and ninth centuries as a colonial backdrop, Turner fashions a posthumous account of the process by which Alfred becomes a scholar, a translator, and an ‘English Reader.’ To wit, as Turner translates the Preface to Pastoral Care, he encounters Alfred’s statements regarding the state of Latin learning in Anglo-Saxon England and introjects, ‘this statement would tempt us to imagine that the Anglo-Saxons had been a learned people before the days of Alfred; but the discriminating king prevents the delusion by his subsequent paragraphs. They had the means of knowledge, not its possession.’ Although Turner recognized initially the ‘Saxon’ poets that Alfred enjoyed as a child and recited as an adult, here Turner elides the ‘Saxon’ voices of the hall and instead hails Alfred—a Latin scholar and translator—as the first learned ‘English Reader.’ While Turner’s Epicedium locates the voices of England’s earliest vernacular

47 Ibid., 2:252.
48 Ibid., 2:267.
49 Ibid., 2:278.
poetry, such a reference tells the lie that Turner’s *History*, which gives voice to Alfred, pivots upon the muted sounds of another.

Although Turner avows his relationship to *Krákumál* and pursues vigorously its paths of incorporation, he does not know that his is an anaemic *History* and therefore shaped in relation to a crypt. As Abraham and Torok explain, when we encrypt a loss or a trauma, we do so as a self-preservative action. In cleaving our self to a corpse, however, we leave ourselves vulnerable to its haunting maneuvers. They write, ‘the “shadow of the object” strays endlessly about in the crypt’ and ‘sometimes in the dead of night, when libidinal fulfillments have their way, the ghost of the crypt comes back to haunt the cemetery guard, giving him strange and incomprehensible signals, making him perform bizarre acts, or subjecting him to unexpected sensations.’

Turner explains that when Ragnar’s sons arrive in Northumbria, they ‘inflicted a cruel and inhuman retaliation on Ella for their father’s sufferings. They cut the figure of an eagle on his back, divided his ribs, to tear out his lungs, and agonized his lacerated flesh by the addition of a saline stimulant.’ Strange and incomprehensible in its logic. Bizarre in its performance. Unexpected in sense and in sensation. This elaborate act breaks apart Ella’s ribs and turns his body inside out to render him without air or breath, effectively mute, and suffering in silence. It is a torture of surgical precision that, despite its deliberate method, makes little sense: it disables Ella’s Anglo-Saxon body violently in order to steal his Old English voice. In a footnote at the bottom of the page, Turner, the dutiful historian, cites his sources: ‘Frag. Isl. 2 Lang. 279. Ragnar Saga, ib. The Scalld Sigvatr. ib. Saxo Gram. 177. This punishment was often inflicted by these savage conquerors on their enemies. See some instances in Stephanius, 193.’

---

50 Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 141, 130.
52 Interestingly, while Ella’s death by blood eagle is accounted for in the *Ragnars saga* (*The Tale of Ragnar Loðbrok*) and Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (*Deeds of the Danes*), the only Scandinavian text that includes the ‘lung-ripping’ component is the *Þáttr af Ragnar’s sonum* (*The Tale of Ragnar’s Sons*), which Turner does not mention here.
In these marginal, academic quarters, Turner draws the blood eagle from the hazy reaches of an Icelandic fragment to a saga narrative in prose, from the voice of a skald to that of an historian, from Saxo’s medieval history to Stephanius’s early modern commentary.53 Turner’s footnote genealogically excavates the blood eagle from the sedimented layers of Scandinavia’s past. Suspended, however, in between the medieval and early modern citations of Turner’s footnote is his own commentary — ‘this punishment was often inflicted by these savage conquerors on their enemies’ — which does not hearken back to the rhetoric of Scandinavia but to that of Percy and Johnstone. In the dead of night, when libidinal fulfillments have their way, Turner’s prose butchers Ella’s body and voice. In the light of day, when these pleasures are restrained, Turner’s notes legitimate these actions under the aegis of scholarship and translation. Turner, the cemetery guard, has unearthed a ghost of the crypt. Like Percy’s North American ‘savages’ and Johnstone’s ‘Indian,’ Ella stages a colonial resistance against Ragnar and his Northern relations that takes place at home, in England, not abroad, in English colonies. Ella, not Alfred, is the real figure of Anglo-Saxon sovereignty and ‘Saxon’ poetry, but his body has been broken, and his voice has been rendered mute by Turner’s History.

53 Turner, The History of the Anglo-Saxons, 2:123n9. Stephanus Stephanius is an early modern commentator. In 1645, he published Notæ Uberiores in Historiam Danicam Saxonis Grammatici (Søro: Crusius, 1645), an edition and exegetical commentary of Saxo’s Gesta. Stephanius expands Saxo’s mention of the ‘aquilam figurante’ by explaining that it was a practice common to the ‘Angles, Danes, and other Northern nations’ ['Anglos, Danos, and aliasq[ue] nationes Boreales'], in which ‘the victor, about to inflict his defeated adversary with the greatest dishonor, drives a sword into the spine in the back near the shoulder blades, and, with a massive incision having been cut along the length of the body, he separates the ribs from the spine, both of which [the ribs], having been drawn out to the sides, represent the wings of an Eagle’ ['victor ignominia summa debellatum adversarium affecturus, gladium circa scapulas ad spinam dorsi adigebat, costasqu[e]amplissimo per corporis longitudinem facto vulnere, utrinque a spina separabat: quae ad latera deductae alas repraesentabant Aquilinas'] (193). My translation.
It takes Turner two subsequent paragraphs to give direction to the ceaseless straying of Ragnar’s sons and to make comprehensible the incomprehensible signals of Ella’s death. Immediately after describing the blood eagle, Turner explains that, ‘after this battle, decisive of the fate of Northumbria, it appeared no more as an Anglo-Saxon kingdom.’ Then he narrates briefly the ascension and expulsion of several of Ella’s successors. Amid these internal politics, which span an uncertain length of time, Ivar, one of Ragnar’s sons, remains, quietly ‘usurping the scepter of Northumbria from the Humber to the Tyne.’ Turner, unable to understand the sequence of events or the timeline of his own narrative, returns to the scene of Ella’s death and revises the history he has just written. He begins a new paragraph that recodes the ‘cruel and inhuman retaliation’ of Ragnar’s relations as ‘a dismal sacrifice [that] had been offered up to the manes of Ragnar, yet the invaders did not depart.’ Turner then narrates the complete destruction of Northumbria and Mercia by the ‘manes of Ragnar,’ concluding with the fall of Wessex and the death of Athelred. Upon Ella’s broken body, silenced voice, and conquered kingdom Turner’s historical arc pivots: from the death of Ragnar to that of Alfred, from colonial invasion to national unification, from an Anglo-Saxon past that is trampled and silenced to an English future that will be forever incorporating the bodies, voices, and territories of others. Turner arranges the strange stirrings and haunted visions that emerge jointly from his scholarly sources and from his psyche into a primal scene. The murder of Ella, a mythical father, is enacted by all of Scandinavia’s sons: poets and saga writers; skalds and chroniclers; translators and scholars; Sigvatr, Saxo, and Stephanius; Percy, Johnstone, and Turner. This traumatic fantasy shapes a nation’s history. The ‘dismal sacrifice’ of one Anglo-Saxon king’s sovereignty allows Alfred to claim a greater reward for all of England.

---

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
While Turner arranges his *History* to make sense of something incomprehensible, he remains horrified by these stirrings and signals that come from without and within. Consequently, as Turner reflects upon his *History*, he buries Ella’s blood eagle within its Preface:

On comparing their documents with our own, he [self-referentially, Turner] was struck with the resulting fact, that the great Danish invasion, by which Alfred and his brother were so afflicted, was not a casual depredation, but a deliberate attack to revenge the death of the celebrated Ragnar Lodbrog. The circumstance, which gave system and meaning to what appeared before to be incoherent and unconnected, occasioned further researches, and it at last became apparent, that the inattention of our writers, to the Northern documents, had filled their histories with obscurity and mistake.\(^{57}\)

One event, which Turner concedes as ‘the circumstance,’ not only explains ‘the great Danish invasion’ but also ‘gives system and meaning’ to the ‘incoherent and unconnected’ events of Anglo-Saxon history. This circumstance, upon which Turner previously elaborated in his narrative but does not name in his Preface, is the torture by blood eagle of Ella of Northumbria. Turner’s elusive and obscurantist lexical choice denies Ella’s presence. Likewise, Turner’s syntax, which locates ‘the circumstance’ as the subject of a new sentence that succeeds ‘the great Danish invasion’ that ‘afflicted Alfred,’ confuses the sequencing of these events. Turner obfuscates, obstructs, and renders inaccessible the scene of Ella’s death. He anasemically disables Ella’s bloody shape. These processes of encryption shield Turner from recognizing that he is inhabited and haunted by restless specters that have caused him to tear apart the body, render the mouth voiceless, and ravage the territory of an Anglo-Saxon sovereign, while writing an Anglo-Saxon history. Consequently, Turner cannot mourn Ella. He can neither speak his grief for the death

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 2:vii.
of this Northumbrian king nor express his shame in causing it. So Turner hides Ella. He locks his blood-eagled body away where no one will find it with language that disregards Ella’s death as merely ‘the circumstance,’ thus dislocating it from its place in the narrative. In an act of double encryption, Turner installs Ella’s captive body and his muted voice with those of Ragnar and the ‘Indian.’ To the unspeakable traumas of colonialism, he adds the unvoiced shame of nation-building, a fantasy of incorporation that is as inhuman, savage, and tortuous as that of Empire.

*From the Death of Egbert* and its companion volumes initially received mixed reviews, and despite Turner’s continuous revision and republication (he revised the *History* until this death in 1849) it took almost 70 years for its seven editions to sell about 4500 copies, the last of which were purchased by scriveners and shipped to America in the 1870s. Nonetheless, Turner’s *History* was highly influential during the first half of the nineteenth century. Longman ledgers record that Turner’s 1820 third edition — its most popular and fastest-selling *History* — was purchased by romantic writers Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey, popular historian Charles Mills, and former Bombay judge, Whig MP, and professor at East India Bombay College, Sir James MacKintosh. Shortly thereafter, the 1824 edition of *The Library-Companion* recognizes Turner alongside John Lingard as ‘among the most eminent of those of our living historians,’ and, much later, Turner’s biographer for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* recognizes the *History* as ‘a work which

---


59 In a telling move, the posthumously published seventh edition (1852) removes all of Turner’s Prefaces, the content of which had, over the course of revision and republication, replaced *Krákumál* and Ragnar’s death with the British empire as the inspiration for his *History*.

60 Longman Manuscript, Records of the Longman Group, University of Reading, MS 1393/1/A7/164, 623.

61 Ibid.
was to have a powerful influence on historical thought for the succeeding half-[of the nineteenth]century.62

Perhaps because of its celebrity status as a popular rather than a scholarly text, Turner’s *History* was discarded in favor of other narratives of the Anglo-Saxon period written by Stubbs, Green, and Freeman. As these nineteenth-century historians were replaced by a new generation of twentieth-century scholars, Turner’s *History* became not simply old-fashioned but untenable, and Ella’s blood eagle, encrypted long ago within the tomb of the *History*, was an entirely forgotten sacrifice. Yet, as Abraham and Torok explain, while ‘the dead do not return to join the living,’ they ‘lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences. To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are destined to haunt.’63 From the mid-1940s through the mid-twentieth century, the blood eagle begins to stir, appearing first in the dismissive comments of Frank Stenton’s monumental *Anglo-Saxon England*. First published in 1943 amid World War II, Stenton returns Ragnar to the spoken shores of Anglo-Saxon history in chapter eight, ‘The Age of Alfred’:

At the end of the eighth century each of the three Scandinavian peoples of historic times formed a nation…. The invasions which deflected the course of English history in the ninth century arose from internal movements among the peoples who commanded the entry to the Baltic Sea, and at the court of Charlemagne were regarded as forming a single kingdom of the Danes.64

---

From Denmark, the Great Army descends upon East Anglia, and, after a year in England, it turns towards Northumbria, where it encounters Ælla:

The contemporary account of these events in the Chronicle shows that he [Ælla] had barely come into power before the Danes were on him, and, if disproof were necessary, would disprove the famous Scandinavian legend that as king in York he had killed Ragnar Lothbrok, the father of Ivar and Halfdan, by throwing him into a pit infested with snakes.\(^{65}\)

After almost a century of Anglo-Saxon histories that have left Ragnar and his sons unmentioned, Stenton’s Anglo-Saxon History, written and published during England’s darkest hours of war, turns to the myth and poetry of Ragnar and his Death Song as a means of explaining historical threats to English sovereignty by outsiders. In the 1940s, England’s national other is no longer Napoleonic France or Britain’s own imperial self, but Nazi Germany. Amid English wartime propaganda and Churchill’s statements about ‘Hunnish’ barbarians, Ragnar’s name and the ‘Scandinavian legend’ of simple ‘disproof’ rise to Stenton’s historical consciousness with ironic force as couched signifiers of German invasion and the threat of Nazi empire. To combat such a mythic threat, Stenton turns to Alfred’s defenses, arguing that Alfred’s fleet of ships mark the beginnings of the English navy, and he concludes the chapter, ‘[i]t thus becomes important evidence of the new political unity forced upon the various English peoples by the struggle against the Danes.’\(^{66}\)

In the wake of World War II, interest in the blood eagle was rekindled by a group of Stenton’s fellow Oxford academics. Its inarticulate signals grow louder in the prose of Gabriel Turville-Petre and Gwyn Jones.\(^{67}\) A few years later, as Roberta Frank ob-

---

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 247.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 276.

serves, ‘the significance of the blood-eagle was heralded in the 1974 Stenton Lecture when J.M. Wallace-Hadrill made available the then-unpublished observations of Alfred Smyth’. 68

What happened to Duke Seguin in 845, when he was captured and put to death? *Occisus est.* Or Archbishop Madalbert of Bourges in 910? Dr. Alfred Smyth has advanced some reasons for holding that as late as the eleventh century the Vikings practiced ritual sacrifice of important victims of Odin, in the form of the blood-eagle. That is, the victim, after being a target for javelins or arrows, was stretched face-downwards over a stone, so that his ribs could be torn upwards from the spine in a shape suggestive of an eagle’s wings. Finally he was beheaded. Examples of this practice may have included: King Ella of Northumbria, Halfdan son of King Haraldr Harfagri of Norway, King Edmund (a victim, like Ella, of the great Danish Viking Ivar), King Maelgualai of Munster, and just possibly Archbishop Ælfheah if Thietmar is to be trusted. It may also be noted that where one source will report little more than *occisus est,* or will concentrate on some aspect of the torture reminiscent of earlier Christian martyrdom (as, use of arrows,) another will betray the essentially complex procedure of the sacrifice. It happened in Scandinavia, in Ireland and in England. I am presuming Francia was not exempt. 69

As if to acknowledge what Stenton only dared to allude, 70 Wallace-Hadrill’s Stenton Lecture describes an intricate ritual that

---


70 Note that Wallace-Hadrill’s lecture begins, ‘It seems fitting that a lecture bearing the name of the man who, more than any other historian, has enabled us to understand the English Danelaw…Sir Frank Stenton was wonderfully at home with Danish settlers and their problems while at
adds javelins, arrows, body-stretching, and decapitation to the blood-eagling process. He explains this ‘ritual sacrifice’ as a practice that punctures and hacks away at all material surfaces, rendering a person without recognizable voice, physical form, or identity. Yet Wallace-Hadrill can correctly identify the blood eagle torture and name its victims by bracketing his own statements with the italicized Latin verb phrase, ‘occicus est.’ From this untranslated, undisclosed, and, moreover, encrypted expression—a passive construction that allows for all kinds of terrible deaths71—Wallace-Hadrill identifies the blood eagle, explains its procedures, and turns to Ella as its first unquestioned victim. *Occisus est* is rhetoric fraught with equivocation. Consequently, Wallace-Hadrill begins with a question: What happened to Duke Seguin and Archbishop Madalbert? *Occisus est.* And he ends with a statement: the precise and ‘essentially complex’ descriptions of the blood eagle are *occisus est.*

Wallace-Hadrill delivers his 1974 Stenton Lecture in the wake of three decades of intensive decolonization. Beginning with India, which won independence in 1947, Britain’s empire had fallen apart. It lost Asian, Middle Eastern, and African territories in the late 1940s and 1950s, and these conflicts were followed by the abrogation of its remaining African lands in the 1960s. The changes taking place within Britain’s empire reflect those elsewhere in Europe during the post-war period, and Michael Wintle explains this worldwide decolonization process as ‘symptomatic and emblematic of Europeans having to accept that their role in the world had changed radically, and then for the worse in terms of power politics.’72 As the British empire contracts and

---

71 Wallace-Hadrill quotes here from Adémar de Chabannes, an eleventh-century French monk and historian. Note that as the passive, indicative, active conjugation of ‘occido,’ *occisus est* is an expression that implicates any number of deaths by beating, smashing, crushing, slaughtering, and torturing, to name a few variations.

its identity adjusts ‘for the worse,’ mid-century historians reconsider and fiercely debate the impact of the Vikings on medieval Europe. They begin to challenge (or defend) the predatory image of the Vikings, the violence of their conquests, and the lasting impact of their engagements with other European peoples. Amid these discussions, the blood eagle begins to stir. Its phantom presence, encrypted within Turner’s colonial *History*, can be felt in the scholarly conversations that circulate around the Vikings. The blood eagle locates what Abraham and Torok call a ‘gap’ in narrative that points toward an unspeakable secret. As Abraham and Torok explain, these gaps and secrets — these phantoms that arise within a subject’s memory — are not generated by her own traumas. They are skeletons in the closet, ‘postmemories’ that are not experienced by the children of parents who have been traumatized but come secondhand ‘as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself’.

As Schwab writes:

> it is almost as if these children become the recipients not only of their parents’ lived memories but also of their somatic memories. Children of a traumatized parental generation, I argue, become avid readers of silences and memory traces hidden in a face that is frozen in grief…without being fully aware of it, they become skilled readers of the optical un-

---


74 Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 171.

conscious revealed in their parents’ body language…. The second generation thus receives violent histories not only through the actual memories or stories of parents (postmemory) but also through the traces of affect, particularly affect that remains unintegrated and inassimilable.\textsuperscript{76}

Wallace-Hadrill, a ‘child’ of an imperial generation of nineteenth-century scholars, has become the ‘recipient’ of his ‘parents’ lived and somatic memories: their silenced and encrypted colonial losses and traumas. He bears no responsibility, no guilt, and no shame in this but has been, nonetheless, affected by it. Consequently, Wallace-Hadrill, like many other medievalists of his generation, has become a ‘skilled reader’ of his parents’ ‘optical unconscious,’ the ‘traces of [scholarly] affect,’ and the parts of an ‘unintegrated and inassimilable [history].’ Like others who bear witness to the blood eagle, he recognizes that some unspeakable secret — some gap, some \textit{occisus est} — has been passed down from another’s historical memory to his own. A century later, however, as Wallace-Hadrill eyes Ella’s encrypted body, voice, and Northumbrian territory, these bloody outlines do not form the sacrificial shape of a nation but map the entirety of northern Europe: ‘it happened in Scandinavia, in Ireland and in England. I am presuming Francia was not exempt.’\textsuperscript{77} In the post-war twentieth century, an era during which Europe’s nations have given up the majority of their empires, an era in which their political futures are uncertain, Wallace-Hadrill finds the unspeakable gaps and secrets of the ninth century and arranges them the best way he can: in the shape of a Viking empire marked by blood-eagle butchery.


\textsuperscript{76} Schwab, \textit{Haunting Legacies}, 14.
\textsuperscript{77} Wallace-Hadrill, \textit{Early Medieval History}, 225.
that offer an eerie acoustical echo of Turner’s narrative voice.\(^78\) While James Campbell, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald write that its ‘particularly gruesome’ operations ‘involved ripping a victim’s lungs out of his rib-cage’ in a sacrificial ritual that dedicates the bodies of Ella and other victims ‘to Othinn (the Scandinavian Woden),’\(^79\) Roberta Frank and Bjarni Einarsson dispute whether or not the practice was ‘a conspiracy of romantic hopes’ or a ‘refined method of execution [that] seems thus to have been reserved for royals.’\(^80\) Despite two rounds of arguments between Frank and Einarsson, neither side reached consensus.\(^81\) *Saga Book*, the journal in which the concluding exchanges were published, however, did: it placed the debate’s final episode under one heading, ‘The Blood-Eagle Once More: Two Notes,’ and featured Frank’s and Einarsson’s comments side-by-side.\(^82\) *Saga Book*’s flagging editorial interest and historical equivocation foreshadow the blood eagle’s reception history from the 1990s forward. Aside from another round of debate between Smyth and Frank,\(^83\) the blood eagle no longer makes headlines.

---


\(^81\) For the first volley of debate, see Roberta Frank, ‘Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse,’ which was countered by Einarsson, ‘*De Normannorum Atrocitate,*’ to which Frank responded in ‘The Blood-Eagle Again,’ *Saga Book* 22, no. 5 (1988): 287–89.


In discussions and debates among Stenton, Wallace-Hadrill, and Smyth, as well as Frank and Einarsson, along with other mid-to-late-century historians, the blood eagle functions as an effect of secondhand trauma. One might argue that, as scholars turned to the blood eagle, they compulsively acted out hidden wounds as a means of healing — that they exorcised encrypted ghosts of empire by speaking a heretofore silenced shame. But did they? In the 1990s, as the nations of post-imperial Europe began to imagine transnational and global futures, interest in the blood eagle faded. It has been over a decade since scholars have weighed in on the ritual, and most have edged away from wholehearted belief in the practice. Yet, the blood eagle consistently finds its way into the passing comments, footnotes, and bibliographies of contemporary scholarship. It lingers quietly in the academic margins as a figment, a specter, a ghost. Its restless figure, an unmourned and unmournable body of Empire, is a long-term effect of nineteenth-century colonization and twentieth-century decolonization.

In ‘The Underdeveloped Image: Anglo-Saxon in Popular Consciousness from Turner to Tolkien,’ Tom Shippey asks why, despite nineteenth-century England’s power as a global empire and Western hegemony, its Anglo-Saxon history has been all but forgotten and left in the medieval shadows of Arthurian and Viking worlds. Shippey proffers: ‘I suggest that the developing and potentially powerful image of Anglo-Saxon origins was sacrificed during the nineteenth century to the needs of an Imperial and a British, not an English ideology.’ Shippey speaks here of a
metaphorical sacrifice, and he explains its genesis as a response to pressures within and upon the British empire. Over the course of the nineteenth century, he argues, Anglo-Saxon cultural identity was not expansive enough to manage non-English nationalist traditions developing within the British archipelago. Yet, as a host of Western European countries clamored to claim their Germanic origins, a Saxon identity was too non-specific to be the exclusive property of Britain. England, Shippey suggests, ceded memory of ‘the developing and potentially powerful image of Anglo-Saxon origins’ in exchange for greater, immediate goods, some of which endure into the twenty-first century: the wealth of its remaining colonies, a global *lingua franca*, and a position of international cultural and political prestige. In its ‘post-Imperial situation,’ however, Shippey points out that these Anglo-Saxon sacrifices have left England ‘suffering from an identity crisis caused by the retreat from Empire.’\(^{86}\) Shippey’s comments\(^{87}\) speak of a future for England at the turn of the twenty-first century that is, arguably, shared by its Anglo-Sax-

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 235.

\(^{87}\) As a counterpoint to his 2000 article, I mention briefly a subsequent essay by Thomas A. Shippey, ‘Tolkien, Medievalism, and the Philological Tradition,’ in *Bells Chiming from the Past: Cultural and Linguistic Studies on Early English*, eds. Isabel Moskovich-Spiegel and Begoña Crespo García (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 265–79, that, perhaps unwittingly, revises his response to the question of why Anglo-Saxon studies is in decline: ‘Tolkien’s professional speciality continues its long decline. Compulsory Anglo-Saxon has lost its long struggle for survival at Oxford, the same has just been decided at University College London, and my successor at Leeds (also, of course, Tolkien’s successor) tells me heart-rending stories about the trouble he has had to keep Anglo-Saxon on the curriculum even as a minor option — the situation is even worse in most American university departments of English. People love Middle-earth. They have no time for the Middle Ages. Why this enormous contrast?’ (265–66). Shippey responds to his own question with a statement that is, itself, a response to the stirrings of an old guard discussed at length in this book’s introductory chapter. He points to Tolkien, the Grimm brothers, and nineteenth-century philological traditions in which ‘the study of literature should never be separated from the study of language, and the history of language. The refusal to see this by departments of English, in Britain and America, has been a disaster for the subject’ (274).
onists, who find themselves struggling to maintain a toehold in English Studies. While Shippey’s language of sacrifice reverberates acoustically against Turner’s ‘dismal sacrifice’ and Wallace-Hadrill’s ‘ritual sacrifice’, his is not an encrypted rhetoric, but a mourning call—a cry to look to the past without nostalgia and to acknowledge a history that is no longer tenable. Shippey’s own contributions to nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon historiography and literary appropriation, along with those of many others, could be perceived as similar modes of mourning and, possibly, of exorcism. In recognizing the ties that have bound Anglo-Saxon studies to Anglo-Saxonism, medieval studies to medievalism, the identity politics of nations and empires to those of their academies, Shippey seems to desire a scholarly self-awareness that would loosen the knot between narratives of early medieval history and of national-imperial ideologies.

Is this time of mourning over, though? Or has it yet arrived? The postcolonial ‘turn’ has come to Anglo-Saxon studies and with it an archipelagic view of the field. But how sharp is its arc if, as Aranye Fradenburg argues, we are located and write within an ‘ambivalent, indeed melancholic, relation to modernity’ that has not, as of yet, mourned its ‘archaic signifiers’?

As an oblique response to these questions and Fradenburg’s cautionary words, this chapter now turns to popular culture, where, in

---


the post-9/11 decades, the blood eagle’s notoriety has soared. It is defined by online sources such as Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary. It is the name for online gaming groups, pagan religious organizations, and heavy metal bands. It has been the subject of various internet discussion boards, some of which advocate

91 Warhammer, Planet Tribe, and the no longer available BattleField 2 have co-opted it as a name for online gaming clans. Brakus D’Vehne, a member of Blood Eagle Talon Prime Tribe, states, ‘They call us butchers, murderers, and worse, as if pretty rules govern war. Heh. There’s only one rule: win! Whatever the cost! If the other tribes are too soft, we’ll carve the blood eagle on their sorry carcasses and carry the remains as banners into battle. It’s simple: Win and live. Lose and die’ (Sons of Ma’as, Tribes Webring, http://som.iwarp.com/main.html). On a smaller scale, the recently created role-playing game, ‘Blood Eagle: Skirmish Warfare in the Legendary Dark Ages,’ asks, ‘Have you ever wanted to replicate the bloody feats of heroism you see in The Thirteenth Warrior movie and the Vikings! TV series?’ (‘North Star Military Figures’).

92 Blood Eagle Kindred is a New England chapter of the Ásatrú Alliance, a religion that practitioners claim is descended from Northern Europeans. A short list of songs include ‘The Sons of the Dragon Slayer (Blood Eagle)’ by Rebellion; ‘Blood Eagle’ by Ritual In Death; ‘Blood Eagle Sacrifice’ by Cobalt; ‘Blood Eagle’ by The Wound Man; ‘The Blood Eagle’ by Vreid; ‘Blood Eagle’ by Amon Amarth; ‘Blood Eagle Wings’ by Anthrax; and ‘Blood Eagle’ by Firespawn. The lyrics of these songs emphasize overwhelmingly the story of Ælla and Ivar, Ælla’s tortured body, and Viking conquest of England. A handful of bands likewise have adopted the Vikings as figures of racist agendas, and several have chosen the blood eagle as a signifier of these politics. Blood Red Eagle, an Australian RAC / Viking Rock band of the early 2000s, describes its music as ‘heavily influenced by the traditional Scandinavian Viking Rock style before it was pacified by many of the weak politically correct “acts” of today, Viking Metal, Folk metal, while still retaining their roots as a skinhead band with an aggression to match.’ The now-defunct website, BloodRedEagle.com, had weblinks to the white power organizations, Blood & Honour, Volksfront International, and Hammerskin Nation, all sites now discontinued.
Connections between Nazism and neo-Nazism, Odin, and, by proxy, the blood eagle, run deep. In the ‘Culture and Customs’ segment of Stormfront.org, the discussion board of the Stormfront White Nationalist Community, many of its threads concern Scandinavia and the Vikings. One entitled ‘viking blood eagle’ addresses the veracity of the practice. Discusants differ in their historical opinions, but all are fascinated. One writes, ‘[m]ost of us here are pissed off that it appears to be a myth.’ Another Stormfront.org thread begins with the comment, ‘[w]ell im looking for a good looking tattoo, that dont just blatantly stand out and scream “im a racist” but also want something some may notice every now and then,’ [sic] see ‘help me with a tattoo, please.’ Among the suggestions, pangerjeager responds: ‘I would recommend the “Blood Eagle.” This is the one with wings swept down and head to the left. Often it is clutching a reath [sic] in its claws. It is also known as the “Sentries Eagle.” If you ever see a ring of this sort, chances are the wearer is involved with law enforcement, especially amongst the military types. In the graphics gallery it is featured with a swazi in a wreath, but there are version [sic] with claws outstretched w/o the swazi. I have had this tatt for a while and when people see it they usually associate it with European [sic] flags of various sorts, but racially aware usually associate it with white pride. Also Thor’s hammer (Mjolnir) is a good one, especially with runes on the head.’ These posts extend the reach of the blood eagle further into the company of white supremacists as a stand-alone symbol of racism. Likewise, pangerjeager’s suggestion of a tattoo with a graphic that is ‘associate[d]…with European flags of various sorts’ displaces further the rite from its Scandinavian origins by conflating the Viking blood eagle with German nationalism and Nazism. In this context, the blood eagle becomes a frightening code for State-sponsored racial violence and torture.

While contemporary fictions most often associate the blood eagle with Nazi and neo-Nazi movements, the blood eagle has leached into post-9/11 on-line conversations about America’s relations with the Islamic Arab world. In a posting about Al-Qaeda member Zacarias Moussaoui’s 2006 testimony, one participant, Othala, writes, ‘Give him a blood eagle and cover him in pig grease and bury him facing south. :beer: / and tell all of the terrorists this is what is awaiting you if you attack us. :yes:' Email to a thread, ‘Moussaoui Says He Was to Hijack 5th Plane,’ in CurEvents.com discussion forum, site now discontinued.

In the discussion topic entitled, ‘How Do You Think Saddam Should Be Punished?’, respondent Evil Engineer writes, ‘give him a blood eagle and fly him from the witehouse [sic] flagstand, to show other countries not to fuck with america. [sic] Or give him a sex change operation and force him to live with the Taliban: email to a thread, ‘How Do you Think Saddam Should Be Punished?’ in Tribal War discussion forum. In another
wake of 9/11 attacks that remind America of its identity politics as both a nation and an empire under threat, the blood eagle makes its restless presence felt. It is no surprise, then, that in popular fiction and television, the relationship between Nazi movements, Al-Qaeda, and the blood eagle is revealed by way of medieval history.\textsuperscript{96}

In Craig Russell’s 2005 novel \textit{Blood Eagle}, Jan Fabel is Chief Commissioner of Hamburg, Germany’s murder unit. He begins to investigate the deaths of two women killed within a twenty-four-hour time-span. Their bodies are mutilated, but it is not until he visits his former medieval history professor that he learns of the blood eagle and begins to put together clues that link a former SS officer, the Hamburg Cell (the al-Qaeda group that masterminded the 9/11 airline attacks), and a shadowy arch-criminal who operates with tacit protection by anti-terror departments of the American CIA and Germany’s Bundesnach-

richtendienst because his military experience in Afghanistan makes him a valuable ‘source of information on al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations.’ In the following year, David Gibbins’s novel, *Crusader Gold*, signals more clearly the integral and dangerous role that medieval historians play in tracking down the blood eagle. During archaeologist Jack Howard’s search for the lost Golden Menorah of Jerusalem, he discovers that Viking armies plundered the menorah during their raids on Constantinople. Nazis attempt an excavation in Greenland to find it, and, in the process, a group of Nazi archaeologists recreates the ‘félag,’ a Viking secret society that tortures errant members with the blood eagle. When Maria de Montijo, a medieval historian from Oxford, and Father O’Connor, a Catholic priest and medievalist by training, hear about the Nazi félag, they engage in the following exchange:

> ‘The outline of an eagle was carved on the back of the victim, while he was still alive,’ Maria said quietly. ‘Then they cut away the ribs and ripped out the lungs.’
> ‘God almighty.’ Even Costas was at a loss for words.
> ‘They haven’t used it yet on one of their own,’ O’Connor said. ‘But at the Einsatzgruppen trial one of the Jewish survivors spoke of a rumor that SS officers had carried out something like this on a group of prisoners, using his ceremonial dagger.’

Gibbins enmeshes Viking lore with Nazi history, and the blood eagle is registered as a Viking signifier for Nazi barbarisms. Yet, at the moment at which it is introduced into the plot, it is linked to unspeakability. Maria, whose mother is a Holocaust survivor, ‘quietly’ explains the procedure, to which ‘Even Costas was at a loss for words.’ O’Connor references the ‘rumored’ possibility that ‘something like this’ may have been carried out by the Einsatzgruppen, and Gibbin’s turn to the Einsatzgruppen trials

---

echoes the unsayable and therefore cryptic nature of the blood eagle.\textsuperscript{99} Late in the novel, we learn that the blood eagle is not a figment of history but a murderous agent against its medieval historians, when Maria finds the body of Father O’Connor, who has been blood eagled by the neo-Nazi Pieter Reksny.

In the post-9/11 world of crime fiction and historical fantasy, only medieval historians have the capacity to locate the blood eagle. Yet the ambivalence and, moreover, the silence of ‘real’ medievalists towards the blood eagle’s ghostly presence has left popular culture to its imagination. Likewise, this silence by medievalists has given agents of popular culture permission to act as though they were medieval historians. Most notably is the History Channel’s television series, \textit{Vikings}, the narrative of which follows the figure of Ragnar Lothbrok. From its first season in 2013 to its fourth season, which spanned 2016–2017, the death of Ragnar in King Ælla’s snake pit and the subsequent blood-eagling of Ælla by Ragnar’s sons has been a narrative through-line of the series. After a glimpse of Ælla’s snake pit in Season 1, in Season 2 Ragnar describes the blood eagle before enacting it upon fellow Viking Jarl Borg.\textsuperscript{100}

The offender gets down on his knees and his back is opened with knives. And then, with axes, his ribs are chopped away from his spine. And then his lungs are pulled out of these

\textsuperscript{99} The Einsatzgruppen were a special unit of the SS, which operated as death squads in Eastern Europe, killing over a million Jews between 1941 and 1943. Their commanders were tried in post-Nuremberg military tribunals held by the U.S. Government. As part of the Court’s opinion and judgment, it wrote: ‘a crime of such unprecedented brutality and of such inconceivable savagery that the mind rebels against its own thought image and the imagination staggers in the contemplation of a human degradation beyond the power of language to adequately portray’ (‘Nuremberg Military Tribunal,’ Vol. IV, 412, ‘The Mazal Library: A Holocaust Resource,’ http://www.mazal.org; ‘Nuremberg Military Tribunal,’ Volume IV, Page 413, ‘The Mazal Library: A Holocaust Resource,’ http://www.mazal.org).

huge, bleeding wounds and laid upon his shoulders, so they look like the folded wings of a great eagle. And he must stay like that, suffering, until he dies. If he suffers in silence, he may enter Valhalla. But if he screams, he can never enter its portals.\textsuperscript{101}

As Ragnar describes the practice, his hands slide forward and grip the front of a bathtub in which he is soaking so that they are parallel with his shoulders. As ‘his ribs are chopped away from his spine,’ Ragnar lifts his hands, drawing them around his own back in order to show the site of ‘these huge, bleeding wounds.’ Recounting its steps not only draws Ragnar forward in the bath, as if in anticipation of the event, but also engages his own body as locus of the blood eagle. Likewise, the \textit{lentissimo} with which Ragnar explains the process — each step joined by an ‘and’ as the slow, but eerie strand of a violin begins to accompany his words — implicates a sensual intimacy with the practice, one that is accented by his place in the warm water of a bath.

When the torture is finally enacted, Ragnar appears dressed as a priest, and the blood eagle is staged as a night-time ritual sacrifice. Although it is introduced by the close-up shot of a snake, which recalls Ælla’s snake pit of Season 1, and also foreshadows Ragnar’s own death in the distant future, on this night, Ragnar is not the victim, but the executioner. The camera moves from the snake to Jarl Borg, the intended victim. As Borg is taken from his cell, the snake retreats, and when Borg steps outside, he is met by Ragnar, who is dressed in a long, white robe and standing barefoot on a wooden dais, surrounded by his entire community. Torches light the night; drums beat in unison; spears, skulls, stones, and shells hung from twine decorate the space. The camera slows down the pace of the action, and the only sound that can be heard is the unrecognizable voice of a man, whose chant is accompanied by a bell and other ambient sounds. As Borg approaches the dais, he makes eye contact with many of Ragnar’s Vikings, all of whom look silently and

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
unflinchingly back at him and at the elevated platform where he will be blood-eagled. This, the viewers of The History Channel are to understand, is not revenge but a serious and meaningful act, and they are asked to participate in it, watching, for over three protracted minutes—from Ragnar’s initial cut on Borg’s back to the final extraction of his lungs. As all eyes silently gaze on Ragnar’s bloody but unseen operations, and Borg remains open-eyed, unspeaking, and unflinching despite his immense pain, viewers are asked to mimic the behaviors of the characters on screen: to watch, open-mouthed but silent, at the ritual severity of its practice and to acknowledge Ragnar’s priestly status.

Again, absent the voices of ‘real’ medievalists, The History Channel takes on this role, supported by the Viking’s creator and writer, Michael Hirst. In an interview with Curt Wagner of the Chicago Tribune’s redeye, Hirst articulates his own faith in the practice:102

It [the ‘Blood Eagle’ episode] is a totally extraordinary TV event, I think. And one of the things I’m proudest of…it’s a profound experience of suffering and spirituality in the Viking context. And if it wasn’t in a Viking context it would be like watching, I guess, the crucifixion of Christ….It is a very profound and a very real experience. In other words, it actually happened to people. It’s not fancy. It’s not made up. It’s not for show. It’s a profound spiritual experience.

For me this is what Vikings is [sic] all about. This is where we are. This is real; it’s honest. It’s about spirituality. It’s about profound things. It’s not a joke.

…

It was like being present at some extremely wonderful, sacrificial, frightening event. And I just wanted the opportunity to say that. For me, it’s a very, very important moment in television history.

---

Hirst expresses a terrifying romance with the blood eagle and, upon waxing poetical with respect to its ‘profound spiritual experience,’ states that ‘this is what Vikings is all about.’ Is Hirst referring to the historical Vikings or to the Vikings of The History Channel? Does he consider himself a Viking? While Hirst’s interview statement is ambiguous, his words not only point back to the sensuality of Ragnar’s description and the reverential silence of the Viking community in the recently aired ‘Blood Eagle’ episode. Moreover, they foreshadow the events of Season 4, in which the long-awaited blood-eagling of Ælla takes place. In an episode titled ‘Revenge,’ Ragnar’s sons nail Ælla’s hands to a horizontal beam, and as a hot blade is inserted into his back, Ælla’s cries are heard by King Ecbert of Wessex, who sits up in his bed, looks up, and calls out ‘Christ.’ Unlike Ragnar’s priestly performance, in which the camera showed only the bloody evidence of the blood eagle, this time Ælla’s back, pieces of bone, and finally his entire blood-eagled body are on display. After four seasons of preparation, the Vikings, the Vikings, and their American viewers are ready for the intense scopophilia of this event. When Ælla’s blood-eagled body is hoisted, with outstretched arms, into the air, everyone is asked to believe, with Christian faith, in the ‘profound spiritual experience’ of Ælla’s blood-eagling.

In the world of network television, the dates of TV shows are plotted months, if not seasons, in advance. Yet ‘Revenge’ aired two days before Donald Trump’s 2017 presidential inauguration, a temporal proximity that is uncanny, if not down-right chilling. As Stephen Frosh argues, ghosts signal the future as well as the past, and Ælla’s blood eagle is that spectral haunting which, in the decades since 9/11, has increased the frequency of its signals as American politics take up the banner of ethno-nationalism. Yet the failure or, rather, the inability of early medieval historians to contemplate and speak openly about the blood eagle marks its cryptic presence in the field. As Kath-
leen Biddick cautions, when ‘the consequences of the fathers’ work still elude acknowledgement,’ a discipline’s ‘disavowal of them[, its ‘excluded objects,’] actually reflects an inability to historicize the discipline’ and therefore to mourn the objects and narratives which have created it.¹⁰⁴

The blood eagle is that encrypted specter — that excluded object — passed down from Sharon Turner’s imperial psyche to those of his children, a post-imperial generation of Anglo-Saxon historians. As a ghost of Empire, it haunts the unconscious quarters of the discipline, keeping the field of Anglo-Saxon history unmindful of its presence and therefore unable to engage fully in the process of mourning. Yet psychic crypts are often positioned next to material ones, and, consequently, while cryptic hauntings impact the mind, they likewise impact the body. The next chapter searches out these material crypts by examining the writings of another father of the interdisciplinary field of Anglo-Saxon studies, eighteenth-century barrow digger and early medieval archaeologist James Douglas. Douglas spends his life stepping into and out of Anglo-Saxon graves, and his archaeological report, *Nenia Britannica*, bears witness to the affective displays of interminable grief that arise from standing too close to the skeletons of the racialized, Anglo-Saxon dead.