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## The Great Heathen Failure: Why the Great Heathen Army Failed to Conquer the Whole of Anglo-Saxon England

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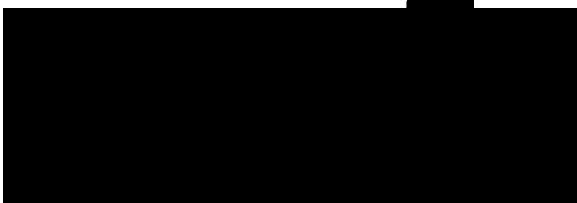
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May, 2019

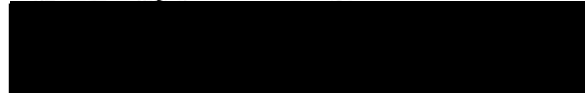
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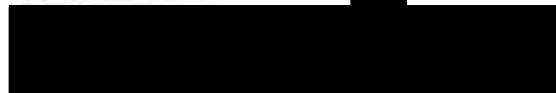
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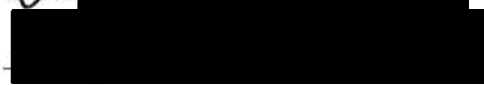
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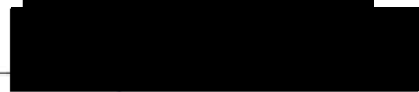
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THE GREAT HEATHEN FAILURE: WHY THE GREAT HEATHEN ARMY FAILED  
TO CONQUER THE WHOLE OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty  
Of the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
In Partial Fulfillment

Of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Of  
Master of Arts  
In History  
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By

Ryan MacNeill

## Abstract

In the year 865 CE, a coalition of Viking forces combined to form an army aimed at the conquest and settlement of England. Known as The Great Heathen Army, these Vikings managed to capture most of the territory that today constitutes England with the notable exception of the English kingdom of Wessex. And so, despite many successes, they failed to conquer all of English territory. Though these events, which transpired throughout the 860s and 870s, are well documented, the Viking perspective is rarely taken into account and there has yet to have been an argument that pinpoints how and why the Great Army was defeated. The purpose of this thesis will be to determine why the great army failed in their attempt to conquer all of the lands that belonged to the Anglo-Saxons. The coalition of Viking forces failed for many reasons, but, on a basic level, it seems that they were insufficiently prepared for the invasion, they did not account for local factors in England and how these factors would undermine their momentum, and they divided their forces, as many of the original members of the army preferred to settle on the lands they had already conquered rather than help a new wave of Vikings fight in Wessex, especially after so many Viking leaders had already died. All this led to a series of decisive defeats that in turn affected morale and determined who controlled the field armies.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. J. Edward Lee for his directions, advice, and conversation during this project. Much of my Master's Degree in History was time spent and taking courses with Dr. Lee. Therefore, it is only fitting and proper to say I would not be where I am without the presence of Dr. Lee as both a professor and Director of Graduate Studies in History.

Many thanks to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Josephine Koster and Dr. Jason W. Silverman, for taking the time to assist me throughout this literary endeavor. Their comments, suggestions, and assistance have been second to none. While only taking one course with Dr. Koster, I knew right away she would be a wonderful and vital asset to this project. Though Dr. Silverman has retired from the university, I have been one of many fortunate students to have been able to take courses with him and staying in touch as well.

A very special thanks and dedication to the advisor and leader of my thesis committee, Dr. Gregory Bell. This thesis would not have come to fruition, nor finish, without the assistance and guidance of Dr. Bell. He allowed this project to be of my own development and creation, though was steadfast in steering me in the right direction throughout. The amount of time and effort Dr. Bell put aside to help me make my argument, as well as reinforcing it, deserves recognition and praise. Never have I come across a professor whose in-depth thoughts and comments on students' writings were so thorough and concise. My interests in this subject, as well as Medieval History as a whole, would not have been initiated had it not been for Dr. Bell's history courses I had the luxury and privilege of taking.

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## Introduction

In the year 865 CE, a coalition of Viking forces combined to form an army aimed at the conquest and settlement of England. Known as The Great Heathen Army, these Vikings managed to capture most of the territory that today constitutes England with the notable exception of the English kingdom of Wessex. And so, despite many successes, they failed to conquer all of English territory. The events, which transpired throughout the 860s and 870s, are well documented, but the focus of modern scholarship has been on the movements of forces, the battles that were fought, the leaders who fought them, and even the size of the great army, not to mention what occurred after Alfred's triumph. While all of these subtopics are important and contribute to our understanding of the Great Army, there has yet to have been an argument that pinpoints how and why the Great Army was defeated. In large part, scholars have been more interested in who or what the great army was, who led them, what they did, and what happened after their downfall, not the reasons for their loss.

The purpose of this thesis will be to determine why the great army failed in their attempt to conquer all of the lands that belonged to the Anglo-Saxons. Why did they fail? How close were the Vikings to achieving their ultimate goal? And what was at stake? What would happen to the English if the Vikings had succeeded? The coalition of Viking forces failed for many reasons, but, on a basic level, they were insufficiently prepared for the invasion and they did not account for local factors in England, such as

the Danegeld, and how these factors would undermine their momentum. Upon arrival, they divided their forces, making them vulnerable to being picked off one-by-one, and they had not decided whether they wanted simply to conquer or to settle, too. Further, they had not considered the effect that the Danegeld might have on their operations, and how money available in England might alter their strategy and decision-making. All this led to a series of decisive defeats that in turn affected morale and determined who controlled the field armies. A variety of primary sources are relevant to the events surrounding the invasion of the Great Heathen Army. These include the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (most specifically the Winchester and Peterborough manuscripts), *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Historia Regum*, *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons*, and the *Doom Book or Legal Code of Alfred the Great*. Articles and journals discussing archaeological discoveries found in former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms along with territory previously occupied by the heathen invaders will be part of the process as well. The archaeology findings complement and hone information found in contemporary accounts and literature.

Many of the primary sources focus on the Anglo-Saxon narrative. *Asser's Life of King Alfred* is a biography of King Alfred written by a Welsh monk named Asser. Asser was the Bishop of Sherborne and then worked as a member of Alfred's court. The biography is one of the most significant sources that chronicles the life of Alfred, including his dealings with the Viking invaders. The *Historia Regum* is a historical compilation that presents material regarding the Kings of Britain. It is a useful primary source depicting Old English and Northumbrian history. The *Doom Book* was a code of



laws compiled by King Alfred in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. This book contained a series of laws and judgements that Alfred wanted to incorporate into his dominion along with surrounding English kingdoms.

Some primary sources offer more information on the Viking perspective. *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons* is a saga telling the story of a legendary Viking king named Ragnar. The story goes that his sons were the men in charge of the great army that stormed into the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It is one of the few sources available revealing a Scandinavian perspective of events during the time. The *Annals of Ulster* are a concise historical record of medieval Ireland. The annals mention Viking agreements, colonies, and invasions into Ireland. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are a collection of annals that record the cultural, political, military, and religious history of the Anglo-Saxon people. At first glance, this source appears to address the Anglo-Saxon perspective; however, some versions of this chronicle do look specifically at the Vikings. A portion of the records, most specifically the Winchester and Peterborough manuscripts, chronicle the invasion and campaigns against the Great Heathen Army. The chronicles reveal the most detailed information of the great army and the events that unfolded during the army's existence. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are one of the most important and critical primary sources that will be implemented and incorporated into this project.

While there exists a small number of books or written material specifically addressing the Great Heathen Army, most of the secondary literature relating to this subject is part of the larger historiography that explores the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms prior to the formal establishment of England. This material generalizes a broad

scope of major figures and events that took place throughout the English kingdoms. Some discuss the reign, significance, and impact of King Alfred the Great, his defense of the kingdom of Wessex, as well as his efforts to suppress Viking invasions and incursions, arguing that his actions were essential to protect and save Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from Danish rule and occupation.

Three sources that focus more closely on Alfred the Great are the *Medieval Life of King Alfred* by historian and medievalist Alfred Smyth, *Alfred: Papers from 11<sup>th</sup> Century Conferences* by German and British historian Timothy Reuter, and *Alfred The Great: Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* by professor, military and political specialist Richard Abels. In *Medieval Life of King Alfred*, Smyth questions the traditional narrative about Alfred by examining the accuracy of sources that depict the king and his actions. Although this could discredit Alfred's reputation, for Smyth's focus is more on filling the gaps left by questionable sources, particularly the work of Bishop Asser, who, as noted above, was King Alfred's advisor. Smyth argues that Asser, in some instances, does not hesitate to embellish Alfred's actions, and this leaves little room for the Danish perspective. Reuter was the editor of *Alfred: Papers from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Conferences*, a collection of conference papers on the topic of King Alfred. Together, the authors contextualize and re-evaluate the king's achievements and developments during his reign. Although only a portion of the book covers the time of Viking attacks and invasions, this nonetheless was a crucial period during lordship and leadership of Alfred. These authors look not only at King Alfred, but Old English and Anglo-Saxon studies as a whole. Old English and Anglo-Saxon literature and culture is influenced and intermingled with that

of their Northern counterparts – the Old Norse language, literature, and culture. A biography and a contextual history, Abels' *Alfred the Great: Kingship and Culture* looks at the overall historical context of Alfred's reign, but emphasizes Asser's material. Subjects such as war, politics, society, and religion are all part of Alfred's story and the events that ensued during his tenure as king. *Alfred the Great* is written chronologically and succinctly, and Abels is fair in assessing both the perceived successes of the king as well as his shortcomings and questionable endeavors such as hiding in the marshes and using Danegeld to prevent further attacks from the Vikings. He personalizes Alfred, which makes for a compelling work, but he also looks at the great army and their attempts to thwart, undermine, and vanquish Alfred.

Other sources focus particularly on laws, judgements, and decrees. *Vikings and the Danelaw*, by James Campbell and David Parsons, is essentially a collection of sources that look at the Danish in England in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. While the overall picture describes Scandinavian culture and influence during and after the existence of Anglo-Saxon England, a closer analysis concentrates on how the Danes attacked and settled on these lands along with how their presence determined what laws were to be introduced and enforced. This book is important because it reveals how the Danes converged with Anglo-Saxon society. No Danelaw would exist without the Great Heathen Army imposing its will upon the English kingdoms. Had it not been for the invasion, the Danes would not have been able to settle in England, nor would they have discovered arable fertile lands to farm and settle on. The book does well in its efforts to include Danish responses and perspectives to English/Anglo-Saxon laws and judgements.

General histories of the period provide context for and describe the world of the Great Heathen Army. While Frank Stenton discusses the progression and establishment of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain in *Anglo-Saxon England*, he also sketches out the reign of King Alfred and the events that transpired during this time. He breaks down the separate English kingdoms and how Viking raids as well as the Great Heathen Army affected each. Stenton emphasizes the movements of allied and opposing forces while also taking time to explain the political history behind the lords and kings of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Two military histories provide details about how war was fought on both sides of the conflict. Guy Halsall's *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West* provides an overview of battles, wars, weapons, and armies of Britain and her invaders. Looking at the fifth through tenth centuries, the book examines some of the first years of recorded Anglo-Saxon history up until the death of King Alfred. Halsall explores how warfare was waged and how the military was constructed to conduct both raids, invasions, and campaigns. Raising an army, training, weapons and equipment, supplies and transportation are among the major categories covered. The book also provides the reader a comparison of the military structure of various kingdoms such as the Anglo-Saxons, Carolingians, and other Post-Roman empires. Of course, it touches on how the Vikings waged war in England and the British Isles, while also explaining the methods and tactics used by the English kingdoms to respond to invasions and raids. Kim Hjardar's and Vegard Vike's *Vikings at War* studies the Viking Age, spanning from the end of the eighth century up until late eleventh century. The book specifically discusses the

offensive and defensive warfare techniques of the Norsemen. Emphasizing tactics, military traditions, and technology, the authors have fused the art of war with the raids and invasions of the Vikings, who attacked anywhere from the North Sea to Spain and Constantinople. Over time, the Vikings moved from plundering and looting to conquest, with the coming of the great army being one of the first instances of the Vikings setting out to conquer a region. *Vikings at War* provides a list of activities orchestrated by the Vikings of the far North to the Mediterranean. The Vikings clearly were concerned with strategy and tactics.

Ryan Lavelle looks at specific and detailed aspects of military operations in *Fortifications in Wessex*, examining the amount of wealth that the English kingdom possessed compared to that of neighboring kingdoms. This provided Wessex both stability and the ability to fortify the kingdom adequately in defense against opposing warring kingdoms and from the invading pagans. Fortifications were vital to the preservation of both Wessex and neighboring kingdoms when the Great Heathen Army attacked. Wessex was the kingdom that defied the odds and defeated the great army.

Archaeology also offers insights that complement the historical narrative. Martin Biddle wrote an article, “The Viking Great Army in England”, that reveals archaeological evidence of the Great Heathen Army’s existence and presence in Repton (modern day Derbyshire). This article describes excavations of burial mounds and winter quarters of the great army. Bones and grave goods uncovered reveal Scandinavian-style graves and items, further backing the claim that Vikings invaded England in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Carbon-dating and research supports the timeline and claims made by sources such as the Anglo-

Saxon Chronicles. Biddle also debunks several historical arguments, and simultaneously brings the great army back to life, uncovering the graves and goods of hundreds of both Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon warriors. Another multidisciplinary work that focuses on archaeology, “Winter Camp of the Viking Great Army”, by Dawn Hadley and Julian Richards examines the site of the great army’s winter camp at Torksey in Lincolnshire. Larger than the winter camp discovered at Repton, the Torksey camp excavations reveal that Vikings chose this ground as a base of operations due to its natural barriers and defenses. Evidence shows the likelihood that, at one point, thousands of warriors, craftsmen, and merchants wintered at the camp. It was also an ideal location to access natural resources and trading of wood, metal, and pottery. The archaeological findings provided by Hadley and Richards underscores just how little is known about the Viking invasion of the ninth century. That said, this book provides a description of the lifestyle and activities at the Danish camp during the occupation.

Although the Vikings had much success in what is today the British Isles in the decades before the invasion of the Great Heathen Army, their offensive failed. Why? In the literature, little is said about why the Viking army was unsuccessful or how close the army was to reaching their goal. In looking at sources written at the time and archaeological records coupled with cultural, military, economic, and social histories, it becomes clear that the Vikings failed because they did not have a clear overall strategy or purpose at the outset of the invasion, they divided their forces between Wessex and Northumbria, the Danegeld influenced their operations, and, of course, they decisively lost on several occasions. In other words, though they were aggressive, the Vikings did

not sufficiently prepare. Nor did they consider the impact that local factors in England would have on their military operations. In the end, the Viking army was forced to disband and negotiate for peace.

The organization of the chapters in this thesis reflects this purpose. The first chapter tells the story of invasion that took place between the years 865 and 880 CE. After setting the stage for the first invasion, the chapter provides an overview of the basic chronologically culminating with the eventual attack on the Kingdom of Wessex. Chapter two looks at the purpose(s) of invasion, exploring what the Vikings did in their preparations and what this says about their intent. Chapter three sets out to understand the significance of the Danelaw, a kind of tribute used to temporarily halt Viking attacks. Late in the campaign, a second wave of Vikings joined the original expedition. Chapter four examines how this new group got along with the original Viking forces, and seeks to understand how this relationship affected the outcome of the overall campaign. Chapter five will discuss the impact that King Alfred of Wessex had, looking at the defeat of the army and the steps he took to preserve Anglo-Saxon England as well.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Great Army, not all aspects of the invasion were deemed a failure. Many of the men who fought in the army and traversed the Anglo-Saxon countryside as invaders settled within the lands granted by King Alfred. He allowed them to settle on land that they had conquered prior to their defeat in Wessex. So, while the whole of Anglo-Saxon England was not conquered, the Vikings invaders did end up settling down in the region. While Alfred the Great was able to stop a complete conquest and handed the Vikings a major defeat that forced them into making a

settlement, Alfred had to concede some rights to the Vikings in order for a relative peace to take place.

That said, Alfred did have some success, and the invasion helped shape the Kingdom of Wessex. To counter the Vikings, Alfred had built fortified towns, enacted conscription and taxation laws, and constructed military roads. These measures would discourage further invasion. While many raiders and warriors chose to settle, those who continued to fight found little to no success. Many of these Vikings became impoverished, and turned, once again, to raids, especially into Gaul.

The Great Army failed in their attempt to conquer the whole of Anglo-Saxon England, though their efforts were significant enough to leave an indelible mark on Anglo-Saxon history, the Viking Age, and the history of Medieval Europe as a whole. In the end, it seems the Vikings failed at their invasion because of their own actions and a willingness to continue traditional Viking raiding practices such as acceptance of tribute as opposed to Alfred the Great's actions alone.



## Chapter One: The Great Heathen Army Embarks and Invades the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms – A Military Overview

While the Viking invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in 865 CE was likely the defining event of the lives of the people it affected, the story of the invasion is not well-known to general audiences today. Therefore, while looking at why the Great Heathen Army eventually failed, it is first necessary to sketch out what actually happened. The invasion did not take place in a vacuum, and even seemingly small and tangential events may leave hints as to why the expedition was unsuccessful. So, what happened? It seems that in addition to containing remarkable warriors, the Great Heathen Army implemented some effective strategies that led to initial success against the Anglo-Saxons. However, when it came to the overall goal of the expedition, the Vikings do not appear to have been on the same page, with some focusing on settlement rather than conquest; others were busy fighting conflicts beyond Saxon borders, and they gave their enemies too much time to recover. In the end, Alfred the Great would capitalize on these flaws and put an end to the Viking advance.

Due to the lack of definitive Scandinavian primary sources from the Early Medieval Age, along with the heavily outweighed amount of primary material written favoring the Anglo Saxons, the origins of this story are based on one of the most famous Icelandic Sagas: *The Tale of Ragnar Lothbrok*. The tale not only recounts the exploits of Ragnar, a legendary Danish and Swedish hero/ruler, but it also provides an explanation as

to why and how The Great Heathen Army came to be. In fact, *The Tale of Ragnar Lothbrok* is the only known written material that tells the story of the Great Army and its beginning. The saga recalls how the Viking Ragnar conducted a bold and audacious raid into the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria.<sup>1</sup> Although he led a relatively small raiding party, Ragnar wanted to demonstrate that he had earned his reputation, especially after the recent successes of his sons Bjorn, Halfdan, Ubba, and Ivar in similar raids.

Unfortunately for Ragnar, the raid into Northumbria was a disaster. All of his warriors were killed, and Aella, the king of Northumbria, captured him. King Aella then ordered Ragnar's execution, commanding that he be thrown into a pit of venomous snakes. Ragnar's last words were prophetic. "[H]ow the little piggies will grunt when they hear how the old boar suffered."<sup>2</sup> Ragnar's words are both a warning and testament suggesting that his sons will avenge him when they hear of the death of their father. There is no doubt that King Aella knew the repercussions of his actions. Further Viking retaliation was likely, though it becomes clear that Aella did not expect the avenging army to be of this scale and magnitude. As soon as the sons of Ragnar heard news of their father's death, they immediately began preparations to gather a large army, invade the Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and vanquish the Northumbrian king Aella.

Aside from the desire to avenge their father, Ragnar's sons were of royal blood and were experienced warriors, so it should come as no surprise that Ivar, Bjorn, Halfdan, and Ubba organized the invasion. However, the preparations were slowed when it

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Waggoner. *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*. Lulu.com. Troth Publications, 2009, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 65.

became clear that this was not just a retaliatory raid. All able-bodied men who had lived under Ragnar were called to arms and to avenge his death.<sup>3</sup> Years were spent gathering clans, families, and communities from all around what today constitutes the region of Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark). Because there were so many participants, the Vikings had to collect far more supplies including food, water, men, and ships. In other words, they were orchestrating the launch of a major invasion of Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>4</sup>

While it was clearly a sizeable expedition, the extent of the Great Danish Army has been a topic of major debate with conflicting variables and numbers. Historians have found the army to be anywhere from one thousand warriors to ten thousand.<sup>5</sup> While the primary material available does not provide figures, it is possible to look at previous Viking raids and incursions into Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Viking raids prior to this invasion have been chronicled and overviewed. There were numerous instances throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> century where several hundreds of ships arrived on Saxon shores, with each ship holding, at minimum, roughly twenty to thirty warriors. Obviously, not all ships were the same size and were used to specifically board warriors; food, water, weapons, clothing, and other supplies had to be stored in ships built for these specific purposes as well. These stats, along with data on the size and number of ships used in

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Hjarðar, et al. *Vikings at War*. Casemate Publishers and Book Distributors LLC, 2016, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 257.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Halsall. *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*. Illustrated, Reprint ed., Routledge. Psychology Press, 2003, p. 128.

earlier invasions, suggest that hundreds of Viking ships were built to hold thousands of soldiers. The sources are clear that this was a substantial army, and, since Ragnar's sons were set on invading, it is entirely possible that there was a substantial amount of men, ships, and supplies conglomerated to create a considerable fighting force.

While the four sons were the top military commanders of this Great Heathen/Danish Army, the rest of the force would be led by subordinates such as jarls. A jarl was in command of the men from his community or kingdom, and so often personally led a large detachment of men. This would ensure the trust, reliability, and familiarity of those within the ranks of the larger army. The Jarls and their subordinates joined for a variety of reasons, although at the top of the list was the opportunity to acquire wealth as they plundered and conquered Anglo-Saxon lands. Another major reason was that there was a lot of land to be had if they could defeat the Anglo-Saxons. The more land that was taken, the more arable land the Vikings could farm and settle.

By the year 865, the Great Heathen Army was ready to embark on its journey westward and launch one of the largest invasions of the British Isles up to that point in history. The Great Army had to cross the North Sea. However, when it saw the English shores, the Vikings soon discovered that the Anglo-Saxons had improved their infrastructure, enhancing the defenses along the island's southern and south-eastern borders.<sup>6</sup> Although they seem to have intended to land in the kingdom of Wessex, this region was now well defended, so the army instead decided to land in the less well-

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<sup>6</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 125.

defended kingdom of East Anglia. Given the presence of strengthened defensive fortifications, the Vikings must have been aware of the economic, political, and military superiority of Wessex. While they did eventually invade and try to conquer the kingdom, they first had to establish a beachhead for the army so that supplies could be transported inland safely. East Anglia became the prime target.

When the army landed in East Anglia, it captured the kingdom quickly and with little to no resistance. Edmund, the king of East Anglia, surrendered without a fight, believing it was best for him and the people of his kingdom to survive if they complied with the wishes of the Vikings.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, Anglo-Saxon kings could raise a Danegeld, a collected tribute, to offer the Vikings so that they would leave. In this case, the locals raised money hoping the Danegeld given to the army would convince it to leave, but instead the Vikings remained and began to confiscate all valuables.<sup>8</sup> One major demand of the Vikings was for Edmund to provide horses. These campaigns tended to be long and drawn out. The Great Heathen Army would not be able to travel and conquer one kingdom to the next without moving quickly through the countryside on horseback.<sup>9</sup> During the Viking occupation, King Edmund acted more as a puppet king, doing as he was told until 869 when the great army traveled back to East Anglia to eliminate Edmund once and for all. While it was necessary to conquer and occupy East Anglia, the next target was the kingdom of Northumbria. It was there that the Great Army would unleash

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Swanton. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. 2, Illustrated, Reprint, Reprise ed., Orion Publishing Group: Phoenix Press, 2003, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>9</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 242.

its wrath and avenge the death of Ragnar by eliminating Anglo-Saxon resistance and killing King Aella.

The Vikings remained in East Anglia well into the year 866, stripping the countryside of its food and resources. This included the autumn harvest, which was essential for the survival of the inhabitants of East Anglia.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the Viking leaders used scare tactics and propaganda, forcing the Anglo-Saxons to pay bribes and give tribute (Danegeld). With the bulk of the great army already in the confines of East Anglia, along with the acquired wealth and supplies, the Vikings were only becoming stronger and more formidable.<sup>11</sup> The great army used the already conveniently available old Roman roads, which had been created centuries before. These roads would be vital for transportation and communication to implement the strategies of the Northmen. Now that they had established a foothold in Anglo-Saxon England, the Vikings were poised to push northward into the kingdom of Northumbria.

Northumbria was enticing. Of course, by killing King Aella, the Vikings could avenge the death of Ragnar, but Northumbria was also the gateway to the North. These were the lands of the Scots and Picts, where there were more opportunities to loot and plunder. Northumbria could act as a launching point, eliminating the treacherous task of having to navigate the sea route around Scotland. Further, rich farmland surrounded York, the capital of the Northumbrian Kingdom. As they moved northward, the Vikings

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<sup>10</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>11</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 274.

found they already had a lot of influence in York. York was the center of commerce in the region.<sup>12</sup> Trading between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians had taken place over the past few centuries, and this meant that the Northumbrians knew much about Scandinavian religion, culture, and customs as well as their sympathies. The population of York was seemingly mixed enough for the people to be content with the arrival of Viking forces from the South.<sup>13</sup>

The Great Heathen Army arrived at York in late 866, on All Saints Day. The attack was deliberate and without warning, and the Northumbrian king, Aella, fled. After a year of preparations, the Vikings captured York without a battle. Aella was not done, however; he wanted to bolster his Anglo-Saxon army and combine them with other regional Anglo-Saxon forces.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he took too long to raise a larger army. As the Anglo-Saxons had strengthened their defenses while the Vikings prepared an invasion, now the Vikings improved the defenses of York. King Aella took four months to raise an army and gather the necessary supplies.<sup>15</sup>

It was at York where the Vikings would display their maturity in combat tactics and cunning style of warfare. The Vikings chose to leave an opening in a section of the Roman walls around York in an effort to lure Aella and the Anglo-Saxons into a trap.<sup>16</sup> Traditional combat of the time called for both sides to meet each other in pitched battle

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<sup>12</sup> Frank M. Stenton. *Anglo-Saxon England*. Illustrated, Reprint ed., vol. 2, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 231.

<sup>14</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 233.

<sup>15</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>16</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 146.

along an open field; the Vikings avoided pitched engagements as often as they could, but knew the trap would prove successful.<sup>17</sup> The Anglo-Saxon forces poured into the unguarded opening, though as soon as they entered, they found themselves outmaneuvered. Viking forces appeared out of nowhere from previously constructed woodworks and defenses, launching a counterattack on Aella. The street fighting in York was chaotic and brutal, but the defenses proved impregnable to the attackers, as most of the Anglo-Saxons were wiped out when they ran into the trap on the outer wall. In the fighting, Aella was captured by the defending Viking army and was subsequently killed.<sup>18</sup> While the Anglo-Saxon chronicles claim King Aella was killed during the battle at York, the Tale of Ragnar's Sons claims that he was taken prisoner after the battle and then murdered by being submitted through a "blood eagle."<sup>19</sup> This was a pagan ritual death sentence in which the individual was grotesquely hacked from his back and then his lungs shoved outward; the lungs would act and move like an eagle, hence the name.

After the Great Heathen Army was victorious at York, the Vikings installed a puppet king named Egbert as the new king of Northumbria.<sup>20</sup> Egbert did as they said while also collecting taxes from the Northumbrian population. Those who refused to pay taxes or offer tribute had their belongings and commodities stolen or were killed.<sup>21</sup> These taxes would, in turn, fund the Great Heathen Army.

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<sup>17</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 244.

<sup>18</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>19</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Not be confused with Egbert of Wessex.

<sup>21</sup> Shane McLeod. *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*. Illustrated ed., vol. 29, Brepols, 2014, p. 245.



The strategy of the Great Army went beyond fighting Anglo-Saxon armies. They ravaged one kingdom after another, attacking churches, villages, towns, capitals, and strongholds. Often Anglo-Saxon property was either ransacked or burnt. People had their possessions taken while the countryside was stripped of its natural and man-made resources. Clearly, this meant that all of the Anglo-Saxon people suffered in what we consider today as total war.

The Vikings had succeeded in their original goal of avenging Ragnar's death, but they clearly had ulterior motives. By 867, the Great Heathen Army was already in control of nearly half of Anglo-Saxon territory, both from the North and Southeast. With East Anglia and Northumbria under Viking control, the Vikings were poised to take the neighboring wealthy and powerful kingdom of Mercia.

Shortly afterwards, the Great Danish Army, primarily led by Ivar, the military leader of the expedition and a son of Ragnar, set its eyes upon the kingdom of Mercia. The city of Nottingham in the heart of the kingdom fell with little to no resistance. As was done in York, Ivar and his forces began to fortify the city of Nottingham, using the city as a defensive base of operations. The Vikings were confident in their defensive strategy of forcing the Anglo-Saxons to come to them.<sup>22</sup> The Vikings were so sure of their success that they spent the entirety of winter in their Nottingham base, away from

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<sup>22</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 78.

their ships. While the availability of old Roman roads meant horses were vital to the campaign, ships provided an escape route down navigable rivers to the sea.<sup>23</sup>

As soon as the King of Mercia, Burghred, heard the news of the fall of Nottingham, he quickly and wisely called upon the assistance of King Athelred of Wessex. Burghred probably knew he could not withstand the onslaught of the Great Heathen Army, and so, like Aella before him, he sought the aid of other Anglo-Saxons. In King Athelred, Burghred had a significant ally.

By the next spring, both King Athelred and Burghred marched to Nottingham, hoping to eliminate the Viking threat or force them to surrender. This was one of the few opportunities the Anglo-Saxons had in which they were favored to bring victory. The combined forces of Wessex and Mercia outnumbered Ivar's defending Viking force in Nottingham.<sup>24</sup> On top of numerical superiority, the Viking ships remained in the river banks, which meant that the Vikings were cut off from supplies and reinforcements. Without contact from the outside world, the Vikings could not be reinforced whereas the Anglo-Saxons were local, and therefore had an easier time feeding their army. They likely could bring in additional troops, if necessary.

From this point on, every choice Ivar made was a gamble, and the situation was certainly dire for the Vikings. On the one hand, while his own men were hardened veteran warriors, leaving Nottingham to face a combined Anglo-Saxon army would

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<sup>23</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 267.

certainly lead to heavy casualties. On the other hand, if Ivar remained within the defenses of the town, disease and starvation would likely consume his army. Ivar was well aware of the risks he was taking, having to supply not only his men, but also the animals, especially horses, that remained within the defending walls.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the odds stacked against him, the Vikings chose to remain inside of Nottingham rather than wage pitched battle on open ground. Fortunately for Ivar, the Anglo-Saxons also had troubles with their army and supplies. Despite the fact that they were local, since Athelred and Burghred possessed a larger army, they were the ones who struggled to feed their followers. To make matters worse, because they were local, the armies of Mercia and Wessex contained peasants who had limited terms of service. They were unable to stay away from their farms and the harvest for any length of time. Ivar had enough food to sustain his forces.

Ultimately, therefore, Ivar's decision to stay put in Nottingham worked in his favor. The harvesting season quickly came upon the men of Wessex, forcing them to withdraw from the siege. This severely depleted the amount of Anglo-Saxon men, now solely led by Burghred. As for Ivar, he restricted the amount of food each warrior could consume, betting that his men could sustain such diets longer than Burghred's forces.<sup>26</sup> This also demonstrated the Vikings ability to wield superior administrative skills than that of the Anglo-Saxons. With the situation becoming more and more hopeless, the

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<sup>25</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 285.

<sup>26</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 270.

Mercian army began to suffer from desertions. Although Ivar had the upper hand, situations on both sides must have been grim, as the Vikings offered Burghred a truce. While the exact terms were not revealed, Ivar abandoned his fortifications at Nottingham and returned to York. The Mercians likely provided the Vikings with the supplies and Danegeld that convinced the Great Army to temporarily abandon their position.<sup>27</sup> Ivar subsequently departed for Dublin Ireland, for what appeared to be personal and political concerns.

Ubba, Ivar's younger brother, was left in command of the Great Heathen Army, and he decided to remain in Northumbria during his brother's absence. For an entire year, there was little to no conflict in Northumbria. This suggests that under Ubba, the Viking reputation for violence and ravaging was kept in check.

By 869 CE, however, Ivar had rejoined the Great Army, bringing with him reinforcements as well as new plans for further conquest. Ivar's plan was to divide and conquer. He would take a portion of the Viking army, sail down the coast, and land in East Anglia. Meanwhile, Ubba would attack Northumbria. Perhaps wary of the need for access to reinforcements after the failure of the previous campaign, Ivar would control the coastline and have easy access to reinforcements via the North Sea. The rivers would give them access to the heartlands of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>28</sup> The objective was for the two Viking leaders to meet at Thetford, a religious and political center of East Anglia,

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<sup>27</sup> Cathal Macmagnusa Maguire. *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*. Reprint ed., Hardpress Ltd. Forgotten Books, 2013, p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 279.

and force King Edmund to submit. However, the grand prize was Cambridge, located in the heartland of East Anglia.<sup>29</sup> Its location was significant because it rises above boggy ground and provides a practical crossing of the Cam River. There were Roman roads connecting London to York, and Cambridge sat on one of these roads. It was also an important port, allowing travelers to move from the river out into the North Sea.<sup>30</sup>

Ubba first took the town of Peterborough and then headed to Thetford. When news reached King Edmund that Peterborough had been sacked, he immediately called upon his levies and the militia to gather and defend Thetford and Cambridge. However, Ivar arrived before Edmund could muster up the bulk of his levies, who were instead focusing on Ubba.<sup>31</sup> Ivar quickly attacked the defenses at Cambridge and after a skirmish, Edmund was forced to withdraw. Ivar sent a message to Edmund asking for a truce, but the deal was contingent on a large payment to Ivar and Edmund committed to becoming a client king in East Anglia.<sup>32</sup> Edmund refused, saying he would only accept the offer if Ivar converted to Christianity. After receiving Edmund's reply, Ivar once again attacked, capturing Edmund, and killing many Anglo-Saxons. Still defiant, Edmund called for Ivar to repent and stop the violence. Ivar ordered Edmund to be tied up to a tree and the Vikings shot arrows at him until he was dead. Ivar appointed another puppet king and used him to collect tribute. By 870-871, the Great Heathen Army had shattered three of the four major Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

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<sup>29</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 200.

<sup>30</sup> Fabius Ethelwerdus. *The Chronicle of Athelweard*. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>32</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 282.

Wessex was the last remaining stronghold of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It did not come under immediate threat from the Vikings because Ivar was called upon elsewhere once more. A colleague and companion of his, the Norwegian Viking King of Dublin, Olaf The White, requested his assistance in capturing Dumbarton Rock, North of Northumbria.<sup>33</sup> It was a major fortress occupied by a collection of Pictish people who, combined, comprised the Kingdom of Strathclyde. This time, Ivar's brother Halfdan became the leader of the Great Heathen Army while he was away. By 871, Ivar and Olaf returned to Dublin in triumph, having effectively wiped out the Kingdom of Strathclyde. With the spoils of victory came an immense amount of wealth, supplies, and slaves that were transported back to Dublin.<sup>34</sup> Two years later, Ivar died. His death left a major void in the ranks of the Viking high command. Olaf The White remained as King of Dublin, while Halfdan and Ubba were left as co-commanders of the Great Heathen Army.

His brothers had not waited for Ivar, and their actions suggest that they saw themselves as taking over his role as overall leader of the Great Heathen Army. In the previous winter, at the end of 870 CE, Halfdan had gathered supplies and linked up with other Viking forces crossing into the continent.<sup>35</sup> As early as 871, well before Ivar's death in 873, his brothers had already begun an assault on Wessex. They took Kent in East Anglia (near the border of Mercia), which served as a point of departure on the border with Wessex. A puppet ruler was duly appointed in Mercia. Working with his brother, Halfdan took overall lead of the expedition. Their intention was to find the Royal Army

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<sup>33</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 281.  
<sup>34</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 284.  
<sup>35</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 276.

of Wessex and face off in one major pitched battle. If they won, they would be in control of all of Anglo-Saxon England.

Despite the Vikings' initial success, King Athelred and Alfred of Wessex were not so easily bowled over. Shortly after the capture of Kent and the installment of a new puppet leader, the Royal Army of Wessex launched a surprise attack on a detachment of Viking forces foraging in Southern England. After a quick skirmish, the Viking foragers retreated back to fortifications in Reading.<sup>36</sup> Thinking this was the bulk of the Great Heathen Army, Athelred and Alfred jointly led the Royal Wessex Army to Reading. When they arrived, they found only a light guard protecting the outside perimeter. They decided to overwhelm the outside defenders, not realizing that it was another trap. The Royal Army wiped out the token force of Vikings at the wall and immediately stormed the defenses, even bringing down the walls and gates protecting the entrance into Reading.<sup>37</sup> However, Viking defenders, waiting for a signal, suddenly emerged and ferociously counterattacked. The battle was long and hard-fought, but in the end the Vikings prevailed. The Royal Army was forced to retreat. Units were separated and the Anglo-Saxons found themselves scattered all across the kingdom.<sup>38</sup> King Athelred and Alfred barely managed to escape, slipping through the enemy by crossing a ford of the Thames River.

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<sup>36</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 285.

<sup>37</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>38</sup> Ryan Lavelle and Donato Spedaliere. *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066*. Illustrated ed., Bloomsbury Publishing Oxford, 2012, p. 87.

In this conflict, the Vikings had once again demonstrated they were able to defend themselves. At York, Nottingham, and Reading the Vikings defended themselves from Anglo-Saxon advances, and each of these were crushing blows. The inability to win against the Vikings, despite being on their home turf, must have hampered their morale.<sup>39</sup> However, a defensive strategy could only get them so far. While Reading was a great victory for the Vikings, Halfdan must have realized that to win, he would have to eliminate the Royal Army of Wessex and kill both King Athelred and Alfred.

Though he had lost at Reading, Athelred regrouped his forces at Abingdon Abbey, an auspicious location because it was easy to track the Vikings' movements from this position. Due to the openness of the terrain, it was difficult for Halfdan and his forces to travel without being noticed. Anglo-Saxon scouts could carefully observe them. No sources indicate that Halfdan cared.<sup>40</sup> Just days after the debacle at Reading, Athelred was informed by scouts that Halfdan was on the move, heading toward him, once again using old Roman roads as a familiar means of transportation. He seemed to want to avoid a serious pitched engagement. Unlike Ivar, Halfdan chose to remain close to the Thames River, where he had quick access to his ships. Knowing where the Vikings were and observing that they likely wanted to evade battle, Athelred and Alfred positioned themselves near Ashdown, southeast of Reading, and waited to intercept the Vikings.

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<sup>39</sup> Ryan Lavelle. *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*. Illustrated, Reprint ed., Boydell Press, 2012, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 286.



In the year 871, the Vikings reached the Anglo-Saxon lines, prompting Anglo-Saxon forces to hold the high ground around the town. In an effort to outflank Athelred, Halfdan ordered his army to split in two. Alfred, anticipating such a maneuver, requested Athelred's permission to split the royal army in two, with both sides fighting both halves at once.<sup>41</sup> Athelred quickly granted Alfred his wish, and the two immediately attacked the Viking army. Surprised by the fury and ferocity of the Anglo-Saxon attack, the Vikings began to steadily fall back. On territory largely consisting of their own farmland, the Anglo-Saxon army fought with desperate courage. The Vikings retreated up a hill, hoping to make a stand against the onslaught of Athelred and Alfred's forces.<sup>42</sup> Both armies formed shield walls. Alfred was the first to successfully crack the Viking shield wall, and this led to chaos. The fighting was intense hand-to-hand combat and at close quarters. After a lengthy contest, the Great Heathen Army was forced to withdraw.

After a series of defeats across Anglo-Saxon England, which led to the death of thousands, Athelred and Alfred finally delivered a desperately needed victory. However, while Ashdown was proclaimed a significant victory, it also came with huge losses. With many of their experienced warriors gone, the Anglo-Saxons were left with a pyrrhic victory.<sup>43</sup> Further, much of the army of Wessex was comprised of local militia whose service was only required on a temporary basis. To make matters worse, many of the men

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<sup>41</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 288.

<sup>42</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 198.

within the ranks were only concerned with defending their home territory. They were not fighting for the king and his kingdom.

With the Viking setback at Ashdown, Halfdan chose to temporarily fall back and regroup at Reading. Though he and his army did not remain idle while rebuilding their strength. He sent parties through Wessex to further strip the kingdom of its resources.<sup>44</sup> A plausible reason for Halfdan regrouping his army at Reading was the timely arrival of a second Viking expedition called the Great Summer Army, led by a Viking named Bagsecg. Now with the Viking forces nearly doubled in size, both Bagsecg and Halfdan were poised to force Athelred and Alfred into submission.

By the spring of 871, the Viking leaders and their men left their base at Reading and began to plunge into the heart of Wessex, plundering and destroying anything in their path. Since it had worked before, the Anglo-Saxons sought to confront the Vikings in battle. Just before Easter, both the Anglo-Saxon and Viking forces once again met in what would be considered a decisive and pivotal engagement during the battle of Marton/Meretum.<sup>45</sup> No extensive detailed account of this battle remains. It is not even known where the battle took place, however the town of Dorset, where Athelred was buried is a plausible location. It is clear a major engagement took place. Unfortunately for Wessex, after a tremendous slaughter from both sides, the Vikings won.<sup>46</sup> To make

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<sup>44</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 290.

<sup>45</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>46</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 292.

matters worse for them, King Athelred died shortly after the battle, likely from injuries sustained during the fight.

With the passing of Athelred, the Kingdom of Wessex faced a dire situation. The crown should have been passed to Athelred's young son, but, given the circumstances, it was instead passed on to his younger brother Alfred. Given his constant participation in the conflict, fighting from the beginning of the invasion in 865, leading up to 871, Alfred knew how desperate the situation was for Wessex and its people. While the army had fought courageously, all efforts seem to have been futile. The Vikings controlled virtually all of the eastern half of the kingdom, and they had already conquered the other three Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>47</sup> The Vikings continued to be relentless, attacking Alfred and his troops even while he was burying Athelred. Alfred managed to muster up resistance, though after a series of skirmishes the Anglo-Saxons were forced to flee. In a desperate attempt to quell the fighting and prevent further death and destruction of the kingdom, King Alfred sued for peace. In what seemed to have been a surprising decision from the perspective of the Vikings, Halfdan and his new Viking companion Guthrum agreed—at least for the time being.<sup>48</sup>

With roughly seven to eight years into the conflict, Alfred obviously had good reason to sue for peace, but the Vikings also had something to gain. While there was the issue of so many casualties, many members of the Great Heathen Army simply wanted to

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<sup>47</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 295.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Abels. *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. Routledge, 2013, p. 127.

settle down in the conquered lands rather than continue fighting. Men within the ranks of the army were largely accustomed to plunder and enjoy the captured loot. However, since Halfdan had been using the army to conquer, the Viking soldiers no longer had as many opportunities to simply loot. After years of fighting and a number of pitched battles, morale was likely low.<sup>49</sup> In exchange for peace, Guthrum and Halfdan were granted an annual payment made by the Anglo-Saxons called Danegeld along with the eastern portion of the Kingdom of Wessex. This meant the Vikings had a buffer state between them and the natives, who were surely upset at their incursions. By the year 873—the same year as Ivar’s death—the Vikings controlled East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, and Eastern Wessex. In fact, it was at this time that Halfdan chose to retire and pull his forces back to a base in London.

Halfdan realized he had to reset his priorities. With the loss of his brother Ivar, his families grip on Ireland and Northumbria was waning.<sup>50</sup> Rebellions were cropping up in both those regions. After spending an entire year gathering supplies in London, Halfdan was forced to march his forces northward to reestablish control in Mercia and Northumbria. The need to defend already-conquered territory only further divided the Great Heathen Army. Its organization was always questionable, as it was a collection of war bands. It is also possible Guthrum and Halfdan had different goals, and this led to division as well as a lack of overall strategy.<sup>51</sup> Once he was again in control of the

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<sup>49</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 310.

<sup>51</sup> James Graham-Campbell. *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress*. Reprint ed., Oxbow Books, 2016, p. 166.

conquered Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Halfdan and his men chose to head north and retire from fighting. Instead, they settled in newly established Danish lands. It is clear while invasion and conquest were a priority, settlement and farming were equally as important to the Vikings. This meant Guthrum and his army had to face King Alfred without the aid of Halfdan's seasoned veterans.

By 875, King Alfred had a significant amount of time to re-establish Anglo-Saxon control and confidence. He also had time to recruit. Always expecting an attack or raid from Guthrum, Alfred kept his men on the field, blocking Viking access to Wessex via the Thames River. Despite these preparations, the Vikings outwitted Alfred. Guthrum, aware of Alfred's intentions, split his army in half. A small detachment of his mounted army slipped across the river at nighttime, and captured the vital port city of Wareham.<sup>52</sup> Alfred discovered Guthrum's movements, though by the time he became aware of Guthrum's departure from Cambridge, the latter was already dug in. While Viking forces crossing the waters along the coastline did not yet arrive, Alfred knew better than to attack entrenched Danish forces.<sup>53</sup> Surprisingly, Alfred once again offered peace. Guthrum accepted and both sides exchanged hostages to prove their armistice was in good faith. However, as soon as King Alfred's forces withdrew, Guthrum slaughtered all of his hostages and sent his army to capture the more desirable fortress at Exeter

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<sup>52</sup> Alfred P Smyth. *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser*. Illustrated ed., University of Michigan. Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 114.

<sup>53</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 113.

(Southwest of London and Chippenham). If the Vikings could maintain their current position, they would have a stranglehold on the economy and morale of Wessex.

Guthrum's deceitful actions seemed to give him a noticeable advantage. From Exeter onward, Guthrum ravaged the southern portions of Wessex, while also building fortified camps. His fleet was on the other side of the kingdom near Wareham, so he could sail into the heart of the Wessex using the Thames. If his fleet and his army were able to link up, it would mean almost certain victory. Alfred lacked a fleet, so he had to watch events unfold. Everything was falling into place for Guthrum.<sup>54</sup> However, a violent storm struck Guthrum's army. It affected his fleet, too. Hundreds of ships were wrecked, and thousands of men drowned. Guthrum was suddenly outnumbered deep in enemy territory.<sup>55</sup> With no other options at his disposal, Guthrum was forced to request another truce. Alfred accepted the offer and, after chastening the Viking force, allowed it to cross the Thames without countermeasures.

As Alfred had done earlier, the Vikings took full advantage of the peace. The miraculous storm had saved Alfred, but the king of Wessex had also missed a major opportunity to annihilate a significant Viking threat once and for all. Time after time, the Vikings had shown their ability to replenish their forces in relatively short periods, and this situation was no different. Guthrum quickly re-strengthened his army and began a final assault against Alfred and Wessex.

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<sup>54</sup> Lavelle and Spedaliere. *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066*, 91.

<sup>55</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

The wiliness of the Vikings again turned the tide. During the winter of 877, when it was thought that a lull in the fighting would occur, Guthrum launched a major attack on Alfred's stronghold at Chippenham.<sup>56</sup> Guthrum waited until the Christmas season, when Alfred and his men were celebrating, eating, and drinking with family and friends. This caught Alfred by surprise, as he had dismissed the bulk of his army for the holiday and only had his personal bodyguard protecting him. His guards were quickly wiped out and Alfred barely escaped.<sup>57</sup> Alfred and what remained of his bodyguard had little choice but to retreat to Athelney, a wooded island in the marshes of Somerset in Western England.<sup>58</sup> At this point, the power in Wessex was shattered: Guthrum had control of nearly all of Wessex. In addition to his success, his army was bolstered with the arrival of reinforcements led by Ubba Ragnarson, younger brother of Halfdan and Ivar.

In 877 and the early months of 878, the situation confronting Alfred was at an all-time low. He remained in the marshes of Somerset. Driven into exile inside his own kingdom, many of his subjects abandoned him. He had to continually stay on the move, and the likelihood that he would regain his throne must have seemed remote.

However, Alfred was a good leader. He had charisma.<sup>59</sup> He had the ability to inspire and connect with those who remained at his side. Rather than mope while in hiding, he spent his time forming a strategy to defeat the Vikings. Through spies and

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<sup>56</sup> William Henry Stevenson. *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*. Literary Licensing LLC. Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 286.

<sup>57</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Reuter. *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Publishing, 2017, p. 306.

informants, Alfred discovered he had enough loyal followers in the southern portions of the kingdom that he could organize an army that was larger than the one the Vikings had on the field.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, at this juncture, Alfred realized that the Great Heathen Army had to be completely destroyed. Defeating them in a series of battles was insufficient. For the next few months, Alfred waged guerilla warfare against Guthrum and his forces, wearing them down with hit and run skirmishes. Always a step ahead of the Danish forces, by Easter of 878 Alfred was poised to launch an offensive and commit to formidable engagements. Alfred's guerilla tactics worked well against the Vikings. First, it forced the Vikings to spread the army out all across the kingdom of Wessex. They were scattered and their supply lines were stretched thin. This level of resistance also inspired the Anglo-Saxon population, boosting morale and creating a rallying point.

As things began to seem hopeful for Alfred, he was also very lucky. Guthrum sent Ubba on a raid in Devonshire, near Exeter and while on the raid, Ubba encountered an Anglo-Saxon army led by a local noble.<sup>61</sup> A battle ensued and Ubba was killed along with the bulk of his raiding party. Ubba's death prompted Alfred to leave the marshes. The Anglo-Saxon forces he mustered during his stay in Somerset were energized, enthusiastic, and awaiting his return. Alfred requested the assistance of three major shires in the region, with many answering the call.<sup>62</sup> Once he believed his army was ready, Alfred and his newly formed Wessex army marched toward Edington (south of

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<sup>60</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 299.

<sup>61</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 49.

<sup>62</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser*, 311.



Chippenham, near Salisbury). Guthrum was notified of Alfred's movements and quickly reacted, sending his army out of Chippenham southward toward Edington.

It was clear, even before the fighting began, that the battle at Edington would determine whether the Vikings could continue with their conquest of Wessex. Both armies fought behind a shield wall, eventually clashing in fierce hand-to-hand combat.<sup>63</sup> It quickly became a battle of attrition. After many hours of fighting with little ground gained and heavy casualties, the Viking shield wall was broken. Organization within the Viking ranks collapsed and slaughter ensued. The Viking army retreated northward to Chippenham. The Saxon army followed them in pursuit, and besieged the Vikings within the confines of the city.

Guthrum was in a quandary. He was on the verge of success, and now faced a decisive and devastating loss. Not only had his army seen heavy losses, but this particular engagement proved the reputation and prowess of Alfred.<sup>64</sup> Unlike kings before him, Alfred had not faltered in the face of adversity. Guthrum and his forces remained within the defenses of Chippenham for three weeks before his men convinced him to come to an agreement with Alfred. (Stevenson, 282)

The terms were generous considering the circumstances. In what became known as the Treaty of Wedmore, both Guthrum and Alfred came to terms. Alfred gave Guthrum and his men Danegeld and recognized portions of Mercia, Northumbria, and

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<sup>63</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 303.

<sup>64</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, 282.

East Anglia as Danish protectorates.<sup>65</sup> Guthrum agreed to withdraw from Wessex, accept Christianity through baptism, and acknowledge Wessex as a separate independent Saxon kingdom. Alfred became Guthrum's godfather under the name Athelstan, in honor of Alfred's eldest brother who fell in combat.<sup>66</sup> Falling under Danish law and custom, Eastern Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia were granted to former Viking warriors. This territory became known as the Danelaw and would last well into the twelfth century. Guthrum lived the remaining years of his life in peace as ruler of East Anglia until his death in 890. Of those who had been members of the Great Heathen Army, many chose to settle in the Danelaw. Others left England and continued raiding in Francia and elsewhere.

After looking at the overall campaign, the leaders of the Great Heathen Army appear to have implemented a few key practices that led to their initial success. Their strategy seemed to be to quickly take a major city within an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom, fortify it, and then ravage the Anglo-Saxon people. This forced the local king to confront them, and they would then kill the king. Puppet kings were installed, and tribute was expected. Although the Vikings invaded, many of their initial successes were defensive, waiting for the Anglo-Saxon armies to fall into a trap.

A number of factors, however, may well have contributed to their eventual failure. The Vikings appear to have coordinated with other nearby settlements such as

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<sup>65</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 172.

<sup>66</sup> Graham-Campbell, *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Thirteenth Viking Congress*, 176.

Dublin, and so they were actively fighting in various different conflicts throughout the British Isles. This was not just an attack on Anglo-Saxon England, and the other fronts may have detracted from their focus. Further, they were interested in settling. In the long run, conquering was not as fun as looting. They gave their enemies time to recover (especially when Alfred lived on the island in the marshes). Finally, there was disagreement among the Vikings about overall strategy. This was true from the start. When they organized the army, there were a number of people involved. In the end, too, they seem unsure of what to do next. The two Viking leaders, Guthrum and Halfdan, were working together, but they had separate armies. Then Halfdan retired. They certainly were not on the same page, and these divisions, not to mention their tendency to settle after all that they accomplished, would undermine their ability to capitalize on initial successes against the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

## Chapter 2: The Purposes of Invasion and the Preparation Behind It

In the first chapter of this project, a military overview of events revolving around the Great Heathen Army was discussed and dissected. This opened up the opportunity to delve further into the intricacies and minute details surrounding the possible blunders and failures, on the part of the Vikings, to conquer Anglo-Saxony. Chapter two will begin a chronological flow of events and circumstances, deciphering both the purposes and preparation behind the enormous task of building a large calamitous Viking army. Viking leaders and experienced warriors realized the strategy of hit-and-run raids and guerilla warfare had to be altered if they were to successfully launch an invasion of Britain. For over fifty years, Vikings from all over the Scandinavian region of Europe conducted a series of raids, plundering, and killings, each becoming more destructive and larger in scale as years continued to pass. It seemed inevitable for the Anglo-Saxons that these raids would one day turn into an audacious Viking fleet, thousands of men aboard, ready to invade and conquer. Each year, as the raids continued to multiply, Viking leaders and bands of warriors began to better understand all the important factors behind their successes and what can be done in the near future to further the plundering of Anglo-Saxony.

Raids and attacks have already commenced in modern day England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, France, Frisia, and Germany. These were areas where a considerable amount of gold, silver, and other valuable goods could be obtained or salvaged. This also

provided the Vikings with a perspective of location and geography. The Vikings now know where these places are, they know where to go/to land, and have launched raiding parties in areas that have been hit multiple times, giving them an idea of the local terrain, population, and infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> The high volume and consistency of these incursions also allows the Vikings to understand when to attack. They observed the weather patterns, wind direction, status of the sea, enabling them to choose when conditions were most favorable to launch raids into Anglo-Saxony, Francia, and other Christian kingdoms.<sup>68</sup> The Northmen were poised to formulate and make preparations for an ambiguous assault on the lands and foreigners they have become familiar with. The question and task the Vikings now pondered with was how they were going to create such a force that would bring Anglo-Saxony to its knees and into submission. Who and what were to be involved that would orchestrate the likes of which the Anglo-Saxon population never before could have imagined and prepare for?

Due to the lack of definitive and accurate Scandinavian primary sources from the Early Medieval Age, along with the heavily outweighed amount of primary material written favoring the Anglo Saxons, the origins of this story are based on one of the most famous Icelandic Sagas: *The Tale of Ragnar Lothbrok*. The tale not only recounts the exploits of Ragnar, a legendary Danish and Swedish hero/ruler, but it also provides an explanation as to why and how The Great Heathen Army came to be. In fact, *The Tale of Ragnar Lothbrok* is the only known written material that tells the story of the Great Army

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<sup>67</sup> Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 153.

<sup>68</sup> Kim Hjarðar, et al. *Vikings at War* (Oxford: Casemate, 2016), 212.

and its beginning. The saga recalls how the Viking Ragnar conducted a bold and audacious raid into the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria. Although he led a relatively small raiding party, Ragnar wanted to demonstrate that he had earned his reputation, especially after the recent successes of his sons Bjorn, Halfdan, Ubba, and Ivar in similar raids.<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately for Ragnar, the raid into Northumbria was a disaster. All of his warriors were killed, and Aella, the king of Northumbria, captured him. King Aella then ordered Ragnar's execution, commanding that he be thrown into a pit of venomous snakes. Ragnar's last words were prophetic. "How the little piggies will grunt when they hear how the old boar suffered."<sup>70</sup> Ragnar's words are both a warning and testament, suggesting that his sons will avenge him when they hear the death of their father. There is no doubt that King Aella knew the repercussions of his actions. Further Viking retaliation was likely, though it becomes clear that Aella did not expect the avenging army to be of this scale and magnitude. As soon as the sons of Ragnar heard news of their father's death, they immediately began preparations to gather a large army, invade the Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and vanquish the Northumbrian king.

Aside from the desire to avenge their father, Ragnar's sons were of royal blood and were experienced warriors, so it should come as no surprise that Ivar The Boneless, Halfdan, Sigurd, and Ubba organized the invasion; however, the preparations were slowed when it became clear that this was not just a retaliatory raid. All able-bodied men

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<sup>69</sup> Ben Waggoner. *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* (Philadelphia: Troth Publications, 2009), 71.

<sup>70</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 68.

who had lived under Ragnar were called to arms and to avenge his death. Much time was spent gathering clans, families, and communities from all around what today constitutes the region of Scandinavia.<sup>71</sup> Because there were so many participants, the Vikings had to collect an enormous amount of supplies including food, water, men, and ships. In other words, they were orchestrating the launch of a major invasion of Anglo-Saxon England. While the four sons were the top military commanders of this Great Heathen/Danish Army, the rest of the force would be led by subordinates such as jarls. A jarl was in command of the men from his community or kingdom, and so often personally led a considerable force.<sup>72</sup> This would ensure the trust, reliability, and familiarity of those within the ranks of the larger army. The Jarls and their subordinates joined for a variety of reasons, although at the top of the list was the opportunity to acquire wealth as they plundered and conquered Anglo-Saxon lands. Another major reason was that there was a lot of land to be had if they could defeat the Anglo-Saxons. The more land that was taken, the more arable land the Vikings could farm and settle.

While it has been established through the *Tale of the Sons of Ragnar* the immediate or main reason behind the inception of the Great Heathen Army was the death of and vengeance for Ragnar. For the Anglo-Saxons, the reasonings are not so specifically determined. It is plausible to say word of King Aella killing Ragnar would have reached all corners of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, considering the reputation Ragnar and his sons built in their raiding expeditions and exploits back home in

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<sup>71</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 138.

<sup>72</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 72.

Scandinavia. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* only reveal the date of the arrival of the Great Army and the actions that followed; no specific reason behind this invasion is mentioned.<sup>73</sup> There is no doubt King Aella of Northumbria realized that his actions would have repercussions and that he would have to prepare for the worst. However, it's hard to say Aella would have suspected the scale and magnitude behind the birth of the Great Heathen Army and the degree of vengeance the Vikings would wage upon the Saxons. Many Saxons likely figured Ragnar's death would only mean another raid or attack upon British shores, more specifically the kingdom of Northumbria. Due to the amount of strife between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms prior to the arrival of the Vikings, as well as civil conflict within kingdoms themselves, it would be of no surprise if the rest of Anglo-Saxony initially turned away from Northumbria with a blind eye in regards to the execution of Ragnar.<sup>74</sup>

While it has been established Aella was a real person and king of Northumbria during the time, his fate is also a topic of debate. There is no question the sons of Ragnar were present during the Great Heathen invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and, at the very least, one of their main goals was to march into Northumbria and seek revenge against Aella. Once the Great Army took control of East Anglia, it immediately set eyes on Northumbria and quickly avenged Ragnar, delivering a crushing defeat to Aella and his combined Anglo-Saxon force near Jorvik (modern day York). In the process, King Aella was killed, though the circumstances behind his death are uncertain. According to

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<sup>73</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 80.

<sup>74</sup> Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 247.



the sagas, Aella was not only captured, but sentenced to death by means of the “blood eagle” (a gory and graphic heathen execution).<sup>75</sup> However, the Anglo-Saxons claim Aella was killed during the battle for York rather than being captured. While the circumstances of his death are not of paramount importance, they only add to the speculation behind the accuracy and trustworthiness regarding the accounts in both the chronicles and the sagas.

The warrior culture and upbringing of the early medieval Scandinavians meant conflict and warfare would be a constant variable and undertaking for the Viking people.<sup>76</sup> Regardless of location and who was involved, aggression would always present itself if any involvement revolved around the Northmen. On the other hand, the Vikings also sailed to Northwestern and continental Europe in search for new lands to colonize and settle.<sup>77</sup> Scandinavians wanted to find lands more appealing for farming/agriculture. Norway, Sweden, and Denmark presented more harsh climate conditions than Britain; winters were unbearable and the length of the farming seasons were considerably short. While the warriors wanted to plunder and loot wealthy Anglo-Saxon Christian kingdoms, they also wanted to use the land to create a better and more sustainable lifestyle for their families they left back home.<sup>78</sup> The area constituting the Saxon kingdoms presented a more suitable climate to both live and cultivate. While the immediate goal was to invade

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<sup>75</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 121.

<sup>78</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 124.

and conquer, the ultimate achievement was to colonize and settle the conquered lands and further the agricultural lifestyle of the Scandinavian populace.

Based on what has already been said, it appears the defining and ultimate reason for a great invasion of the Saxon kingdoms was the death of the legendary warrior and ruler Ragnar. While this may bear a level of truth, evidence points to multiple reasons for invading Anglo-Saxony. If Ragnar sons, along with like-minded Vikings, wanted to avenge the death of their father, they could have mustered a Viking force large enough to attack Northumbria and defeat Aelle. The army could have been sizeable to the point where they could kill the Northumbrian king, loot and pillage the population, and lay waist to the kingdom. Instead, the size and reach of the Great Heathen Army extended beyond the realms of Northumbria. The army was big enough to capture and conquer the whole of Anglo-Saxony and the army nearly came close to doing so.<sup>79</sup> All the men, weapons, boats, and resources could have been specifically poured into the effort of annihilating Aella and his kingdom. While this has been made clear, the Viking army continued its rampage into the kingdom of Mercia, and shortly afterwards, into the prized jewel that was Wessex. The intentions behind this grand army might have initially been to vanquish King Aella, in the name of Ragnar, though actions and events clearly show the mindset and goals for the Vikings were more complex.

Evidence and events also reveal the possibility of conflicts of interests amongst the upper ranks within the Great Heathen Army. Maintaining the Viking army and

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<sup>79</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 260.

keeping it intact, while also making sure those involved are on the same page were of paramount significance to Viking commanders. Though the tendency to change interests and prioritize certain interests had to have occurred during the duration of preparation. What initially could have been an expedition into Northumbria to kill Aella could have easily turned into a full-scale invasion of all Saxon kingdoms.<sup>80</sup> The immense amount of opportunities that presented themselves must have been too enticing for the Vikings to conquer Northumbria and simply leave afterwards. What was in front of the Vikings after East Anglia and Northumbria were the more powerful and wealthy kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex; the ability and wherewithal to consider their advantages proved too convincing and hence led to the continuation of invasion and conquer. The army was too large, the chance too gripping, the momentum overwhelming, and the timing too calculated for the Vikings to abandon the idea of laying waste to all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

If one was to think further into the purposes and preparation and attempt to place themselves into the minds of the Vikings, much was at stake and major risks were taken with this endeavor. Men and their communities back home knew a number of warriors would likely perish in the pursuit to invade and conquer entire Saxon kingdoms. Scandinavian natives and farmers were, in large part, both physically and financially strained. The only significant source of income for the average farmer at the time derived from the share of the loot and treasure captured from the Viking raiders throughout their

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<sup>80</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 109.

exploits.<sup>81</sup> If the male of the household died in a battle or campaign, not only would there be no source of noticeable income, but the mother and children would lose the head of the family who provided them with the support necessary to sustain their well-being and security. The lives of those vulnerable and unfit for raiding, along with many mothers, became the leaders and workers of the community; they were burdened with the tasks that the male patriarch would normally be assigned to do.<sup>82</sup> Those back home in Scandinavia also realized that such an expedition and army meant many summers and winters would pass before they could possibly return. While Scandinavian natives and the home front were aware of these variables and possibilities, there is no doubt they were unaware of the length of the invasion into Anglo-Saxony and the trail of death and destruction that followed.

Although the Vikings devoted most of their attention to the British Isles during this period, Anglo-Saxony was not the only region of influence and exploration. By 860, Viking explorers and seafarers (more specifically Norsemen from Norway) traveled from their homelands to distant islands westward. Vikings initially settled in and eventually colonized what is today Orkney and Shetland to the Southwest, the Faroe Islands to the West, and Iceland to the Northwest.<sup>83</sup> Much of these islands were, at one point, trading posts, rendezvous centers, and stopping/checkpoints for campaigns and invasions into Saxon, Celtic, and Pictish kingdoms to the South. While these islands were important in regards to location and travel, it was not specifically significant for the Great Heathen

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<sup>81</sup> Hjardar, *Vikings at War*, 49.

<sup>82</sup> Hjardar, *Vikings at War*, 30.

<sup>83</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 54.

Army. During the time of the Great Army's existence, Vikings/Norsemen were only then becoming familiar with or being introduced to the Faroe Islands and Iceland to the North. More so, these islands were too far North for favorable weather and farming conditions, making it unappealing to Vikings who wanted to settle and cultivate in a warmer climate. These islands were largely uninhabited as well, which meant there was little to pillage and loot when referring to physical property or commodities such as gold, silver, brooches, and other valuables.<sup>84</sup> Natural resources could be obtained, though even that was scarce in terrain and climates where winters were profound and the duration of summer was temporary.

The preparation behind the building and expansion of the Great Heathen Army was equally, if not, more important than the purpose of its existence. There is no in-depth description or source available explaining what happened prior to the Great Army's arrival in Anglo-Saxony. The 860's and 70's mark years before Christianity and the languages of English and Latin were able to maintain a foothold in Scandinavia. This meant the amount of readily available written sources were scarce in this region.<sup>85</sup> The only form of written material or indicators of writing found in Viking territory were runic writings and inscriptions into stone and wooden objects. The rune's purpose was to leave behind a permanent but brief message or statement about an individual who had a level of significance worthy of being mentioned. To make matters more speculative, there is currently no definite or concrete evidence to determine the size of the army itself.

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<sup>84</sup> James Graham-Campbell, *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 73.

<sup>85</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 45.

Historians and medieval scholars have hypothesized and guessed how large the army was, however estimates are widely varied.<sup>86</sup> If the army's size cannot be discovered, its likely just as difficult to find any other major components within the composition of the army. Varied estimates are a prime example of how scarce the primary material is regarding the Great Army.

A few historians have more recently accepted the notion that a number of Viking warriors within the Great Heathen Army did not just originate from modern day Denmark. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles often refer to the army as the "Great Danish Army" and constituted a large number of "Danes."<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, while it is likely the number of Danes were most profound, it is possible a portion of the army derived from other parts of Scandinavia and beyond. Recent scholarly research is becoming more confident that members of the Great Army also came from areas such as modern-day Norway, Sweden, the Kingdom of Dublin in modern day Ireland, and Friesland.<sup>88</sup> If this is the case, from a geographical standpoint, for the leaders of the Great Army to be able to convince warriors from opposing kingdoms and communities to come together and unite in a call to arms is a major feat. This would require the frequent travel of long distances, attempting to forge alliances, even if their purpose did not revolve around avenging Ragnar. This meant the orchestrators of the army had to both travel and send word from the Kingdom of Dublin to Frisia in continental Europe to Sweden, Denmark, and eventually northward once again into Norway. This was a daunting task; the territory

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<sup>86</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 255.

<sup>87</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 74.

<sup>88</sup> Graham-Campbell, *Vikings and the Danelaw*, 70.

was often treacherous, not only due to the climate and topography, but the hostility between local kingdoms and communities as well.<sup>89</sup>

The combination of Viking warriors from kingdoms and communities far away from the home base in Denmark (Jutland) meant alliances had to be forged and sealed. The existence of a large grand army with the goals of conquest and colonization would not exist without the assistance and gathering of a large number of peoples. During the Viking Age, while there was aggression and conflict against the Vikings and Saxons in Britain, there was also inter-regional conflict within the confines of Scandinavia as well.<sup>90</sup> It was commonplace for local communities and kingdoms to fight amongst each other. Often fighting would occur due to the lack of abundant food and resources, as well as family feuds. Vikings lives were not only at risk while raiding in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and continental Europe, but back home as well.<sup>91</sup> This required the commanders of the Great Army to walk and talk carefully when trying to make allies with many who could have previously been their adversaries. While the ultimate objective was to avenge the great warrior and ruler Ragnar, it's hard to say the warriors who came from outside of Denmark had their minds set on the same goal. It's likely those who arrived from Sweden, Norway, Frisia, and the Kingdom of Dublin were only in the army in order to obtain land and wealth in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>92</sup> Deals had

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<sup>89</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 58.

<sup>90</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 60.

<sup>92</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 62.

to be made and trust had to be established between various Viking warriors and leaders if they wished for the Great Heathen Army to be successful.

During these negotiations and forging of alliances, the sons of Ragnar and the leaders of the Great Army had to be able to convince warriors from near and afar why such an endeavor was worth it. They had to reveal the benefits of constructing an army capable of the invasion and conquest of all Anglo-Saxony. There is no doubt the sons and leaders used Ragnar's death as a propaganda tool, a method to entice warriors why his death was so significant and such a blow to the Viking world.<sup>93</sup> However, it is undeniable that the benefits most significant to those outside of the Danish kingdoms were both the wealth that could be plundered and the land that could be obtained after the Great Army's campaign against the Saxon kingdoms. Whether such an alliance could remain intact after the objectives were completed was still in question, along with how the land and wealth would be distributed after the fighting ended.<sup>94</sup> While the goals and mindsets of Scandinavians who constituted the Great Heathen Army might have coincided and been concrete at first, that likely changed pending the circumstances after fighting began in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

While allies had to be sealed and mutual/beneficial connections established, an army as grand and formidable as this could not exist without the immense process of constructing ships, weapons, and armor. No statistics exist as to how much was incorporated into forming the Great Army, however there is no doubt hundreds, possibly

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<sup>93</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> Graham-Campbell, *Vikings and the Danelaw*, 76.



thousands of ships/boats were built in order for thousands of warriors to traverse through the North Sea and around the shores of the Saxon kingdoms.<sup>95</sup> There is also nothing that exists to determine how long it took for the Great Heathen Army to form, along with all the necessary components that made the army strong and large. This required an unfathomable number of trees to be cut down, carved, and constructed into powerful and purposeful vessels capable of traveling through both shallow rivers and rough seas. Another major requirement was the forging of a plethora of various weapons, whether that be swords, axes, spears, or shields. Such weapons couldn't be made without a vast amount of iron and smelting.<sup>96</sup> The gathering and preservation of other resources such as food, water, and clothing were also pivotal factors contributing to the likelihood of success. These factors had to be so leveled and calculated to such a degree, so carefully observed, and productive, allowing for the idea of a great army invading and conquering all of Anglo-Saxony to come to fruition.

Although an effort made to consolidate, gather weapons and supplies were the likely route taken to bolster the great army, it is also very possible many of the warriors were only able to use the weapons, tools, and clothing they already possessed. In early medieval Scandinavia, at least for the most part, the general population were not financially stable and constantly worked to survive more so than working without the worry of losing all of their possessions.<sup>97</sup> Most of the wealth lied under the cloaks of a jarl in a community or a king in a small kingdom. Its hard to say whether those who were

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<sup>95</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 139.

<sup>96</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 141.

<sup>97</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 42.

wealthy were generous enough to finance a great army, though chances are most of that wealth remained intact within the influential and powerful leaders. In large part, it is more plausible to say weapons, armor, clothing, and other essentials were up to the individual warriors themselves. Whatever useful weapon or personal item the warrior already had possession of, he would be taking into battle as well. Due to the hostile nature of both Scandinavian climate and the population, it was wise for all communities to bear arms and have something to defend themselves.<sup>98</sup> There was also the possibility of having to wait to obtain weapons, shields, and armor from dead Saxon warriors after the inevitable battles that would ensue. What makes this possible is the tendency of Viking warriors to prefer pillaging and raiding over one massive battle on open ground. Warriors initially without weapons are more safe and likely to discover armaments in such scenarios compared to that on a battlefield.

What is equally as important while preparing for an amphibious invasion is monitoring the climate and weather conditions. Where to travel and how to get to a certain point is important, but knowing when to depart is just as key. Obviously, it was near impossible for the Vikings to sail from Scandinavia to Anglo-Saxony during the winter. Conditions were too unfavorable; the seas were really rough, temperatures were very low, ice likely surrounded the beachheads, and often the winds would be too severe to set sail.<sup>99</sup> Even during the spring season its likely too early to embark on raids and incursions, esp. to the magnitude of a great army. Like farming and cultivating, the

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<sup>98</sup> Hjärdar, *Vikings at War*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 70.

summer months were the most ideal for the Vikings to sail westward for land and wealth. During the summer, the chances of high wind speeds, and ferocious storms are still present, which makes the necessity of weather observation that much more important and meticulous.<sup>100</sup> There was always the possibility of being blown off course or having a storm sink the bulk of the army into the ocean. Whenever the exact time the Great Heathen Army began to travel through the North Sea, it was then that conditions were near perfect to leave the homeland. However, that did not mean those conditions would last from the time they left up until they reached the Saxon shores of East Anglia.

Arguably the most important component behind the preparation of a great army and success is its organization and development. This was likely one of the most difficult tasks for the leaders and orchestrators. Up until this point, most of the Viking activity in modern day Britain consisted of raids and incursions rather than full-out invasions and attempts at conquest. Never before was there one consolidated grand army, all on the same page and hoping to complete the objective of conquest, which in turn, would lead to colonization.<sup>101</sup> During the Great Heathen Army's existence, Scandinavia was largely a conglomeration of small petty kingdoms and communities.<sup>102</sup> Each kingdom or community likely had bodyguards or, what we consider today, as small armies, however; none matched up to the size and scale of the Great Heathen Army. What the sons of Ragnar and the leaders of this grand army were displaying were the first signs of a

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<sup>100</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 243.

<sup>101</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 126.

<sup>102</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 65.

legitimate, organized, and formidable fighting force ever constructed within the confines of Scandinavia.

The commanders of the Great Army, including the sons of Ragnar, likely appointed local rulers and jarls as their subordinates to lead portions of the army into one cohesive fighting unit. The jarls would be in command of warriors and men from their locality or community. This would mean there would be a level of trust and confidence in the jarl since the relationship between these men and the jarl are already mutual and established.<sup>103</sup> The leaders and jarls would have broken down their warriors into various sections or divisions. A certain number of men would be organized as a combination of swordsmen, spearmen, archers, and possibly berserkers. While a number of leaders were likely chosen based on their reputation and wealth, it's not unlikely the sons of Ragnar would select leaders and warriors based on both their intellectual and physical merit.<sup>104</sup> Although an overall call to arms was sounded throughout the Scandinavian countryside, the leaders of this grand army likely appointed the smartest and most physically gifted to play significant roles within the ranks. Each section of the army would be broken down into, what we consider today as, platoons, companies, squads, etc.<sup>105</sup> Cavalry was not incorporated into the Great Heathen Army, however; there is no evidence of the Great Army implementing horse transportation from Scandinavia to Anglo-Saxony, nor

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<sup>103</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 120.

<sup>104</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 123.

<sup>105</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 128.

evidence of Viking ships being able to carry boatloads of horses at this time. (Halsall, 128)

Vengeance for the death of Ragnar may continue to remain in question as a primary motive behind the Great Army's quest to conquer the Saxons. However, it is clear from the beginning, the Vikings desire of conquest and, in turn, colonization were the most significant factors behind the initiation and mobilization of a grand army. It may have been the single most important factor for the sons of Ragnar, but for the leaders, jarls, and warriors that were brought into the Great Army from foreign lands, it's more likely the thought of acquiring land and wealth are what prompted them to join in pursuit. While the Anglo-Saxons do not mention a specific reason behind the invasion, the Viking sagas point to revenge. There is no doubt the Vikings typical desire to dispel, what was in their minds, justice, was partial toward the grand scheme of reasons to invade Anglo-Saxony. Conquest was the preliminary objective, though the most enticing was to establish permanent positions in the conquered lands as colonization and settlement.

What was just as daunting of a task, if not more so, was the level of time and preparation that occurred to make this amphibious invasion possible. The sons of Ragnar and their subordinates had to travel and spread the word throughout all of Scandinavia and abroad to convince fellow Viking warriors to embark on a journey that would lead them and their families to social and economic posterity. One of the many assignments was to unite the peoples of Scandinavia together under one purpose and ideal – to work as one grand cohesive army aimed to conquer the Saxons and eventually settle upon those conquered lands. Alliances had to be made, both locally and from afar. All warriors and

those under their command had to be presented with the possible benefits for such an adventure – vengeance, land for farming, and tons of gold, silver, and coin to obtain. An immense amount of building had to take place; the construction of ships and forging tons of weapons and armor. The men leading the grand Viking army also had to observe and understand when to travel to the Saxon shores; when time and climate conditions were ripe to set sail. What was arguably the most important factor was the organization of the Great Heathen Army. This required turning thousands of warriors who were accustomed to hit-and-run raids and incursions into a formidable and disciplined fighting force. Up until that point, in Scandinavia, never was there such effort given to create an army of this scale and magnitude, capable of destroying an entire culture and social fabric.

### Chapter 3: Danegeld – The Power of Gold, Silver, and Coin

While the discussion has revolved around the military aspects, preparation, and strategic/tactical significance behind the Great Heathen Army during their reign of terror throughout the Anglo Saxon kingdoms, is worth looking into Danegeld further. In order for a kingdom or country to defend itself, a considerable amount of money needed to be raised on the home front. Likewise, in order for the Great Heathen Army to sustain the level of success against the Anglo-Saxons, it must have the financial means to do so. Of course, this was accomplished, in part, through a series of raids and pillaging, however; another way to obtain such wealth also came through bribes and tribute offered by the Anglo-Saxons.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the effect Danegeld had on the Great Heathen Army's operations. In a nutshell, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were able to use their immense wealth to negotiate with the Vikings. Where did this wealth come from and how was it accrued? What will be observed first are the Anglo-Saxon kings, particularly Alfred of Wessex, and how they constituted settlements with the Great Heathen Army and other Viking invaders and whether or not it was wise to implement such policies at the time. Afterwards, the chapter will delve into the archaeological record to better understand Danegeld, focusing on how archaeologists and historians use recent findings to better understand and explain the wealth of the Anglo-Saxons and the percentage of this wealth that was used to pay off the Vikings.

The first order of business is to understand why and how kingdoms were able to administer Danegeld.<sup>106</sup> There was a significant amount of trade between the European world even before the Viking Age. Kingdoms each had their own set amount of commodities and resources unique to their region, but often lacked other equally important resources. In other words, certain areas of Scandinavia did not have or create such goods that continental Europe or the British Isles already possessed. For many Anglo-Saxon merchants, trading was a means of survival that involved a constant coming and going of material goods, purchased with coin or bartered. The existence of this steady trade meant that a portion of this wealth could be taxed as the goods passed into or out of an Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were able to export an immense amount of commodities and natural resources to Northern and continental Europe. These goods could only be found in England.<sup>107</sup> Agricultural products, glassware, jewelry, weapons are among a few of many examples of goods that were traded from the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the rest of Europe. Various kingdoms, therefore, could draw on the trade wealth that had accumulated over centuries. The constancy of this trade also highlights an ongoing interaction between all regions of Europe that had been long established well before the arrival of the Vikings.

This trade network was diverse and well-connected. The British Isles were linked to wider European trade extending down into the Mediterranean Sea when the Roman Empire crossed the English Channel and conquered the island, starting in the 40s CE. The

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<sup>106</sup> Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>107</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 80.



invasions of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes connected the British Isles to Scandinavian trade, as well. Both of these trade networks were unique, and, since they weren't fighting, they opened the door for better communication and relations from one region to the other.<sup>108</sup> This is why the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, which were on a remote island that was considered on the edge of the known world, were so well-connected and able to generate so much wealth through trade.

Indigenous kingdoms throughout the British Isles prior to the arrival of the first Scandinavians possessed goods and commodities uncommon to their location. While it is entirely possible these items were obtained through the use of force or conflict, it is just as likely these possessions were the result of trade. It is no surprise travelers and the indigenous population were aware of who and what was beyond their borders.<sup>109</sup> Prior scholarship often claimed there was little contact between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings between the fourth and eighth centuries, and therefore a general lack of awareness among those groups. However, while they are many centuries apart, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who emigrated to the British Isles came from the same region where the Vikings originated. It is not a stretch to say that, while there might not have been an in-depth knowledge and network of communication between both regions initially, it is not difficult for both areas to keep in relative contact of each other.<sup>110</sup> The Vikings were surely aware where their ancestors and forefathers traveled to. While the

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<sup>108</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 83.

<sup>109</sup> Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 26.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Abels. *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37.

lack of concrete source evidence makes it hard to determine how much interaction there was between the British Isles and Scandinavia between the fourth and eighth centuries, it seems naïve to believe that no contact or awareness existed.

Through trade, taxation, and interregional conflict, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became strong and wealth was pouring into the kingdoms.<sup>111</sup> This collection of wealth that enabled the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to flourish led to improved farming and commerce, religion, and education. Somewhat sophisticated and wealthy Anglo-Saxon states developed, thanks in large part to the interaction between Christian missionaries from England and Germanic kingdoms to the east. They fostered the spread of trade and commerce; this would garner recognition throughout continental and Northwestern Europe.

This apparent wealth and recognition meant that the Anglo-Saxons might not only attract outside raiders, but also be able to use some of that wealth to stave off those same raiders. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms began to use their wealth to negotiate with the Scandinavian raiders when they arrived centuries later. They paid off the raiders and warriors of the North on multiple occasions, even after the conquest, and this meant the Anglo-Saxons had to be leveraging significant wealth<sup>112</sup>. Archaeological finds also support the claim of kingdoms possessing a significant amount of valuable goods. While the attacks by the heathen men were initially unforeseen and hard to counter, militarily,

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<sup>111</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> Glyn Davies, *A History of Money: From Ancient Times to the Present Day* (New York: University of Wales, 2016), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, *A History of Money: From Ancient Times to the Present Day*, 131.

the Saxons saw the effectiveness of bribing the Vikings to save themselves. As the raids became more frequent and larger in size, so too did the amount of resources stripped from the lands of the Anglo-Saxon people.<sup>113</sup> It seems that Anglo-Saxon kings felt it was wiser to offer tribute to the Viking invaders than to fight them. While this method might have been effective in the short run, not to mention far easier than organizing a military defense against constant small-scale raiding parties, the Anglo-Saxons would learn the hard way that the more they attempted to pay off the Vikings, the more incursions that would occur.

When the Great Heathen Army arrived in the 860s and 870s, therefore, they were invading kingdoms that appear to have long ago become wealthy through trade and had sought to pay off outside Viking invaders with accumulated wealth. Danegeld was no doubt used before the notorious Anglo-Saxon King Athelred The Unready in the tenth century.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Danegeld was seemingly a common component of the negotiations administered by the Mercians and kings of Wessex, most notably Alfred The Great, as they attempted to counter the Great Heathen Army, and this practice appears to have occurred on a smaller scale even before this invasion.<sup>115</sup> An example of this during the invasion of the Great Heathen Army was when the Vikings took Nottingham in the kingdom of Mercia. The Mercian leader, Burghred, working with Alfred's brother, Athelred, besieged the Vikings there for a long period without either side gaining an advantage. After a considerable loss of supplies and morale, the Viking leader, Ivar,

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<sup>113</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 108.

<sup>115</sup> Davies, *A History of Money: From Ancient Times to the Present Day*, 133.

proposed a truce.<sup>116</sup> As noted in Chapter One, while the specific terms of this negotiation have never been discovered, it is likely that the Mercians and Athelred, too, used Danegeld to entice the Vikings to withdraw to York. The Vikings were stubborn and would not submit to such a settlement unless they were convinced by means of value or tribute.

If Danegeld was used at Nottingham, then it probably was not a one-time occurrence. Another example of Danegeld likely being used was after the humiliating defeat the Anglo-Saxons suffered at the battle of Wilton in May of 871. The Anglo-Saxon forces were in disarray with levied soldiers ready to go home after the loss and Alfred having to bury his older brother Athelred, who had died recently at Ashdown. The Anglo-Saxon forces had little hope of re-organizing to face the Vikings. In fact, without leadership, it must have seemed as though they were doomed to failure. The loss at Wilton crushed any remaining hope that Alfred could force the Vikings to submit and drive them out of the kingdom of Wessex that year. If he wanted to bury his brother, Alfred had no choice but to make peace with the Great Heathen Army.<sup>117</sup> Why would the Vikings agree to negotiate with Alfred if they had the Anglo-Saxons on the ropes. And yet, the Vikings did negotiate. Asser mentions that the Vikings agreed with the settlement and “made good their promise.”<sup>118</sup> What they fail to mention is why the negotiations succeeded in the first place. It is most probable the Vikings and Alfred came to an

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<sup>116</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 216.

<sup>117</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 227.

<sup>118</sup> *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, William Henry Stevenson, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 111.

agreement only through the use of paying or bribing them to leave, at least for a short period.

While the sources are remarkably reticent, failing to directly mention any payments that the Anglo-Saxons made, the circumstantial evidence certainly adds up over time. Burghred of Mercia appears to have paid off the Vikings in the late 860s at Nottingham, and Alfred of Wessex seems to have had little choice but to pay the Vikings to leave in 871. In almost every scenario where the battle/engagement led to a standstill, the Vikings would either offer or agree to abandon their fortifications or withdraw from a town, and the assumption is that they must have wanted to be paid off to do so.<sup>119</sup> This would happen again in 872, when Burghred and the Mercians would ostensibly pay off the Vikings to withdraw from London and temporarily leave the kingdom of Mercia. Even though sources did not mention bribes or tributes in these particular instances, the Vikings constantly demanding tribute, along with the Mercians paying them off, it's difficult to not surmise Danegeld as the overwhelming factor in suing for peace.

What other reason would the Vikings have? They would fight a campaign, and have the Anglo-Saxons on the verge of defeat, only to sit back to let the enemy regroup. The long-established practice of paying off enemy raiders seems a sensible solution. Danegeld, therefore, was likely being used to convince the Great Heathen Army to abandon its positions or leave temporarily while the Saxons regrouped. If so, was it a

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<sup>119</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 257.

useful tool? Historians have debated whether it was appropriate.<sup>120</sup> It is easy to say that ultimately, despite the Saxons likely using Danegeld several times to quell the Viking onslaught, Alfred of Wessex triumphed over the overwhelming force of the Great Heathen Army. Danegeld, if used, provided him the time he needed to eventually succeed. However; it's troublesome to decipher if Danegeld was truly necessary during crucial circumstances. If the Saxons did not offer tribute during the negotiation processes, would the Vikings still be open to a temporary peace? It would make more sense that the Vikings would rather continue fighting until they achieved success, legitimately crushing the Anglo-Saxon armies and their hopes.<sup>121</sup> While the Vikings were not too fond of fighting large-pitched engagements on an open battlefield, the Anglo-Saxons were in such dire straits that a large battle would mean the total defeat of the Anglo-Saxons. This would not be in one battle, but the end of independent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

When determining the viability of using Danegeld to stave off the Vikings, another factor was simply that Wessex and Mercia clearly had enough gold and silver to offer, even if the sources did not reveal much detail, if any, regarding payments delivered from the Saxons to the Vikings in order to stop the fighting. Few sources make it appear as though the Anglo-Saxons would achieve final victory regardless of what occurred.<sup>122</sup> On top of this, the distribution of Danegeld during conflicts was commonplace even after the Norman conquest of 1066. The issue is that the Anglo-Saxons must have had

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<sup>120</sup> *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser*, Alfred P. Smyth, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>121</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 144.

<sup>122</sup> Timothy Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 208.

significant resources and the ability to collect and distribute those resources because, after losses, they would spend their time regrouping rather than desperately working to make more weapons and find more supplies. Wessex and Mercia just regathered whatever they could, even if it meant taking resources and supplies from the overall population.<sup>123</sup> A large number of soldiers brought their weapons and supplies with them when the levies were called to arms. In other words, if a payment was made to the Vikings, it seems that the Anglo-Saxons still had plenty of resources available to continue their war effort.

So why didn't the Vikings simply conquer the Anglo-Saxons and take control of the population? It seems like conquest would offer a steadier income than a one-time payment. Maybe the Vikings felt it would be easier to just let the Anglo-Saxons collect the money. In such a scenario, the Viking leaders would not have to complete the burdensome administrative task of collecting taxes from a newly conquered population. Avoidance of such an arduous bookkeeping task might well have been tempting, especially when the Anglo-Saxons were already organized to do it themselves.

Simultaneously, one can argue the amount of Danegeld used to make the Vikings leave, buying time for the Anglo-Saxon leaders, could instead have been used to invigorate the Anglo-Saxon cause right when it was most needed. More gold and silver would mean more supplies could be purchased or gathered. The levies within the Anglo-Saxon army were temporary and, in some cases, these levied warriors were only willing

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<sup>123</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 263.

to fight to defend their homes.<sup>124</sup> If the levies were paid more and the king was better able to explain how paramount these campaigns were to survival, the soldiers constituting the levies might have stayed longer, or at the very least hired individuals to tend to the harvest while they continued fighting. The more gold or coin at the king's disposal, the more likely he is to ally himself with a relatively close and powerful neighboring kingdom.

Another possibility is that the Anglo-Saxon leader, Alfred, simply needed time, and so was able to purchase a temporary reprieve from the Vikings in 871/872. There are other factors that suggest time was needed. First, it was from 872 to 876 that the Great Heathen Army was forced to leave the kingdom of Wessex in order to ensure their dominance over their recent Anglo-Saxon conquests.<sup>126</sup> The fact that they had to re-establish control of kingdoms they had recently conquered lends credence to the possibility that the Vikings, too, found it beneficial to accept money rather than collect it themselves. The Vikings traveled back to Mercia and Northumbria, reconquering the kingdoms once again. The fact that this happened right after Alfred's loss in 871/872 was fortunate for the Anglo-Saxon king. While this was seen as being a carefully thought-out and strategic decision on the part of Alfred, it was risky and could have led to the annihilation of Wessex. The Vikings, on the surface, could have merely agreed to Alfred's proposals and immediately broken their promise. The Anglo-Saxons would not

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<sup>124</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 181.

<sup>126</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 130.



only have lost money, but they would also have had to face an immediate Viking threat rather than having the time to regroup and reassemble.<sup>127</sup>

Further, Alfred must have known he could not use Danegeld to bail Wessex out of every engagement against the Great Heathen threat. If the Vikings were continuously paid for temporary peace, the kingdom would lose too much gold and silver to sustain itself. It would also make the king appear weak and unable to defend Wessex and its people, leading to a major decline in the kingdom's morale.

As mentioned, the Viking perspective is also important to consider, as they accepted the money and kept to the bargain. They did not break the truce. The Great Heathen Army could have simply taken the gold and silver and attacked the Anglo-Saxons while they were most vulnerable.<sup>128</sup> The Anglo-Saxons tried, on multiple occasions, to pay off the invaders for more time, suggesting how desperate their situation was. If the Vikings used force, the chances of complete conquest and takeover were very likely.<sup>129</sup> The winters throughout the campaigns, along with the need of re-supplying the Great Heathen Army with reinforcements and provisions, were in the long run minor setbacks. The Vikings had multiple opportunities to vanquish the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and rarely, if at all, were those moments taken advantage of.

Evidence also reveals the Vikings acted inconsistently after making peace settlements. In some situations, Vikings kept to the truce and avoided aggression, leaving

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<sup>127</sup> Ryan Lavelle and Donato Spedaliere, *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Oxford, 2012), 71.

<sup>128</sup> Kim Hjarðar, et al. *Vikings at War* (Oxford: Casemate, 2016), 273.

<sup>129</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 157.

the area for a relatively short period, but this was not always the case. After Alfred's defeat at Wilton, there was a call for negotiation, and the Vikings willingly negotiated.<sup>130</sup> However afterwards, they threw away any hopes of the settlement lasting by killing the Anglo-Saxon hostages that were offered during the truce. Clearly, they were not going to keep the peace after such an act. Perhaps the Vikings simply wanted to appear unpredictable, although this seems to hold little merit. Perhaps instead the Vikings had to deal because they needed time, too, as the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were beginning to rise up against them.

The fact that the Vikings kept the truce suggests that maybe they did want to buy time for themselves. For example, the Vikings would often negotiate without deceit.<sup>131</sup> Both parties would meet in an area suitable for negotiation and formal discussion or their respected camps/fortresses. The two sides would be fair to one another, and under the truce there would be no aggression or conflict. During the meetings, a large portion of the discussion would revolve around payments, what was to be offered, and how much was willing to be given.<sup>132</sup> In such a scenario, it would be easy for the Vikings to trap Alfred or any other Anglo-Saxon king. They could have killed Alfred, signaled for an attack, and take the Anglo-Saxons by surprise. The Anglo-Saxons would be leaderless and the non-compliant population would in theory be eliminated. Such a sudden surprise would

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<sup>130</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 122.

<sup>131</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 185.

<sup>132</sup> Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, 233.

likely lead to an Anglo-Saxon defeat, and the money that would originally be used as Danegeld would be taken as prized loot. But the Vikings never did this.

Another major reason that the Vikings had to accept money to stop fighting was that a new Viking army—the second wave of the Great Heathen Army—arrived and seemed poised to take over the offensive while members of the original army settled down on newly conquered lands. The Vikings had their minds set on colonizing and settling on conquered Anglo-Saxon territory. Was money collected as tribute from the Anglo-Saxons used to further colonization or used to continue the war effort?<sup>135</sup> It is clear the Vikings, at least those led by Halfdan and the initial wave of the Great Heathen Army, wanted to retire and placed the responsibility of conquest upon the newly arrived Summer Army led by Guthrum. Financially, it seems, Halfdan and his Great Heathen Army intended to leave the scene and begin settling on conquered lands to the north and east.<sup>136</sup> Given that he, along with his companions, likely took considerable goods and coins, they could afford settlement. At least, this is what they did. Instead of being used in support of new conquests, which surely would have had a better chance of success with two well-funded Viking armies, it appears large portions of Danegeld was either buried and lost—wasted on fruitless expeditions with little ground gained— or transported with Halfdan and his veteran warriors, who traveled north to colonize.

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<sup>135</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 264.

<sup>136</sup> Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 259.

Another issue is that different participants in the invasion may well have had different motives. Whenever the Vikings were victorious or negotiated with the Saxons, leading to a large bribe, payment, or loot of wealth, there was, no doubt, a question of how to distribute loot among the warriors.<sup>137</sup> How much would the common warrior or soldier receive? Would the leadership get a larger percentage of the loot? What about Halfdan and his ilk—those who led the entire army? Looking at the raids, movements, and colonization of Viking forces throughout the whole of the British Isles, and Halfdan's abandonment of the larger campaign, there is little doubt the wealth obtained throughout the invasion had a major impact on the Vikings' decisions. Many of these men who agreed to partake in this amphibious endeavor and join the Great Army had to be enticed in some way, and the allure of captured treasure was surely a part of the recruitment effort.<sup>138</sup> While revenge and colonization were reasons behind the leaders' desire to conquer, the promise of wealth and riches were arguably the most paramount factors contributing to the size and scope of the Great Heathen Army. If historians claim the Great Army was comprised of men throughout the whole of Scandinavia, previously unfamiliar, unrelated, or associated with each other is true, then wealth and money must have been a significant motivator and uniting factor. For the common soldier, the expedition must have been as much about greed as vengeance.

While the written record contains few references to the use of Danegeld prior to the tenth century, new evidence in other fields suggests that money and goods were

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<sup>137</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 260.

<sup>138</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 266.

exchanged. The sources do not mention the use of Danegeld until the 900s, when King Athelred the Unready consistently paid tribute to buy off the Vikings, convincing them to instead leave his kingdom.<sup>139</sup> Fortunately, modern technology, archaeology, and excavations throughout England, have shed light on Danegeld and how it became a powerful tool of negotiation between the Anglo-Saxons and invading heathen forces.<sup>140</sup> Gold, silver, brooches, coins, and other metals have been rediscovered and unearthed throughout England in those areas that the Vikings sought to conquer. Commerce never ceased; the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and Scandinavia were trading down into the Mediterranean all through this period as well. This supports the notion of Danegeld negotiations rather than the collection of items signifying a hoard taken from the Anglo-Saxons by the use of force.<sup>141</sup> British archaeologists have also excavated evidence of campgrounds constructed by the Vikings dating back to the time of the Great Heathen Army's existence. These areas yield coins, silver, and various metals, further the argument that tribute was paid.

Viking hoards, dating to around the period of the Great Heathen Army, have been found across England. This includes archaeological digs at Watlington, Huxley, Croyden, Gravesend, and Waterloo Bridge, all of which contain Viking treasures dating to around the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. John Naylor and Gareth Williams's *King Alfred's Coins* provide readers with evidence strongly suggesting the discovery of a Viking hoard dating back to

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<sup>139</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 262.

<sup>140</sup> John Naylor and Gareth Williams. *King Alfred's Coins: The Watlington Viking Hoard* (Ashmolean Museum, 2016), 88.

<sup>141</sup> Martin Biddle. "The Viking Great Army in England: New Dates from the Repton Charnel." (New York: Cambridge University: *Antiquity*, vol. 92, no. 361, 2 Feb. 2018), 187.

this period. They make the claim the hoard originated during negotiations between Alfred and Guthrum.<sup>142</sup> This hoard of silver and metals in Watlington, England, dates back to the late 870s, meaning it was collected during the conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and the Great Viking Army. Watlington is located in the northern portion of, what once was, the kingdom of Wessex.<sup>143</sup> King Alfred and Ceowulf II of Mercia both minted some of the coins found in this Viking hoard. This hoard, therefore, seems to confirm the use of Danegeld by multiple Saxon kings and also displays the mutual relationships between Wessex and Mercia in their attempts to challenge the Viking onslaughts.

A few Viking base-camps have also been discovered. In the English villages of Repton and Torksey, archaeologists discovered the remains of a large base designed for military operations. These camps were designed as a base of operations for the Vikings, who could escape into their defensive camp to rest and regather strength for the upcoming campaigns in the spring seasons. Findings at the winter camps suggest that there were economic exchanges between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>144</sup> Coins and metals have been unearthed within the confines of the camps, hoards of plunder that suggest negotiations took place between the Vikings and the Saxons. Archaeologists even suspect the camps were used as temporary trading posts as well.<sup>145</sup> The Vikings within the Repton and Torksey camps would trade with other Viking forces in the British Isles as well as beyond the shores of England back to their homeland in Scandinavia. They

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<sup>142</sup> Naylor and Williams. *King Alfred's Coins: The Watlington Viking Hoard*, 87.

<sup>143</sup> Naylor and Williams. *King Alfred's Coins: The Watlington Viking Hoard*, 90.

<sup>144</sup> Dawn M Hadley and Julian D Richards. "The Winter Camp of the Viking Great Army, Torksey, Lincolnshire." (*The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. 96, 23 Oct. 2017), 49.

<sup>145</sup> Hadley and Richards. "The Winter Camp of the Viking Great Army", 56.

appear to have used hoards and Danegeld compiled since the inception of the Great Army's invasion to further the war effort and to make sure the army was adequately equipped with necessary supplies. The Repton camp was found in what once was the kingdom of Mercia, while the Torksey camp was in Northumbria. This hints at the scope of Viking operations throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Archaeologists now have a better understanding of how many coins were hoarded during the invasions.

The Anglo-Saxons appear to have used Danegeld to buy time, convincing the Vikings to leave while the locals reorganized. This seems to have been a successful method of negotiating with the Heathen Army. Despite losing a considerable amount of money, the Anglo-Saxons survived to fight another day. In reality, they bought themselves time as much as peace. However, it was a risky strategy, and it did not work every time. Fortunately for the Anglo-Saxons, when Alfred and other Saxon leaders used Danegeld, in most cases the Vikings complied and adhered to the conditions made during settlements.

Archaeology complements and bolsters what is only suggested in the historical record. A series of hoards, camps, and treasures have been found that date back to around the time of the Great Heathen Army. Such evidence strongly supports the idea of Danegeld being used. The Watlington hoard of metals and silver is particularly telling in that it contains King Alfred's coins, which seem to have been used to make temporary peace with the Viking Army. The camps at Repton and Torksey provide additional clues to the size and magnitude of Viking operations in Anglo-Saxony, along with the amount of wealth each camp possessed. It appears that the use of Danegeld was one of many

critical measures and elements orchestrating the level of combat and compromise between the Vikings and the Saxons. It was used as both a tool in war and in peace; depending on the situation it meant the difference between another raid or a truce.



#### Chapter 4: The Dividing of the Great Army – What Could Have Been

Over the course of the invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the 860s and 870s, the Vikings forces came in two separate waves. In particular, the Great Heathen Army divided between the years 874 and 876 CE. It was at this time when new groups of Vikings began to participate in the invasion, and those that had had such success began to focus on new tasks besides destroying the remaining Anglo-Saxon resistance. There were consequences for this division. Up until this time, the Viking army had achieved multiple victories and had widespread success against the Anglo-Saxons. The major English kingdoms of East Anglia, Kent, Northumbria, and Mercia had all been subdued. Each was under Viking rule or led by a puppet ruler installed by the Vikings. Wessex remained the last holdout after its king, Alfred, defeated the Vikings at Ashdown in 871. Having already faced the Vikings, Alfred and the people of Wessex knew further assaults would likely come. While the Anglo-Saxons witnessed the coming of a possible new leader, the Vikings faced the opposite. The surprising death of Ivar The Boneless in 870 left an indelible mark on the Great Army. However, the Anglo-Saxons were far from secure with a new Viking force under Halfdan Ragnarsson standing on their doorstep.

During the mid -870s, the Great Heathen Army made a fateful decision. Half the army chose to leave the campaign and travel northward to solidify their hold on the already-conquered Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, as well as attack the Kingdom of Strathclyde in Scotland. This was a clear shift in policy and focus. Halfdan wanted to loot and pillage

Strathclyde until it was stripped of all its wealthy possessions, probably to help finance the subsequent settlement of his army. Halfdan's primary concern was to settle in the lands constituting Northumbria.

Halfdan's decision would have an immense impact on the success and continuation of the Great Heathen Army, which had seemingly been organized to conquer all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. To be so close to accomplishing their ultimate objective, it's hard to fathom Halfdan's decision. The purpose of this chapter is to try to understand why Halfdan decided to give up on the invasion, and how the subsequent changes to the Viking army affected the outcome of the invasion. Although much of Wessex were at their heels and Alfred continued to hide in the marshes of Somerset, the depletion of Viking forces in the Wessex region and the loss of key leaders marked the beginning of the end of Viking domination of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

A major issue confronting the Vikings and Halfdan when he decided to abandon the conquest of Wessex was the loss of key Viking leaders. These losses began either in 870 or 873 CE, when Ivar the Boneless died. This was prior to the breakup of the Great Army. Ivar's death would have been a boon to the Anglo-Saxons, but it certainly affected the Viking invasion. No other source contains a reason for his death except for the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*. This eleventh-century manuscript claims Ivar died from a "sudden and horrible disease." It also claims before his death Ivar requested to be buried in England, where he received his greatest success and notoriety. A burial mound discovered in the seventeenth century near Repton reveals the bones of hundreds of

heathen warriors, along with a special burial of a high-status warrior.<sup>146</sup> Speculation surrounds this burial, although there is no way to connect this warrior with Ivar himself. His death affected everyone in the region, from the rising Viking Kingdom of Dublin to the Danes attacking the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The loss of Ivar was devastating in terms of the morale, stability, and structure of the Great Heathen Army. Ivar, along with most of his brothers, was among the first to land and wage war with the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Slowly, but surely, it was Ivar and his fellow Vikings who ended Saxon resistance and brought all kingdoms except Wessex to their knees. On top of this, Ivar also traveled to the Viking kingdom of Dublin, where the Norwegian Olaf the White was in charge. These two worked together to raid the British Isles while also establishing a wealthy and growing trading center at Dublin.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, Ivar's death not only left a void in the leadership of the Great Heathen Army, but also marked a decline in relations between the Danes and the Norwegians. It is clear his leadership led to numerous successes and alliances that elevated the Vikings. He was the glue that brought the Vikings together during the invasion, and his death threatened Viking unity. Given his ability to bring other Vikings into the fold, such as those under Olaf The White, Ivar's death may well have ended the potential for other Viking alliances.

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<sup>146</sup> Dave Haldenby and Julian D Richards. "The Viking Great Army and Its Legacy: Plotting Settlement Shift Using Metal-Detected Finds." (Internet Archaeology, no. 42, 2016. Department of Archaeology, Hull and East Riding Museum), 27.

<sup>147</sup> Cathal Macmagnusa Maguire and Rory O'Cassidy, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat* (Arkose Press, 2013), 322.

Relations among Vikings from different regions of Scandinavia were not always reliable or even friendly. As they moved into new areas and met people from other cultures, outside influences would divide them even further. Often battles would occur between different Viking tribes from the Northern fjords of Norway to the Southern shores of Sweden.<sup>148</sup> Vikings usually met only to dispute land or make money. As they travelled and sailed across different regions of Europe, the Vikings were exposed to a variety of unique cultural customs and increasing contact with foreigners. They made new alliances and because they were aggressive, often generated tension.<sup>149</sup> They all may have, at one point, shared and worshipped the same culture and religion, but the desire to mingle with the British Isles and consolidate power from within changed the Scandinavian landscape and mindset forever.

Had Ivar and Olaf, who also died around 870, survived to participate in this crucial period of invasion and campaigning, both he and Olaf could have brought the Vikings together. Although this is conjecture, both men were certainly poised to do so. Like the formation of the Great Heathen Army, Vikings from the islands of the North, the Scottish Isles, and Ireland could have banded together and launch a major simultaneous invasion against the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.<sup>150</sup> If anyone had any chance to bring many bands of warriors together it would have been Olaf and Ivar. Ivar and Olaf were able to work together, so there was certainly a possibility of working along with Ivar's brother,

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<sup>148</sup> Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 86.

<sup>149</sup> Kim Hjarðar, et al. *Vikings at War* (Oxford: Casemate, 2016), 28.

<sup>150</sup> Ben Raffield. "Bands of Brothers: A Re-Appraisal of the Viking Great Army and Its Implications for the Scandinavian Colonization of England." (*Early Medieval Europe*, vol. 24, no. 3, 26 July 2016), 37.

Halfdan, and his subordinates. Had such a connection been made and the Vikings attacked the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the North and West in coordination with the Great Heathen Army, then the Kingdom of Wessex would surely have fallen.<sup>151</sup>

Another leader of the Great Heathen Army was Ubba, one of the sons of the mythical Ragnar. Like the sons and Ragnar himself, Ubba might not have existed. However, he is named in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and in *Passio sancti Eadmundi*. Ubba was supposedly a jarl or headman of the Frisians around the time of the Great Heathen Army's arrival in East Anglia. Some scholars and historians speculate Frisians were a part of the Great Heathen Army thanks in part to Ubba's title as a Frisian jarl.<sup>152</sup> He was present during the campaigning throughout East Anglia and Northumbria, fighting alongside Ivar and Halfdan. However, from the years 871-877, Ubba disappears from the sources. It was not until 877-878 that his name reappears. Ubba launched an attack against Wessex in 878, around the same time Guthrum was pursuing Alfred, knowing well the king's death would finally mark the end of the struggle.<sup>153</sup>

It appears during the years Ubba disappeared from the record, he spent this time gathering an army of his own, perhaps hoping to coordinate with the Great Army in another major offensive to conquer Wessex. He was based in modern day Wales, recruiting Viking warriors along with the Welsh, who felt it better to side with the

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<sup>151</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 181.

<sup>152</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 309.

<sup>153</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 257.

heathens than to have any sympathy for the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>154</sup> Ubba sailed with his combined force from Wales to Wessex, though on his way a storm at sea sunk a large portion of his fleet. Still determined, Ubba and the remainder of his force attacked Wessex from the West.<sup>155</sup> This was likely in coordination with Guthrum, acting out a pincer movement against King Alfred in an effort to overwhelm the Saxon defenders. The timing of both attacks seems to have been too close to each other to not have been intentional. Halfdan likely made contact with Ubba to notify him of Guthrum's presence in Wessex. Unfortunately for the Vikings, after arriving, Ubba was attacked by a Wessex force in Devon, led by an ealdorman named Odda. The battle resulted in a Viking defeat. Ubba was one of many Vikings who perished in the engagement.<sup>156</sup> Ubba became yet another Viking leader who died in these pivotal years. His death only widened the gap in the Great Army's leadership, and it forced Guthrum to abandon his position deep in Wessex territory.

Another important character in this saga was Bjorn Ironside, a Viking chieftain who may have had family ties to some of the other leaders. However, he probably did not fight as a part of the Great Heathen Army. Scandinavian medieval sources and sagas mention Bjorn as one of the many famous sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. It seems all of Ragnar's sons grew up to become formidable and fearsome warriors. Eventually, their reputation superseded that of their father.<sup>157</sup> The only problem with Bjorn is that he was

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<sup>154</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 243.

<sup>155</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 249.

<sup>156</sup> Ben Waggoner. *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* (Philadelphia: Troth Publications, 2009), 72.

<sup>157</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 73.

not a member of the Ragnar son's pursuit of revenge and colonization. While Ubba, Halfdan, and Ivar traveled to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and waged war there, Bjorn Ironside pursued other goals. He sailed in the Atlantic, through the Straits of Gibraltar, traveled through the Mediterranean, and launched assaults all across the region, even into the heart of France.<sup>158</sup> If Bjorn was a son of Ragnar, it would be surprising that he was not with his brothers during the invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Family tensions due to multiple family agendas, along with Bjorn having a different mother, may have also led to his decision to travel to the Mediterranean rather than join the Great Heathen Army with his brothers.

In the mid 850's, Bjorn launched raids throughout the river systems in modern day France, taking advantage of the unrelenting civil strife amongst Frankish nobles and rulers. Around the year 860, it is recorded that Bjorn raided into North Africa, modern day Spain, and even Italy. While he won many victories and acquired a considerable amount of slaves and wealth, on his way back home his fleet was ambushed by the Muslim Moors of Spain and Northern Africa. A large portion of his fleet and wealth sank. Bjorn managed to escape and with enough to leave him well off the remainder of his life.<sup>159</sup> More importantly, however, he was not with his brothers attacking Wessex. Surely, had Bjorn been present, his thousands of men and hundreds of ships would have had an impact during that conflict. It is possible word might have traveled to notify Bjorn

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<sup>158</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 70.

<sup>159</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 71.

about the exploits and pursuits of the Great Heathen Army, though Bjorn went raiding overseas prior to the formation and invasion of the Great Army.

The last brother, who has not received as much attention and whose existence is questioned, is Sigurd Ragnarsson (Sigurd Snake-In-The-Eye). While there is very little information about him, it is believed that he traveled with his brothers to avenge their father.<sup>160</sup> Sources from the British Isles rarely mention his existence, and do not mention him as a participant in the Viking campaigns in England, whereas Ivar, Halfdan, and Ubba are mentioned regularly in the sources. However, there are claims made about Sigurd in *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons*. The tale relays after Ragnar died, Sigurd inherited a large tract of land in modern day Denmark and Sweden. Sigurd succeeded Halfdan as King of Denmark in 877, the year Halfdan died attempting to reclaim the Kingdom of Dublin.<sup>161</sup> Since several of his siblings seem to have existed, it appears likely that Sigurd did as well, especially considering that he supposedly inherited land from his father and legitimately became the Danish king once his brother Halfdan died.

Sources hint that Sigurd was with the Great Heathen Army; however, there is not enough information available to make a concrete conclusion. Since he eventually was supposed to have become King of Denmark, he probably would have sailed back to Denmark to take the position as king.<sup>162</sup> If Sigurd was there and inherited the Danish throne in 877, then the date is significant. Rather than stabilize the Viking cause after

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<sup>160</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 252.

<sup>161</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 68.

<sup>162</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 121.



Halfdan's death or raising an army in support of Guthrum, Sigurd seems to have focused on his ruling in Scandinavia.<sup>163</sup> He was consolidating the family claim on their hereditary lands in modern day Denmark. Given that his brothers Ivar and Halfdan died, Bjorn was absent, and Ubba would soon lose his own life, it would make sense that Sigurd would want to remain in Denmark. With no familial ties to Guthrum, as well as having royal inheritance claims to a vast amount of land back home, Sigurd, if he existed, probably wanted to leave.

Another Viking leader worthy of mention was Bagsecg, who worked with Halfdan as the co-commander of the Great Heathen Army. Arriving in the year 870 or 871 CE, Bagsecg brought with him, likely from modern day Denmark, a new Viking army to help aid Halfdan in subduing Mercia and also conquering Wessex. Sources associate Bagsecg with Halfdan, which suggests that he was seen as on par with the veteran commander.<sup>164</sup> Bagsecg was responsible for the major Viking victory at Reading. However, Bagsecg was killed at the subsequent battle of Ashdown. In this battle, the Vikings were outnumbered. While Bagsecg was slain, Halfdan managed to escape the battlefield.<sup>165</sup> Like in many cases where killing a leader has a significant psychological blow to an army, the loss of Bagsecg was another major loss for Halfdan and his Viking forces. There are claims that Bagsecg's burial site was within the confines of a Neolithic burial structure at Wayland's Smithy in Ashbury England.<sup>166</sup> Although Ashdown was a

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<sup>163</sup> Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 29.

<sup>164</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 221.

<sup>165</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 233.

<sup>166</sup> Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 130.

short-lived victory for the Anglo-Saxons, the loss of both Ivar and now Bagsecg certainly created a gap in Viking leadership and morale, possibly influencing Halfdan's decision to accept Danegeld and retire from fighting.

Finally, by the year 874, another large contingent of heathen forces reached the British shores, led by the Viking leader Guthrum. Guthrum was the last wave of Viking reinforcements that reached Halfdan and the Great Army. Right away, both leaders took the initiative and, after consolidating their armies, began another offensive into Wessex. Having just arrived, Guthrum had to learn the territory and the tendencies of both the Anglo-Saxons and Halfdan's veteran warriors.<sup>167</sup> First setting up base at Repton, forces under Guthrum marched onward to Cambridge and further to Wareham, traveling deep into the territory of Wessex. The plan was to attack Wessex from two sides, with Halfdan attacking in the east while Guthrum launched raids and attacks from the south. However, it seems while Guthrum engaged the Saxons, Halfdan was more passive than aggressive. Subsequently, after Guthrum launched his raids and found good defensive ground to cement his position in the south, Halfdan surprisingly made a truce with King Alfred of Wessex.<sup>168</sup> This comes as one of the most, if not the most controversial decision the Vikings made through the duration of the campaign since its inception in 865 CE.

It is at this time, when Guthrum first arrived and Halfdan considered leaving the expedition to settle in Northumbria, that King Alfred of Wessex seems to have offered

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<sup>167</sup> Ryan Lavelle and Donato Spedaliere, *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Oxford, 2012), 42.

<sup>168</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 319.

the Vikings money if they would leave Wessex alone. Halfdan was supposed to abandon his position and stop trying to conquer Wessex.<sup>169</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, Halfdan agreed to such terms and withdrew back to Northumbria. While this may not have been the wisest financial decision for the sustainability of the Saxon war effort, King Alfred apparently sought to capitalize on the Viking tendency to accept bribes. For their part, Halfdan's decision probably surprised the Vikings as well.<sup>170</sup>

It appears Halfdan had little choice but to make an agreement with King Alfred based on circumstances, especially events transpiring outside of Wessex. Halfdan was, after all, the sole leader of the Great Army despite the arrival of Guthrum. Yet he was forced to march back into the previously conquered kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia to re-pacify them.<sup>171</sup> Since the bulk of the Viking army was engaged in the effort to take Wessex, the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were left in a power vacuum, void of leadership or protection. This led to revolts within the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria, both of which had been overseen by puppet rulers who the Vikings had installed.<sup>172</sup> East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia constituted a majority of what had been Anglo-Saxon territory, and so these areas proved difficult to control once the Vikings had moved on to try and conquer Wessex. Basically, Halfdan had the choice of either committing all of his warriors and resources to capturing Wessex, or abandoning the idea of total conquest and accepting the idea that he would control half, or even three-

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<sup>169</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 254.

<sup>170</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 256.

<sup>171</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 258.

<sup>172</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 260.

quarters, of what had been the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Halfdan had to prioritize if he wished to colonize Anglo-Saxon lands. Again, Halfdan's decision speaks to his intentions. If the Vikings had only intended to raid in the first place, then the Vikings would not see this as a big decision to be made. Halfdan would simply have retired his forces to his lands in Scandinavia.

Another factor that seems to have contributed to Halfdan's decision to leave the conquest of Wessex to Guthrum was simply the losses that the Vikings had sustained. Though there are not any available statistics to reveal specific numbers, while Anglo-Saxon sources reveal a considerable number of losses on their side, so too was the Viking Army gravely afflicted. With the entire campaign to conquer the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms lasting over thirteen years, the death and casualties on both sides likely numbered in the thousands. While a notable amount of these casualties occurred on the battlefield, just as many if not more likely died due to malnourishment, maltreatment, and disease.<sup>173</sup> Of course there were also Viking fleets arriving from areas such as modern-day Ireland and Denmark expressly sent to reinforce and relieve the veterans of the Great Army. However, even these reinforcements saw heavy casualties, as many perished at sea on their way to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms due to ferocious sea-storms.<sup>174</sup> With the number of losses continuing to pile, endless conflict from one kingdom to another, and

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<sup>173</sup> Asser's *Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, William Henry Stevenson, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 220.

<sup>174</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 243.

reinforcements buried beneath the sea, it is not as surprising to see why Halfdan and his men decided to depart and settle in Northumbria and East Anglia.

The overall goal of the Vikings who invaded the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was unique; however, their methods were still rooted in Viking traditions of raiding. Although Ragnar's sons supposedly were the primary instigators who, as rulers, organized the Great Heathen Army, the Vikings were not exactly an army with standard weapons/armor, financially supported by a stabilized political entity. The Great Heathen Army was essentially a collection of war bands, kept together by the desire for land and wealth as much as a brother's desire to avenge the death of Ragnar Lothbrok. Viking warriors were traditionally accustomed to implementing and engaging in raids in highly vulnerable areas where they would encounter marginal resistance.<sup>175</sup> Those raids were often small in scale and the areas where the pillaging and looting occurred were often full of material wealth. Viking warriors wanted to strike areas where the rewards far outweighed the risks. Vikings were also not particularly fond of engaging in a large-pitched engagement on an open battlefield, and only did so when it was believed they absolutely had to.<sup>176</sup> While Halfdan and the other leaders of the Great Heathen Army appear to have sought to conquer the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, they still used older strategies associated with raiding. The number of raids, where the raids took place, and how often the Vikings were compelled to accept Danegeld over further fighting supports

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<sup>175</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 138.

<sup>176</sup> Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900*, 142.

this notion. The fewer the casualties and, more importantly, the faster they could conduct hit-and-run raids, the better off the Vikings were.

Another reason Halfdan departed from Wessex and began to re-establish control of Northumbria was his desire to attack the Pictish Kingdom of Strathclyde, located in modern day southern Scotland. Although the Picts' prized jewel - the once formidable and strategically important natural fortress of Dumbarton - was already captured and looted by Ivar The Boneless in the year 870, the Kingdom of Strathclyde managed to hold on. Ivar did not conquer them outright.<sup>177</sup> The kingdom stretched through territory that bordered between modern day England and the heart of modern-day Scotland. By 874-875, Strathclyde continued to maintain enough wealth and resources to garner the attention of Halfdan. Based in Northumbria, Halfdan probably used that kingdom as the staging point for an attack on Strathclyde. The sources say very little about how Halfdan attacked the Picts and the aftermath of the conflict. It was seemingly a brief engagement. Halfdan took what wealth and resources he could and returned to Northumbria to rule there, and then began to eye the Kingdom of Dublin, which his brother, Ivar, had previously ruled.<sup>178</sup> These raids certainly had an effect on the local balance of power. As for the Picts of Strathclyde, their kingdom continued to decline until they became a vassal to the kingdom of Scotland and eventually ceased to exist by the early eleventh century.

The most significant reason behind Halfdan's decision to make a deal with King Alfred and withdraw northward, therefore, seems to be that he wanted to colonize those

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<sup>177</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 296.

<sup>178</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 305.

kingdoms he had already conquered, most notably Northumbria. This would be impossible if he spent all his resources and manpower trying to conquer Wessex, too. Whom would he have to support him when he returned to Northumbria if everyone died in Wessex? He had, after all, seen his brothers die or abandon the expedition. Viking kingdoms and settlements have already been established along the Scottish Isles, areas of Ireland, and surrounding islands.<sup>179</sup> It comes as no surprise Halfdan and a number of Viking warriors wanted to abandon the constant grind of perpetual warfare and settle down in the lands they had recently conquered. This was likely why they had come here in the first place, and so Halfdan was simply cutting his losses to take possession of those areas already under his control.<sup>180</sup> It would not be surprising if his soldiers had also grown tired of constant conflict, as fighting had lasted nearly a decade up until this point and so many of their peers had already died. During his short reign in Northumbria, Halfdan spent time handing out tracts of land to his fellow veteran warriors.<sup>181</sup>

In this, Halfdan may well also have recognized his followers need to return to a traditional Viking lifestyle if he hoped to hold onto the lands he had conquered. While the lifestyle of a Viking warrior was, in large part, focused on fighting and raiding, this was only for the warmer months of the year. Otherwise, Viking men spent a considerable amount of time cultivating and farming.<sup>182</sup> Not to mention, many of Halfdan's men had taken concubines/wives and began families in the winter camps where the army was

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<sup>179</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 127.

<sup>180</sup> McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England*, 277.

<sup>181</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>182</sup> Raffield, "Bands of Brothers", 311.

stationed prior to settlement. This was the common method and means of providing for their families and making ends meet when they were not acquiring wealth through raids. While Viking warriors certainly raided and looted for financial gain, farming and cultivating were arguably the most important aspect of their lifestyle. Halfdan probably recognized if he and his fellow veterans wished to permanently settle in the newly acquired Saxon lands, he would have to let his followers farm, too, in order to establish his power and hold on the territory he conquered.<sup>183</sup> Conquering the land did not solely constitute legitimate kingship. There was no time to waste. If Guthrum's continued invasion of Wessex failed, the Saxons would certainly gather their strength and attempt to reclaim the lands they recently lost.

Although concrete evidence remains elusive, Halfdan must have had a difficult time negotiating with Guthrum, the Viking who would take over the invasion of Wessex. Halfdan clearly did not want to continue the invasion, and appears to have negotiated with his enemy Alfred. While Halfdan and Guthrum probably could have defeated Wessex if they combined their forces, Halfdan's veterans were weary, tired, and likely unwilling to continue fighting in Wessex.<sup>184</sup> Halfdan was left to make an agreement with Alfred while simultaneously negotiating with Guthrum, hoping he and his fresh troops would continue with the conquest of Wessex while Halfdan retired to Northumbria.<sup>185</sup> Halfdan was working with his enemy at the expense of Guthrum, who had come to

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<sup>183</sup> Raffield, "Bands of Brothers", 326.

<sup>184</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 278.

<sup>185</sup> James Graham-Campbell, *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 90.



relieve him. It does not seem that Guthrum received any real benefits for replacing the veteran army. While there is no way to tell, Guthrum likely made stipulations and conditions with Halfdan considering the circumstances and what was at stake. Perhaps the idea was that Halfdan had already done most of the hard work, and Alfred was now too weak to resist. Guthrum could sweep up and rule in Wessex while Halfdan was king in neighboring Northumbria. The agreement appears to have been mutual, though it must have undermined their relationship at the time and even soured any future association. Even if Guthrum succeeded, how could they rule side by side after Halfdan had essentially thrown Guthrum under the bus?

Another likely cause for Halfdan's departure was his interest in the Kingdom of Dublin. Only recently, Dublin had been under the control of his brother, Ivar, and the Norse King Olaf the White. Dublin was one of the Vikings' most strategic, powerful, and influential trading towns within the British Isles. Unfortunately for the Vikings, the situation in Ireland was not stable. Throughout Ireland, the native Irish fought against the Norse and the Danes, both of whom also regularly fought amongst themselves. However, when Ivar came into the picture, he made an agreement and alliance with the Norse king of Dublin, and he and Olaf co-ruled the kingdom. They went on a number of voyages and campaigns together, raiding and attacking Welsh, West Saxon, and Pictish kingdoms. They notably co-coordinated a siege of Dumbarton Rock, the fortress at the heart of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, and starved its inhabitants into submission. Viking cooperation was short lived. Olaf the White died by the year 872, likely while conducting an

expedition throughout Scotland, and, as noted earlier, Ivar The Boneless died around the year 873.

Not only did these deaths mean there were fewer regional Viking rulers who could help Halfdan with his invasion, but it also meant Halfdan was left as the primary Viking leader tasked with picking up the pieces in all of these areas. In a nutshell, he was overextended. This was a huge blow to the Norse, who hoped to control their territory in Ireland, but Halfdan now had to consider those lands in Ireland while making a final push to attack and conquer Wessex.<sup>186</sup> Halfdan tried to step into the void in Ireland. By the year 876, Halfdan sailed to Dublin and attempted to take his brother's place as ruler of the trading kingdom.<sup>187</sup> He was met with resistance by both Norse and Danish warriors who were already established in Ireland. A battle was fought between what was described as the "native light Danes" versus the "invading dark Danes" (the dark Danes being led by Halfdan). Ultimately, the dark Danes suffered a crushing defeat, and Halfdan was killed in the process.<sup>188</sup>

Where did this leave the Vikings? Guthrum was in Britain, but his forces were on their own against King Alfred of Wessex, who, as will be shown, spent his time revitalizing the Anglo-Saxon forces in his kingdom. There was an open position for kingship in Northumbria. Halfdan only ruled the kingdom for two years. By now most of Ragnar's sons, who were supposedly responsible for orchestrating the Great Army's

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<sup>186</sup> Hjarðar, *Vikings at War*, 236.

<sup>187</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 401.

<sup>188</sup> Maguire, *Annals of Ulster, Otherwise ... Annals of Senat*, 403.

campaign to conquer the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, were dead. Guthrum was without regional support, and he faced a potential Anglo-Saxon resurgence in Northumbria in addition to the situation in Wessex. In fact, Halfdan died attacking other Vikings, so any coordination with the Danes and Norse in Ireland was now out of the question. All those factors that led to the initial success of the Great Army were now gone. Although circumstances may have remained strained for Alfred, this could be considered the beginning of the end of the Great Army's conquest of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms.

It is worth noting a shift in the balance of power on the British Isles. When the Vikings invaded, the British Isles contained a variety of petty kingdoms and competing tribes. These kingdoms and communities were perpetually focused on survival, constantly fighting neighbors and taking whatever they could when they could.<sup>189</sup> While kingdoms such as Wessex, Mercia, Dublin, and Northumbria stand out as centralized, most of the rulers in the British Isles were unable to match the size and capabilities of those kingdoms. The Vikings spent much time plundering the disorganized tribes, which they saw as too small to be leveraged as reliable allies.<sup>190</sup> The larger kingdoms were hardly stable enough to work with. The Great Heathen Army's relationship with Dublin was shaky; they were at war with Wessex and Mercia and constantly fought to control Northumbria.<sup>191</sup> This left the Great Army with little local support if they needed assistance from an Anglo-Saxon neighbor.

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<sup>189</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 228.

<sup>190</sup> Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 250.

<sup>191</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 240.

Arguably the most controversial decision made during the Great Army's invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was when Halfdan, rather than working with Guthrum to continue the invasion of Wessex, instead chose to make a deal with King Alfred. In so doing, he abandoned the campaign altogether. As remarkable as it may seem, Halfdan retired from the fighting and retreated northwest into the kingdom of Northumbria. At first glance, this seems to be an irrational choice, as he was so close to victory and had sacrificed so much for so long.

Halfdan and his followers, however, seem to have had good reason to pause and consider their options despite all their successes against Alfred and the Kingdom of Wessex. Many of the men, including Halfdan himself, were tired of perpetual warfare and struggle. But even more than this, Halfdan watched as the Viking position deteriorated. Yes, the Anglo-Saxons were on the ropes, but the Vikings had lost all of their leadership and stood to lose all the gains they had already made if they sustained a lot of casualties in Wessex.

The number of losses within the Viking leadership that Halfdan had to endure during the invasion is an important factor when considering Halfdan's mindset. His brother Ivar and Ivar's ally, Olaf the White, both died around the year 873 CE, opening a gap in both Viking leadership in the Great Army and creating a power vacuum in Dublin rule. There was no opportunity to make an agreement to mutually attack Wessex. One of Halfdan's subordinates and a powerful, up-and-coming Viking leader, Bagsecg, perished during the Viking defeat at the Battle of Ashdown. This only deepened the level of woes and stresses of Halfdan and forced him to rethink his position. Another brother, Ubba,

seeking to help the cause, saw his fleet destroyed in a storm at sea, and then, upon his arrival, was killed in battle. Halfdan's brother, Bjorn Ironside, was unable to be present during their invasion. He attacked Francia and sailed into the Mediterranean, narrowly escaping death and returning home with wealth and fame. Lastly was Halfdan's most obscure brother, Sigurd. Sigurd was likely a participant when the Vikings attacked the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. However, with Halfdan's death in 877 CE, Sigurd returned to Scandinavia to claim the Danish throne as his own.

All these factors must have clouded any negotiations between Halfdan and Guthrum, both of whom now had different goals. Though there was likely a deal reached between the two men, Halfdan's departure determined Guthrum's fate, as well as signified the "high water mark" for the Great Heathen Army.

## Chapter 5: Alfred the Avenger and Opportunist – His Role and Significance in the Great Heathen Invasion

Monks and chroniclers wrote most of the surviving primary material from this period, and their writings were often subjective when constructing an overview of events. Being local, these men interpreted events as Anglo-Saxons would have during this period. Therefore, these authors regularly gave Alfred most, if not, all of the credit for the defeat of the Great Heathen Army. While it is clear Alfred was a tenacious and formidable opponent, it is difficult to determine whether or not he was the prime reason for the major Viking failure. Having looked at the invasion of the Great Heathen Army from other perspectives, it is clear Alfred was only one of several factors that led to the failure of the expedition.

In the available sources, it seems Alfred was not only a man of perseverance, but also an opportunist who made quick decisions based on the actions and motives of the Viking army. Looking at Alfred's diplomacy, military strategy and tactics, personal qualities, demeanor, and treatment of others as he evolved as a leader, it appears he was thoughtful in his approach and would not give up. This seemingly led to his success in dire circumstances.

Alfred's childhood experiences helped prepare him to eventually become a king of Wessex. Even in his youth, Alfred must have known his father was important, and seen himself as a natural ruler. When he was still a young man, Alfred and his father

Athelwulf went on a pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>192</sup> Athelwulf decided that Alfred, not his elder brothers, should go on this pilgrimage, which suggests Alfred was unique and possessed qualities his brothers did not have. It's quite telling that the youngest son was chosen to join the pilgrimage, an opportunity one surmises would automatically be given to the eldest brother. While traveling, Alfred met Charles the Bald, King of the Franks, and spent time in the king's court. Despite being a younger son, Alfred's father gave him opportunities. Not only was there an underlying assumption he was born a prince and so meant to be comfortable among kings, but Alfred also must have learned how diplomacy worked on a personal level. This would be a skill he would leverage later in life.

Alfred, however, did not spend his entire youth socializing with kings. Alfred's brothers Athelbald and Athelberht led a revolt against their father, King Athelwulf, according to Alfred's personal chronicler, Asser. The civil war reflected division in the family and was significant enough to force a treaty to be made between father and sons.<sup>193</sup> Athelwulf lost and his son, Athelbald, took control of the western half of the kingdom of Wessex, which was the traditional homeland of their family, leaving Alfred's father with the eastern portion of the kingdom. Then Athelwulf died in 858 CE. Wessex was, once again, a single kingdom, but Alfred's three older brothers all claimed ownership of the kingdom. Athelbald and Athelberht both ruled Wessex in quick succession, followed by Athelred. These events must have had a tremendous effect on

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<sup>192</sup> Asser's *Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser*, William Henry Stevenson, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 256.

<sup>193</sup> *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser*, Alfred P. Smyth, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 77.

Alfred, who watched as his own kin turned on one another for control of the kingdom. Caught in a family feud between father and sons, Alfred was in treacherous territory, likely having to make careful decisions in such delicate matters. Which brother would he side with, or should he try to avoid choosing? Alfred could easily be killed if he backed the wrong brother. He also must have seen how his decisions would affect the entire kingdom and the people living in it.

That said, the history of Wessex in the years after the death of Athelwulf is largely unknown. Alfred's older brothers, Athelbald and Athelberht, both ruled Wessex until the accession of Athelred in 865, but it is unknown how events played out in those seven years. Even Athelwulf's fate, whether he died of natural causes or was assassinated by his sons, remains a mystery. Athelred's ascension to the throne of Wessex is also a mystery. The only available knowledge Anglo-Saxon sources provide is a reference to a deal made between Athelwulf and his sons in the town of Swinbeorg (modern day Swanborough) in which the brothers agreed whomever outlived the others would become king and retain ownership of Athelwulf's possessions.<sup>194</sup>

There is no evidence of what the brothers did with the kingdom of Wessex after Athelwulf's death and prior to the Viking invasion, which began in the same year as Athelred's ascension to the throne. Although, this period did mark a turning point in Alfred's life. Ready or not, Alfred would be forced into the limelight. Therefore, Athelred's claim to the throne occurs at a real turning point in the history of Wessex. This

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<sup>194</sup> Richard Abels. *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80.



marked not only the dawn of the Great Heathen Army's invasion, but Alfred's ascension into public life and reputation as well. From the great pilgrimage to Rome at the age of four to the arrival of the Viking army and Athelred's crowning when he was sixteen, Alfred had already been exposed to a lifetime of experiences. With the Vikings knocking on the door of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Alfred and company were given a major task. The knowledge, skills, and past encounters he experienced would be put to the test.

Upon Athelred's ascension, Alfred was now much closer to the throne. While Asser and the chronicles hint at a possible agreement made in Swinbeorg, Alfred is given the unique title of "secundarius" or "tanist."<sup>195</sup> This may indicate that Alfred was to ascend to the throne if Athelred was to fall in battle against the Vikings. Whether this was sanctioned by Athelwulf or the Witan remains unanswered. Alfred was given such a title and position despite his youth. His family saw leadership potential in Alfred, and now he had an opportunity to lead the kingdom even during times of invasion and civil strife.

Prior to becoming King of Wessex, Alfred certainly had his short-comings as well as some successes. The decisions he made during this time in his life say a lot about who he would become. From the years 868 to 871, Alfred was the subordinate and right-hand man beside his older brother and king, Athelred. Together, they fought many battles and skirmishes against the invading Viking hoards.<sup>196</sup> In 868, in an attempt to defend the neighboring kingdom of Mercia, Alfred and Athelred fought against Ivar The Boneless. Unfortunately for Alfred, the Vikings won many of these battles. Alfred and Athelred

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<sup>195</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 92.

<sup>196</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 2, Michael Swanton, trans. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 251.

experienced a crushing defeat at Reading in 871 against Ivar's brother, Halfdan<sup>197</sup>. It was at the subsequent battle of Ashdown, where the West Saxons were able to catch up with the Vikings, that Alfred notably began to assert himself as a leader.

At Ashdown, Athelred divided his forces in two, with him controlling one half of the West Saxon army while Alfred commanded the other. As the Vikings approached, Athelred chose to pray rather than retain his advantage of keeping the high ground by immediately marching out against the Vikings. Alfred noticed the Danes were continuing to march closer to the West Saxon lines.<sup>198</sup> While his brother paused, Alfred moved his forces to halt the Viking advance without waiting for the approval of Athelred. Surprisingly, Danish forces believed Alfred's men to be the entire West Saxon army during this engagement. This led the other half of the Danish army to turn toward the direction of Alfred. Fierce hand-to-hand, close quarters combat consumed the battlefield, and there was much strife and slaughter.<sup>199</sup> Finally, after waiting for a long time, Athelred moved his forces quietly forward and attacked the Viking forces from behind. This surprised the Danes, and resulted in the elimination of half the Danish forces on the field. Alfred was saved, and the Saxons had their first major victory.<sup>200</sup> Although Athelred saved Alfred, Alfred was given credit for the victory at Ashdown because he was able to hold his position and fend off the Viking attack long enough for the remaining West Saxon army to attack the Viking rear. Although Alfred was in a poor position on the

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<sup>197</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 268.

<sup>198</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 132.

<sup>199</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 135.

<sup>200</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 130.

battlefield and outnumbered, the battle would likely have been lost had it not been for Alfred, who took a stand and managed to hold his position.

Unfortunately for the West Saxons, the victory was matched with a devastating loss. It appears Athelred was mortally wounded during the battle of Ashdown. Shortly afterward he died, leading to the immediate coronation of Alfred as King of Wessex.<sup>201</sup> Although Athelred left two sons, they were underage and inexperienced, which meant they did not possess the credentials to becoming king during these troublesome times of invasion and war. Of course, there was the agreement that had been made at Swinbeorg. The sons of Athelred were granted the property and riches bestowed to them through the settlement, while the surviving brother became king.<sup>202</sup> Athelred's court, along with the Witan, unanimously supported Alfred's claim. While it is likely Alfred did not want to become king during such pivotal and defining times, he nonetheless answered the call and performed his duty. He took over with few options except to continue to lead the West Saxons against the Great Heathen Army. There was no time to mourn the death of Athelred.

Alfred did not have much success in the period immediately following his brother's death. After burying his brother, Alfred found himself engaged with the Danes near the town of Wilton, a battle that ended with yet another West Saxon defeat.<sup>203</sup> This

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<sup>201</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 72.

<sup>202</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 74.

<sup>203</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 115.

battle proved significant and crushing for the new king, for it meant he would be unable to drive the Heathen Army away from the kingdom of Wessex at the time.

Already Alfred faced defeat and was forced to make peace with the Danes, most likely through the use of Danegeld. Rather than fight, Alfred used money to pay off the Danes. While they subsequently withdrew, at least for the time being, Alfred's inability to force them out meant the Danes could easily come back whenever they wanted. Bishop Asser recorded the pagans agreed to vacate the realm and keep their promise, giving Alfred and Wessex hope they could negotiate with such a people despite their violent and aggressive nature.<sup>204</sup> There is no mention of the use of money to pay the Vikings to leave, though at the time the West Saxons had no way to ensure the Vikings would comply except to pay them.<sup>205</sup> Viking hoards have recently been unearthed that date to around the time of the Great Heathen Army. These discoveries further support the idea that Danegeld being used in such settlements. Although it is possible there was an exchange of hostages, it's more likely Danegeld was used in this matter.

Probably due to the use of Danegeld, from 872 to 875, there were few, if any, engagements between the Saxons and Danes, at least in Wessex. Alfred spent this time preparing defenses for the kingdom. He was alone in these efforts because the Vikings had already subdued Mercia and other neighboring kingdoms. It must have made Alfred and his followers uneasy to know they sought to turn back a Viking advance that had

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<sup>204</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 46.

<sup>205</sup> Dave Haldenby and Julian D Richards. "The Viking Great Army and Its Legacy: Plotting Settlement Shift Using Metal-Detected Finds." (Internet Archaeology, no. 42, 2016. Department of Archaeology, Hull and East Riding Museum), 34.

succeeded against all their brethren and allies, not to mention the army of Wessex a few years before. Alfred mobilized as many men as he could muster to make a new army.<sup>206</sup>

This process of organizing an army proved difficult. Due to the system of levies, many men within the Anglo-Saxon army were only fighting for a short period of time before their terms of service were over. In other words, once they had fought for a predetermined number of weeks, men left the army to defend their homes, care for the livestock, and farm, as they had to make ends meet. Although Alfred paid off the Vikings to leave Wessex, this did not mean the Vikings left all of Britain; they remained on Alfred's doorstep until conflict resumed. To make matters worse, Alfred did not possess a navy to contend with the Vikings along the shores of his kingdom. This, in many instances, forced Alfred to sit and wait to see what the Danish forces would do.<sup>207</sup> Having control of the seas allowed Viking forces to navigate and taunt Wessex with little worry of any resistance from Alfred. He was unsure where they might attack, and he had no way to stop them. Viking ships could sail anywhere from the East in East Anglia to the West in Wales, continuously harassing Alfred's defenses.

Alfred moved into one of the more difficult periods in his reign when the Vikings again became aggressive. In 876, the Great Heathen Army resumed its advance, though this time under the leadership of a new commander, Guthrum. The former Viking commander, Halfdan, and his men chose to retire and instead traveled north to settle

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<sup>206</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 277.

<sup>207</sup> Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 224.

lands they had conquered. This was marginally good news for Alfred, for he would not have to fight against the combined forces of Guthrum and Halfdan. He was, after all, the last remaining independent Anglo-Saxon ruler in the field, and he would not want to defend his kingdom from not one, but two Viking armies after so little success in the past.

Guthrum marched his forces into Wessex and occupied the city of Wareham. Noticing the Vikings were advancing for the first time in a few years and seeing this as an immediate threat, Alfred moved his forces to recapture Wareham.<sup>208</sup> He was able to blockade the Viking forces from their ships in the river outside the city. He was able to besiege it as well. However, after repeated failed assaults, Alfred was once again forced to negotiate for peace.

While Alfred had probably used Danegeld to settle for peace in the recent past, this time Alfred used an exchange of hostages and swore oaths from both parties. Alfred gave up a few of his soldiers and priests for a handful of Viking warriors.<sup>209</sup> The Danes swore an oath using a “holy ring” of sorts. This method of negotiation proved less effective. Shortly after the exchange, both parties departed to their respected sides, but the Vikings broke their promises. They killed all of the hostages in their possession and quickly slipped away under the cover of darkness to Exeter, near Wareham. Receiving the news of the Viking deception, Alfred quickly mobilized his forces again and moved toward Exeter. Once more, Alfred surrounded the area, blockading the Viking ships in

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<sup>208</sup> Ryan Lavelle and Donato Spedaliere, *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Oxford, 2012), 88.

<sup>209</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 263.

Devon. He clearly understood the importance of separating the Vikings from their ships. This forced the Great Army to remain in their current position. Perhaps unbeknownst to Alfred, Guthrum was expecting a relief fleet to arrive from the south. This second army would then penetrate into the kingdom of Wessex and meet up with Guthrum at Exeter.<sup>210</sup> However, a vicious storm disrupted the second Viking fleet, which prompted Guthrum to temporarily withdraw his forces back to Mercia.

In 877, with the approach of winter, it appeared another lull in the fighting would occur. Alfred and the Anglo-Saxon people of Wessex spent much of the winter occupied with festivities, celebrations, and commemorations of the holidays.<sup>211</sup> Although weather came to the rescue for Alfred and granted the Anglo-Saxon people time to immerse themselves in festivities, times of celebration were short lived. Despite the cold, in early 878, when Alfred was least expecting such an event to occur, Guthrum and the Danes launched a surprise attack against Alfred's winter stronghold at Chippenham.<sup>212</sup> Alfred had given most of his army temporary leave for Christmas and other related activities, so he only had his personal bodyguards when Guthrum's much larger band of warriors approached. Despite having numerical superiority, Guthrum likely spent this time surveying the area, analyzing the terrain, spying on Alfred, scouting the region, and finding weaknesses in the defenses at Chippenham. It appears the Vikings sought not only to secure Chippenham and kill as many Saxons as possible, but also to capture Alfred dead or alive. Most of Alfred's personal bodyguards were killed in the subsequent

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<sup>210</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 255.

<sup>211</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>212</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 70.

struggle to defend the city.<sup>213</sup> However, Alfred managed to escape with a small number of followers into the marshes and swamps of Somerset, Southwest of Chippenham. Guthrum and the Great Heathen Army were essentially in control of the kingdom of Wessex. Following a series of defeats, Alfred was on the run and many of the Saxon people were unaware of his location. The West Saxons must have felt that all was lost.

Alfred made a major mistake in allowing most of his West Saxon forces to depart from duties and return to their homes. It cost Alfred Chippenham, most of his personal guards, and almost his own life. Alfred should have known better, seeing the Vikings were nearby and unpredictable. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly when and where they would strike. Now Alfred did not possess a standing army in Somerset, the Vikings sought to capture him and rule over the people of Wessex. Guthrum occupied Chippenham as well as most major strongholds in the kingdom.<sup>214</sup> Due to his absence, the Wessex population also grew increasingly worried, fearing Alfred either fled the kingdom or was killed, leaving the Wessex population in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Of course, this was also a missed opportunity for Guthrum and the Great Heathen Army. Although they took Chippenham and delivered a crushing defeat to Alfred and the West Saxons, the Vikings were unable to capture the West Saxon king.<sup>215</sup> Alfred's current status was so dire that members of his court suggested he permanently leave

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<sup>213</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 126.

<sup>214</sup> Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 279.

<sup>215</sup> Timothy Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 255.



Wessex, sneak out of the kingdom, and travel to France where he and his family would be safe.<sup>216</sup>

This was the time, however, that Alfred began to lay the foundations for his plan to expel the Viking invaders. In the marshes, Alfred made decisions that would cost the Danes their conquest of Wessex, despite their best efforts. Regardless of all the loss and the string of defeats, Alfred decided to continue the struggle and to further his plans for ultimate redemption. He sought to muster an army, reclaim Wessex, and deliver a devastating blow to Guthrum and the Vikings.<sup>217</sup> It must have been around this time that Guthrum realized Alfred had no intention to flee. Further, as long as Alfred lived, so too did Wessex and the struggle to defend the kingdom from the Viking invaders. Had the Vikings managed to capture or kill Alfred, it would have likely meant the end of Wessex. They could have finalized their prolonged campaign of conquest and settlement.

Alfred utilized the time spent in the marshes to organize a system of guerilla warfare, and thereby become a thorn in the side of the Viking occupants of Wessex. A significant amount of hit and run raids and skirmishes unfolded while Alfred hid in the swamps.<sup>218</sup> The men tasked with these raids not only tried to confuse Guthrum and his Viking warriors, but to also gather what supplies they could find. They fought Alfred's battles, but they simultaneously helped feed his soldiers. Alfred's makeshift fortress was in Somerset, and the Vikings had a hard time locating him. Guthrum's soldiers were

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<sup>216</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 106.

<sup>217</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 38.

<sup>218</sup> Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 187.

forced to travel long distances searching for the men who orchestrated these raids, and in most cases, they failed to find or capture Alfred's followers. This resistance movement would prove to be very effective considering the surmountable odds Alfred faced.

Alfred, however, was not content to simply be an annoyance. He wanted to organize a more substantial resistance that could, in the long run, defeat the Vikings outright. While these hit-and-run tactics acted as a disturbance and distraction to the Vikings, Alfred spent most of his time speaking with nobles and priests.<sup>219</sup> He told them to spread the word, both of his existence and the efforts needed to once again raise an army.<sup>220</sup> Many of these men acted as messengers to Alfred, alerting every corner of Wessex while traveling through Viking occupied territories. Most of the men Alfred would be able to muster and rally were from Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire in Southern Wessex.

In this period of resistance, Alfred came to be known as a man of the people. An incredible legend appears from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. As the story goes, Alfred fled to the swamps of Somerset, and a peasant couple gave him shelter and protection. The couple were initially unaware they offered their home and hospitality to the king of Wessex. One day the peasant wife and her husband left to gather food, supplies, and run errands, leaving Alfred and company to watch their home.<sup>221</sup> The woman left Alfred with the task of keeping an eye on wheat cakes she was cooking on the fire. The story continues that

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<sup>219</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*

<sup>220</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 60.

<sup>221</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 94.

Alfred was not paying attention to the cakes due to being preoccupied with the duties of rallying the shires of Wessex and bolstering up his forces and support.<sup>222</sup> As a result, Alfred accidentally let the cakes burn and when the peasant woman came back home, she scolded Alfred for his negligence. Alfred's court and nobles threatened the woman, alerting her to Alfred's identity and to be aware of her manners. However, Alfred pardoned the woman's words and behavior, blaming himself for the cakes being burned. (Stevenson, 253)

While this story is probably untrue, it nonetheless may provide an example of Alfred's balanced temper and humble personality, or at least the image he or his descendants wanted to convey. The story insinuates Alfred could have easily punished the peasant woman for lashing out or taken their home for himself. However, if the story does possess some level of truth, it makes sense he would be thankful to have his life and find shelter in a swampy marsh. Some historians, including Richard Abels, seem to think the story can also be used as a tool to measure Alfred's behavior and tendencies.<sup>223</sup>

Eventually, Alfred would have to make a move if he wanted to get rid of the Vikings altogether, and that was just what he did. By late spring of 878, Alfred and his companions finally emerged from the marshes and marched toward Selwood, just east of Somerset. There, he would eventually meet up with a newly formed West Saxon army. After so much loss and then having to hide in their own territory, the West Saxons must have felt relieved. In the accounts, when Alfred reached the gathered army, everyone was

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<sup>222</sup> Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 253.

<sup>223</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, 147.

shouting and rejoicing to be in his presence.<sup>224</sup> The Vikings had the initiative and element of surprise with their deception and a winter attack. However, Alfred's actions meant he had the support of the people. As he moved into the open, his army was surely itching for a fight. After the reunion of king and army, Alfred moved his forces northward, aiming to reclaim his stronghold at Chippenham. Viking scouts quickly alerted Guthrum of Alfred's emergence and movements, prompting him to leave his defenses at Chippenham and head southward to meet the West Saxons.

The two armies met at a town south of Chippenham known as Edington (Ethandun). It is here where the fate of Alfred and Anglo-Saxon England would be decided.<sup>225</sup> Guthrum had felt compelled to leave Chippenham and meet Alfred on the battlefield before the West Saxons besieged him. A large collection of West Saxon levies clashed against the slightly outnumbered but seasoned Danish warriors. After a long engagement, Alfred's forces finally penetrated the Viking shield wall, opening up Guthrum's lines to slaughter and chaos. Shortly after, the Vikings fled to Chippenham. Alfred showed no mercy, as many Danes died while they retreated.<sup>226</sup> Alfred ordered a siege, surrounding Guthrum's tattered army and starving it into submission. After a few weeks, Guthrum surrendered to Alfred. Edington was a triumphant victory for Alfred and the Anglo-Saxon people. It also marked the end of the invasion of the Great Heathen

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<sup>224</sup> Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, 301.

<sup>225</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 122.

<sup>226</sup> Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age*, 126.

Army, which had been decimated and now sought terms. Because of Alfred's leadership and tenacity, the West Saxons were able to overcome surmountable odds.

It was not a total success for the West Saxons, as the Vikings remained in some parts of Anglo-Saxony. Alfred and Guthrum agreed Wessex and Mercia would remain Anglo-Saxon kingdoms ruled by Saxon kings. However, the territory that previously constituted East Anglia and Northumbria would remain Danish. This would come to be known as the Danelaw. There is no doubt Alfred wanted all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms back under Anglo-Saxon control. However, he granted the Danes a portion of Saxon land in an effort to maintain peace and alleviate the likelihood of further aggression by the Vikings.<sup>227</sup> Alfred had Guthrum baptized as his godson under the name Athelstan, along with twenty-nine of his companions, further cementing their relationship, Christianizing the Vikings, and highlighting the subordination of Guthrum. Alfred promised no further conflict as long as Guthrum and his Viking warriors remained in the confines of the Danelaw. Although the risk remained of the Danelaw threatening Wessex and neighboring kingdoms, Alfred chose to be diplomatic and favored compromise over war.

After the defeat of the Great Heathen Army, Guthrum's baptism, and the establishment of Anglo-Saxon and Viking borders, Alfred authorized a series of actions that would greatly assist the welfare of Wessex. Not only had he defeated the Great Heathen Army, but Alfred also sought to make sure his people were ready in case of another invasion. Alfred reorganized the Anglo-Saxon military. Previously and

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<sup>227</sup> Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Viking Great Army and Early Settlers, c. 865-900*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 292.

throughout the engagements against the Great Heathen Army, Alfred was forced to use levies, which provided temporary military service. Men would leave the army when they were needed the most.<sup>228</sup> Instead, Alfred created a permanent Anglo-Saxon fighting force that could be called upon at a moment's notice. To pay for it, he implemented public taxes. Alfred also fortified towns throughout his kingdom. These were known as burhs. Burhs acted as defensive strongpoints scattered throughout his kingdom.<sup>229</sup> If there were an invasion, Alfred could quickly prepare for and repel any foreign invasion or army from invading the kingdom. This also meant the ealdormen and thanes of each town in Wessex could stave off the Vikings if they were to strike again, at least until Alfred arrived with his army.

Legal reform and the establishment of a new law code were also major priorities of Alfred in his later years. Known popularly as the Doom Book or Legal Code, it was a combination of laws and judgements enacted by Alfred himself.<sup>230</sup> The book consisted of roughly one hundred and twenty chapters, ranging from traditional laws to Christian code of ethics. Alfred made this book, influenced by the works of his predecessors, in an effort to instill a sense of justice and moral obligation in Wessex. Alfred stressed the importance of judicial matters, as well as attempting to maintain a balance of religious and moral practices into law.<sup>231</sup> He wanted the new law code to be considered as not only

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<sup>228</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 93.

<sup>229</sup> Ryan Lavelle and Donato Spedaliere, *Fortifications in Wessex C.800-1066* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Oxford, 2012), 59.

<sup>230</sup> Frederick L. Attenborough. *Laws of The Earliest English Kings: Edited and Translated* (New York: Cambridge University, 2016), 80.

<sup>231</sup> Attenborough, *Laws of The Earliest English Kings: Edited and Translated*, 84.

a legal manual, but also a major document supporting the divinity and loyalty of kingship. Laws gave Alfred authority and the people of Wessex a sense of common identity. This type of policy also made it harder for subsequent Viking invasions.

In terms of religion and education, Alfred inspired a spiritual revival using bishops and abbots through education and learning. As king, Alfred believed he was responsible for Wessex's temporal and spiritual well-being.<sup>232</sup> Due to the invasion of the Great Heathen Army and multiple Viking raids that occurred, the level of learning and education in Wessex and neighboring kingdoms were deeply diminished. Many Anglo-Saxon books, manuscripts, documents, and other precious written material were destroyed during the invasions.<sup>233</sup> Because of this, Alfred created a number of schools for "those of lesser birthright", along with court schools where his children and members of nobility were educated. There they were taught how to read and write, the liberal arts of the time, as well as learn how to write and speak in both Latin and English.<sup>234</sup> Alfred foresaw the importance and impact English would have on the future literacy and learning of the Anglo-Saxon people.

In conclusion, while the Vikings did make significant blunders and had missed opportunities, Alfred was somewhat responsible for the failure of the Great Heathen Army. At a young age, the opportunity to travel to the court of Charlemagne in Francia, along with the pilgrimage to Rome alongside his father, exposed Alfred to regional and

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<sup>232</sup> Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, 312.

<sup>233</sup> Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 162.

<sup>234</sup> Reuter, *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, 314.

international affairs and relationships. During his adolescent years he and his family were burdened by a vicious civil war, tearing the family apart and affecting the political and social framework of Wessex. These events shaped Alfred's character and by circumstance (his father and brothers all dying), led to his rule. Most significantly, Alfred ultimately becoming King of Wessex during one of the kingdom's most tumultuous periods in Anglo-Saxon history turned him into the revered and legendary king that he was.

One can see clearly that Alfred, while notoriously steadfast and unwavering, was not the most ideal military commander. In the battle of Ashdown, Alfred felt compelled to engage the oncoming Danish force, despite the initial absence of his older brother Athelred. Outnumbered and exposed in the open battlefield, Alfred's detachment of Saxon forces was nearly wiped out before Athelred finally "finished his prayers" and launched a counterattack, effectively subduing the Danish army and forcing them to retreat. There is no question that Athelred should have either joined Alfred in meeting up with the Danes or ordered Alfred to join forces in a combined effort to engage the Vikings. However, Alfred's decision to move forward, without further support, was extremely risky and could have cost the Saxons, not only the battle, but the campaign as well.

However, despite the overwhelming odds and resistance stacked against him, Alfred managed to lead a successful guerilla war against the Vikings, rise from the marshes of Somerset, raise another Anglo-Saxon army, fight back against the marauding hords of the Great Heathen Army, and eventually triumph in the battle of Edington.



Alfred's victory meant the defeat of the Great Heathen Army and the Viking's chance of both conquest and colonization. Favoring compromise over further force, Alfred made the agreement of the Danelaw with Guthrum and his band of warriors in order to retain peace and strict borders between the Danes and Saxons.

Alfred only added to his legendary status and reputation after the campaign by promoting a series of improvements on Wessex's military, political, social, and religious standing. He called for the defense and fortification of towns throughout the kingdom, the installment or initiation of a naval force, along with taxes to financially support an indefinite Saxon army. The king also authorized a new law code in which the people of Wessex could receive more justice and abide by a greater sense of religious and moral composition. Alfred's agenda also called for the rebirth and reformation of education and learning; new schools, charters, churches, and writings were to reinvigorate and revitalize what was lost during the time of Viking invasions. Alfred was truly one of the greats, able to overcome one of the greatest invasions in British/Anglo-Saxon history and afterwards taking the necessary actions to prolong the defense and welfare of the kingdom. There is no doubt the Vikings made their own series of errors and misjudgments. However, King Alfred was able to capitalize on their mistakes, emerging victorious after nearly being plunged into the jaws of defeat.

### Reflection: What Was to Come

As the 8<sup>th</sup> century came to a close and the dawn of the 9<sup>th</sup> century was unveiled, the European landscape was about to be shell-shocked and shaken to their very core. Raiders and warriors from the Scandinavian heartland began, initially, to descend upon Western Europe. As the 9<sup>th</sup> century continued, more and more expeditions were orchestrated against Christian kingdoms, with the spread of attacks eventually reaching as far east as modern-day Russia and both the Black and Caspian Seas. So effective and far-reaching were these Northmen that they were able to combat and come in contact with the Christian kingdoms of Anglo-Saxony to the north and as far south as the Muslim kingdoms of North Africa and the Mediterranean. The introduction of Scandinavian raiding parties into Christian Europe truly marked the Dark Age for much of Europe, for they were to be plunged in perpetual warfare and strife. These were times where inner conflict and turmoil were just as alarming and brutal as the outside threat posed by the warriors of the North. These events, along with those involved, culminate into what we describe today as the Viking Age.

From early to mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, the number and size of Viking raids grew exponentially. What were initially small raiding parties consisting of a few ships and few dozen men gradually grew to large expeditions and raiding parties, equipped with hundreds of ships supported by thousands of battle-hardened warriors to go along with them. So frequent became these attacks that it became the norm for Anglo-Saxon

kingdoms; kingdoms were constantly under threat, on high alert, and vulnerable places such as the church were raided and stripped of their valuables on multiple occasions. These hit-and-run tactics utilized by the Vikings was extremely effective in quickly striking Saxon kingdoms, obtaining large amounts of wealthy objects and material, and terrorizing the public into an endless frenzy. What was once an occasional phenomenon became an annual occurrence; Vikings traveling through the use of their infamous vessels meant the coastline of Anglo-Saxony was under constant occupation. However, by the year 865, the Vikings were poised to lay the foundation to launch, not only a large expedition, but a full scale invasion of Anglo-Saxon England.

In the year 865, a large Viking army embarked on a voyage, crossed the North Sea, landed on Saxon shores, and initiated one of the largest invasions ever seen throughout the British Isles. Traversing and battling through the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex, the Great Heathen Army tore through the Saxon countryside, looting, pillaging, and killing thousands along their path. The army was supposedly led by the sons of a semi-legendary and famous Viking warlord/chieftain named Ragnar Lothbrok. A few years prior, Ragnar went on a small expedition throughout Northumbria, however was captured and killed by the Saxon king Aelle. The sons of Ragnar decided to seek revenge for the death of their father by launching a large vengeful army to capture and kill Aelle themselves. What is interesting are the reasons for the enactment of a large Viking army and the events that transpired throughout the course of the invasion, ultimately resulting in a failed attempt for complete conquest.

The purpose for this thesis project is to reevaluate the Great Heathen Army and to look upon the Viking perspective of characters and events during the time. Very little primary material has been written and preserved in regards to Medieval Viking/Scandinavian sources. All that is at one's disposal from the Vikings during this time are runic inscriptions and writings carved onto stone or wooden objects; Latin and English was not formally introduced into Scandinavia until the 11<sup>th</sup> century or afterwards. It is because of this the Viking perspective throughout the Viking Age is either largely unknown or significantly skewed. Most of the primary material from this time was written by the Anglo-Saxons. This unfortunately leads to the high probability of conjecture, embellishment, exacerbation, and falsehood throughout a considerable amount of Saxon writings. However, one has no choice but to use these sources because it is all that remains in writing from this period.

The argument of this project is to place more blame and responsibility on the failed invasion and conquest, more so on the Vikings themselves rather than what Anglo-Saxon sources indicate was largely orchestrated by the bravery and heroics of King Alfred the Great and his Saxon forces. It is without question Alfred played a significant role throughout the invasion and its aftermath. It is clear his determination, will, and tenacity are second to none among medieval kings. However, being considered as the sole proprietor of Saxon success and Viking failure undermines everything that took place that was beyond the king's control. There are more reasons to point at the Vikings themselves for a number of blunders and failures that doomed their amphibious expedition. After looking through all available sources and studying the Great Heathen

Army, it becomes more obvious a series of unintentional self-inflicted wounds and decisions altered the initial success the Great Army achieved and eventually led to their downfall. The objective of this project was to carefully analyze, study, critique, and lay out the major/possible reasons why the invasion failed and why the blame should reside more heavily with the Great Army and their leaders.

First of all, if one is to understand why a failed invasion or conquest occurred, understanding how it all began is equally, if not, more important than the factors following its inception. What initially caused the need for a grand Viking army to be constructed was to seek vengeance for the death of a famous and legendary king. While this may have been true in the beginning, the Vikings appear to make it quite clear the long-term goal for the Viking army was to not only seek redemption in the name of Ragnar, but to conquer all the Anglo-Saxon lands, turn it into a Danish protectorate, and use the land to cultivate and settle in. In terms of preparation, the orchestrators of the Great Army had to be able to entice many of the soldiers within the army that this was not simply a family affair; they had to convince warriors there was much more at stake. Informing them of the vast amount of land and wealth that could be taken in Anglo-Saxony had to have been the deciding factor. The scope and magnitude of this army was too large for its purpose to simply seek revenge and kill one insignificant Saxon king. This caused confusion as to what the primary goals of the army were and what was to become of Saxon territory if the lands were to be conquered.

Another major reason that altered Viking strategy and led to questionable decisions was the influence and significance of Danegeld. A powerful financial tool,

Danegeld was used as bribe money to negotiate with the Vikings in order for a temporary cease of combat to be issued. The true nature of the Vikings was to loot and pillage, not only to find valuable goods and commodities, but to find coins and sources of income that were easily tradable and reliable to Viking economic and military expansion. Anytime a large sum could be traded or obtained by the Vikings, they would quickly jump to and take advantage of. However, throughout the invasion of Anglo-Saxony, on multiple occasions, Viking leaders were content with negotiating to acquire Danegeld and complying to the wishes of Alfred and other Saxon kings. In other words, nearly every time they negotiated with the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings could have simply attacked and very likely wipe out whatever Saxon resistance remained. While the Vikings needed forms of wealth to sustain their war effort, it is clear, throughout most of these cases, they had the upper hand. Saxon kings, most notably Alfred, noticed the Vikings were willing to negotiate as long as they received Danegeld. While this was dangerous, Saxon kings took advantage of the Vikings tendencies and it allowed them to live and fight another day.

What was arguably the most critical and controversial moves of the entire campaign, the leaders of the Great Heathen Army made a fateful decision. Rather than a combined Viking force led by Guthrum and Halfdan, Halfdan, likely to the initial surprise of many, chose to make an agreement with his rival Alfred, cease from further aggression, and retire back to the Kingdom of Northumbria. Guthrum's newly arrived reinforcements, refurbished and untethered from weary combat, combined with Halfdan's seasoned and experienced warriors, would have made a near invulnerable army to defeat.

After further research however, it comes to little surprise as to why Halfdan decided to abandon the campaign and leave northward. Many of his brothers have already perished, the long-term goal of settling and farming, he and his warriors were tired of perpetual fighting, Halfdan needed to maintain his control over already conquered lands, and the task of reorganizing power and influence in the Kingdom of Dublin. The amount and degree of responsibilities proved too heavy and cumbersome for Halfdan to continue the Great Army's campaign of conquering Wessex. While that is understandable, this decision left Guthrum on his own and made the task of total conquest much more difficult. Whichever decision Halfdan made, both presented major implications and consequences. The arrival of Guthrum's army and the departure of Halfdan's veteran soldiers marked the climax of the Great Heathen Army and, for the time being, the beginning of the end for Viking domination in Anglo-Saxony.

It is impossible to discuss this subject matter, as well as anything revolving around Anglo-Saxon England without including the famous and renowned King Alfred The Great. Being one of only two kings to be crowned the title The Great, Alfred earned the title, thanks in large part, to one of the most tumultuous and darkest periods in Anglo-Saxon history. Forced and burdened into the calamitous struggle that was the invasion of the Great Heathen Army, upon his crowning of kingship, Alfred immediately faced surmountable odds and the possibility of total conquest by the hands of the heathen. Alfred fought many battles against the Vikings, and even at times made foolhardy decisions that nearly cost the kingdom and his life. However, through it all, Alfred managed to survive. In a literal sense, Alfred was Wessex; without Alfred, Wessex was

doomed to fail and if he was to be captured or killed, it would mean the death of Wessex. A sly and carefully planned opportunist, Alfred ripped himself out of the jaws of defeat and delivered a decisive victory at Edington that not only saved Wessex, but cemented his legacy as one of the greats. While the Vikings have much to blame on themselves for a series of blunders, there is no question King Alfred's presence, determination, and tenacity were crucial to the defense and preservation of Wessex.

Much was to take place after the defeat of the Great Heathen Army. An agreement was made between the Vikings and Saxons, saving the Kingdom of Wessex from initial Viking aggression. The Vikings were granted over half the land they conquered and used it to farm and settle, naming it the Danelaw. Guthrum's surrender also came with further conditions: Guthrum was baptized under the name Athelstan, became Alfred's godson, and he also became the king of the smaller Saxon Kingdom of East Anglia. Most of the Viking warriors who constituted the Great Army who decided not to settle in conquered lands, chose to abandon Anglo-Saxony and continue raiding along Frisian and Frankish coasts to the South and East. Viking raids continued to take place along the British Isles, though not as frequently and with little success up until the 10<sup>th</sup> century. King Alfred orchestrated a series of reforms, proclamations, and projects to reconstruct and revitalize Wessex from the never-ending onslaught of death and destruction laid out by the Viking invaders. The strengthening of military and defense, the expansion of the English language, the promotion of writing and education, and the precedent of power and control all became characteristics of Alfred and his kingdom up until his death in 899. Alfred made the groundwork for Wessex to be the most prominent



kingdom of Anglo-Saxony, as well as laying the foundation for the eventual emergence of Saxon kingdoms to all come under one formidable entity – the birth of England.

While the defeat of the Great Heathen Army was a major victory for the Saxons, the Viking Age was far from over. Viking aggression and expansion continued to thrive, not only throughout much of Europe, but across the globe as well. Vikings from Norway migrated to Scottish islands, to modern day Iceland, and even went as far as traveling to and discovering North America. Raids and attacks occurred through all spheres of cultures, anywhere from the Muslim kingdoms in North Africa and Spain, the Christian Frankish kingdoms in Southern Europe and Italy, modern day Russia, and the Middle East. Viking trade and commerce was abundant, with trading centers reaching areas including Dublin, Ribe, Hedeby, Novgorod, and Constantinople. While warfare and combat were engrained as a staple of their culture and background, the Vikings were equally as committed and willing to trade and settle in distant lands far from their Scandinavian homeland. Kingdoms established by Viking ancestors became notorious and worthy of mention, including the Kievan Rus (from which the name Russia derives from), as well as the more familiar Kingdom of Normandy in Northern France (named after the men who settled on the lands, the Northmen). These are many examples displaying the level of reach, influence, and significance the Vikings had in shaping Europe and the lands beyond. These examples also reveal the Vikings were capable and powerful enough to create and orchestrate something even more alarming than the Great Heathen Army.

While the Great Heathen Invasion of the late 9<sup>th</sup> century was repelled and defeated, this only meant further conflict and revenge was to occur and the likelihood of more invasions was inevitable. Anglo-Saxony was saved in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, however was under constant pressure from Viking raids throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> century. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Viking warlords and kingdoms were powerful and large enough to launch full-scale invasions that eventually became overwhelming to their Saxon counterparts. The year 1016 marked the first year and time Anglo-Saxon England was successfully conquered by the Vikings, led by Danish King Sweyn Forkbeard, along with his son Canute. Canute eventually became king of, not only England, but of Denmark and Norway as well. The more famous successful invasion occurred a few decades later in 1066, when Norman Duke William defeated the Saxons at Hastings and subsequently became King of England. Future discussions and projects will revolve around these successful invasions and conquests of England. A possible comparable analysis and study, along with close examinations, will take place regarding why the Great Heathen Army failed to conquer modern day England, while the armies of Canute and William completed their conquests successfully. These successful invasions would greatly impact the future of England and Europe, coinciding with dire consequences and implications for further conflict and negotiations of the future.

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