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Medieval language contact: an analysis of the interaction between Old Norse and Old English in “Vikings”

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ABSTRACT

The present study proposes an analysis of the historical sources from which the TV series *Vikings* draws its inspiration, focusing on how Vikings and Anglo-Saxons interacted in linguistic terms. The primary aim of this work is to compare what is portrayed in *Vikings* with events that actually happened in reality. To accomplish this, I first needed to collect material to comprehend what the situation was like in the Middle Ages, as the Vikings did not write extensive texts and the existing historical sources are scarce. For this reason, mainly English historical sources were used for this comparison, namely *The voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan* in the Old English Orosius, Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicle* and Ælfric's homily *De Falsis Diis*. To complete the analysis, two Scandinavian sources were also utilised: *Haralds saga ins hãrfagra* and the *Egils saga*. After analysing them, it was then possible to comment on the pre-existing hypotheses on the issue, in particular Bailey and Maroldt's Middle English creole hypothesis, which is partly contested by Patricia Poussa. Unfortunately, as there are no exhaustive and sufficiently detailed testimonies, it is almost impossible to determine with certainty the linguistic relationship that existed between the two peoples, but we will see later that most experts agree that Old English and Old Norse speakers were mutually intelligible, if not completely at least enough to understand each other without necessarily employing interpreters or translators. My examination then finally shifted to the TV series *Vikings*, which took inspiration from the Scandinavian sagas we partially examined previously. In this adaptation, author Michael Hirst has opted for the inclusion of characters like Athelstan and Sinric, who, as polyglots, had the ability to serve as interpreters. The difference from previous statements on historical reality is that in the series, it seems that Vikings and Anglo-Saxons did not understand each other without them. Other minor historical discrepancies have also been noted, for which, however, reasons are given as far as possible. It could therefore be concluded that although it tried to remain faithful to reality, *Vikings* still took several licences to make the narrative more audience-appealing, which was actually the purpose of the series that did not claim to be a documentary.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION	7
1.1 Background	7
1.2 Research questions	7
1.3 Methods	8
1.4 Roadmap	8
CHAPTER 2 – STUDYING THE PEOPLES	11
2.1 Introducing the Vikings	11
2.2 Language	16
2.3 Vikings raiding westwards	19
CHAPTER 3 – EARLIER STUDIES AND HYPOTHESIS	23
3.1 Earlier Historical Sociolinguistic Studies on Old English and Old Norse Contact	23
3.2 Hypothesis on Anglo-Norse contact	28
CHAPTER 4 – <i>VIKINGS</i>	35
4.1 <i>Vikings</i> ' historical sources	35
4.2 Language intercomprehension represented on screen	40
4.3 Interpreters in <i>Vikings</i>	42
CONCLUDING REMARKS	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	49
RIASSUNTO	51

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

“Although he’s a foreigner, he speaks our language, don’t you? [...] I want to learn some of your language. Will you teach me, priest?”

1.1 Background

This quote comes from the TV series *Vikings*, written by Michael Hirst and broadcast from 2013. This TV series has captivated millions of spectators, who have become fascinated by the adventures of the Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok. In the beginning, Ragnar is a farmer and warrior who lived in southern Norway with his wife and two children. The story tells how he will travel all over England, becoming earl and then king. After him, his sons will widely travel the world, taking the audience with them on a journey through the High Middle Age world (that lasted from around A.D. 1000 to the 1300s).

From the very first episode, the audience is immediately immersed in the world that Hirst wants to portray, thanks to the first words that are pronounced. They are not in English, the production language of the series and which one would therefore expect to hear: they are in Old Norse, the language spoken in Scandinavia in the Viking Age. This is a bit confusing at first, but it quickly catches the attention and allows the viewer to fully identify with a situation that would be hard to imagine, and to sympathise with the characters.

In the following seasons, the characters will go on expeditions to England, then to France, Spain, Italy, Russia, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland and even North America, before Christopher Columbus even got there. Throughout the series there is contact between peoples who speak different languages, and this has made me curious.

1.2 Research questions

The author of *Vikings* decided to propose the problem of language intermediation to the viewers, and I got enthusiastically involved in the issue. This thesis was born from the questions I was asking myself and the doubts I was having while watching the series.

I first wondered how well the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings understood each other, since they spoke different languages, and above all I wondered how could Athelstan (the Northumbrian monk) know Old Norse, given that he was English. Fascinated especially by the dialogues in Old Norse and Old English, I then wondered how faithful they were to reality. I already knew there was little writing by the Vikings, so I questioned how they could have recreated entire dialogues in a dead language with so little evidence - provided that they were right. For these purposes, the main objective of this thesis was to investigate the linguistic intercomprehension between the two peoples, proposing an analysis of the interaction between Norsemen and Englishmen in medieval times, to finally see how accurate the TV series was.

1.3 Methods

To do so, it was first necessary to analyse historical sources to see if anyone who lived in that era had ever spoken of the encounter with the other people. This was hard to do, because the evidence we have is very limited and often not exhaustive in this respect. The Vikings, after all, did not write. Or more precisely, they had their own way of writing (the Runic alphabet, which will be explained later), but they did not use it to write long lines. Thankfully, the Anglo-Saxons did write, which is why the sources that are offered for this analysis are mainly of English origin. Based on the evidence we have, some of the existing theories on this matter will then be analysed, with a focus on the hypothesis of mutual intelligibility, the hypothesis of the existence of interpreters and finally the hypothesis of the creation of a creole. All of this is then compared with what was represented on screen to determine how fantastic and how truly historic *Vikings* is. Crucial to this last part were the interviews with the author Michael Hirst, his team and the actors, which provide material for explaining why certain choices were made by the production.

1.4 Roadmap

The second chapter will provide an overview of what is considered to be essential to talk about a people such as the Vikings, which as a popular subject are also surrounded by a number of misconceptions.

Then, the third chapter will focus on the language which they spoke, and resources will be analysed to confirm or contradict the existing hypotheses on the modalities of language contact between Old English and Old Norse.

Finally, the fourth and final chapter will revolve around the TV series *Vikings*, and on the basis of what has been outlined in the previous chapters, a comparison will be made between what the authors have proposed and what has been seen to be the reality of the facts.

CHAPTER 2 – STUDYING THE PEOPLES

2.1 Introducing the Vikings

The topic of this thesis cannot be fully analysed without defining who the Vikings were, and in order to do this, we need to introduce the Germanic peoples. Settled in northern Europe in an area between southern Scandinavia and northern Germany, they were a group of tribes that shared a common language, as well as social, legal and religious customs and habits. I will now propose some traits of Germanic culture with the aim of outlining a picture of Germanic civilization and better understanding the people we are talking about.

In their society, private property was unknown, so land was communally cultivated and abandoned after harvest. Therefore, the need for constant movement was imposed. Livelihoods were provided by a very primitive type of agriculture, livestock raising and hunting, and the standard of living was about the same for the various tribes.

In order to discuss the organisation of Germanic societies, we will use the main sources on this subject that we have at our disposal: Caesar's *Commentarii de bello Gallico*¹ and Tacitus' *De origine et situ Germanorum*²

These are in fact the earliest sources we have on the ancient Germanic peoples. Before them, only Pytheas, from Marseilles (4th century B.C., when Marseilles was a Greek colony), had written about them in a text about a trip he made for trade, but this text has been lost and we do not have it. Pytheas speaks of the peoples he saw, but does not use the term "Germanic". The first to use this term was Julius Caesar (born around 100 B.C. and killed in 44 B.C.). In 51 B.C. he expanded into Britain and began writing the *Commentarii de bello Gallico*. This text contains the oldest description of the Germanic peoples in comparison with the Celts.

After 150 years came the second fundamental source: Tacitus, who wrote *De origine et situ Germanorum* in 98 A.D. Tacitus travels to the East, but he does not go to the places where the Germanic peoples were located, so his is not a direct experience. Tacitus got information at second hand, furnished probably by people who had been in

¹ 50 B.C.

² 98 A.D.

such places or on the frontier, and through the medium of traders. It must be kept in mind that the East Germans (Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Gepids, etc.) are not included in Tacitus' discussions because they had not been in contact with the Romans.

In *De origine et situ Germanorum*, Tacitus tells about the social structure of the Germanic peoples. He writes that the kings (in the 1st century A.D.) were chosen for their noble birth, while the commanders were chosen for their valour. The figure of the king was not the same as that of the commander: they had different competences. The duties of kings were to maintain relations with the sacred and to protect the people, but this type of leader is not useful for war, for which in fact a commander - a military chief - was elected. However, the possibility that the king and the commander could be the same person is not excluded.

According to Tacitus, the assemblies were composed of free men and served to make crucial political choices, to legitimize judgments made by rulers and to serve as courts of justice³.

With the great migrations and the subsequent formation of Germanic kingdoms, the Germanic peoples set down their laws in writing. The earliest written collections of Germanic law are the *Leges Barbarorum* (written in Latin), which date from the 5th to the 9th century. Despite the late redaction and the now deep contact with Latin civilization, this documentation is valuable to us and shows that not only did the Germanic tradition manage to resist the encroachment of a superior civilization, but indeed enjoyed prestige with the Romans who drew from it. For instance, it may be noted that some words from modern Romance languages, such as the Italian word *legge* or the Spanish *ley* which mean "law", come from the Latin *lex*, which "derives from Anglo-Saxon *lah, laga, lauge*, Icelandic *lag, laug, log*." (Valpy, 1828, 227)

One cannot form a complete portrait of this people without describing briefly their religious beliefs, because it is known that, at least in antiquity, religion is perhaps the element that delineated the psychological and social aspects of individuals in the community. Germanic religion took on the aspect of a polytheism in which divine figures are identified in order to provide, each according to their own prerogatives, for the various needs of mankind. The Germanic is divided into two families: the Æsir and the Vanir,

³ Tacitus, P. C. & Risari. E. (1991) *Germania*, Italy: A. Mondadori; chap. 11–13.

which waged war against each other for a long time, resulting in a unified pantheon. The Æsir are predominantly associated with law and war, and include Odin (who is the supreme deity and governs all things), Thor, Tyr, Heimdallr, Baldr, Hrenir, Ullr, Bragi, Loki and others. The Vanir, on the other hand, are associated with magic, fertility and peace and include Njörðr, Freyr, Freya and others.

Supernatural beings live alongside these main characters. They are often present in major myths and remain alive in the folklore of Germanic tradition. They include giants, elves, dwarves, Norns⁴, and Valkyries⁵. Germanic people were aware that they could not escape a predetermined fate and resorted to magical practices and divinatory rites to know their future. This made the culture of the Germanic peoples profoundly different from that of the English, which was a Christian society.

In fact, when we will discuss the interactions with the peoples who lived in England in a later section, we must keep in mind that they were Anglo-Saxons. This means that they came from Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians who were Germanic peoples who occupied Britain in the 5th century, after the Romans had abandoned it in 408 (where they had arrived with Julius Caesar 450 years earlier). There, the Anglo-Saxons had converted to Christianity in the 7th century, so by the time of the contact that would take place from the 8th century onwards, the two peoples were now one Christian and the other polytheistic.

The difference in ideals mentioned earlier has therefore made cohabitation even more difficult, often impossible. The ideal of life that Christianity imposed was contrary to the Scandinavian ideal, and this increased intolerance between peoples at the moment when the Vikings settled in England. But despite this, interactions between the two populations did take place and contributed to the formation of two societies influenced by each other. A significant impact was given by the monks who made attempts to spread the Gospel, and in doing so they also spread the Latin alphabet. It was used not only for translations of the Holy Scriptures, but also for writing down the literary heritage of the Germanic tradition that would otherwise have been lost.

⁴ Female entities that decided the destiny of the gods and of each individual human.

⁵ When brave warriors died in battle, they went to Valhalla. Valkyries were the maiden warriors who went down to the battlefield and accompanied the souls of the warriors to Valhalla to Odin.

Precisely because of the spread of Christianity, the runic alphabet began to be used less and less, eventually surviving only in Scandinavian regions. This alphabet is also known as *futhark*⁶ and was presumably common to all Germanic peoples. It was an alphabet composed of 24 signs⁷, each of which is bivalent and can be used with either phonetic or ideographic value. Runes were not only used as a means of communication, but also as a vehicle for magical practices and for divinatory purposes. It was precisely because of their links to preserved longer than elsewhere in the Nordic region: in fact, more than 6,000 inscriptions come from Denmark and Scandinavia. The available runic inscriptions were actually engraved on weapons, combs, rings and buckles. Those engraved on perishable materials such as wood have not survived to us, which is precisely why we have so scarce historical sources coming from the Vikings.

As mentioned before, it did not disappear completely and was still sometimes used until the 10th or 11th century, in fact we can find it mixed with Latin characters for example in the Ruthwell Cross (England, 8th century), as well as in the Franks Casket (England, 8th century), or in the St Cuthbert's coffin (England, 698); the latter is also an example of how runes were also used in the Anglo-Saxon church.

With the Norman conquest in 1066, the runic alphabet became very rare and disappeared completely shortly afterwards. In fact, The Norman conquest of England greatly disrupted the situation. England's relations with Scandinavia were greatly reduced, and stronger links were forged with France.

As already pointed, the contacts with other cultures (not only with the English one) profoundly changed and shaped this peoples who travelled so widely. The exposition of Germanic peoples' expansion will serve us to conclude this description. For ease of reference, our division will be based on East Germanic, West Germanic, and North Germanic peoples. The East Germans came from the north, detached themselves from their original places and moved south, taking different routes. Their conquests were only temporary, but they were the first to come into contact with the Romans who inhabited England until the 4th century, and assimilate some of their culture. The West Germans were at first settled along the coasts of the North Sea and in the region between the Rhine

⁶ It is called *futhark* because of the first six rune names' initial phoneme.

⁷ This is for the Elder Futhark, which was later simplified and the Younger Futhark consisted of only 16 signs.

and the Elbe. South-central Britain was a major destination for their migrations. Because they were better organized and compact than East Germans, they laid the foundations for the development of modern European nations. Lastly, the North Germans are those we also refer to as Vikings. This term was used in the 9th and 10th centuries to describe warriors who left Scandinavian countries like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark and made raids on European countries. The origin of this term is uncertain and there are various theories about this. Some claim it comes from the Old Norse word *vik*, which means “bay”. So the term “Viking” literally means “those who go from bay to bay”. The Vikings were great travellers and able warriors, which is why they ventured far from their homeland. They reached the Sarmatian plain, where they imposed themselves on the Slavs; arrived to the Black Sea and Constantinople (866), but they were soon absorbed by the locals because of their small numbers; by raiding westward, they established cities such as Wexford and Dublin in Ireland, contributing to the island’s economy and trade. They also conquered a large part of England’s north-central and eastern regions (known as “Danelaw”⁸), and colonized Færøer, Orkney and Shetland⁹ as well. A group of noblemen left Norway in 874 and settled on what was then called Iceland (meaning “Land of Ice”), a place inhabited by a few hermits of Irish origin. The Norwegians of Iceland are credited with discovering Greenland, where Erik the Red¹⁰ founded the first settlement between 982 and 984. During that time, his son Leifr Erikson landed in what he called *Vinland*, probably along the coast of present-day Canada. The Vikings also raided and plundered the regions of Friesland, Holland, and Zeeland. However, only the Normans, the “men of the North”, managed to establish a lasting settlement in France (911), which was then named Normandy after them. By 1066, they would have completely assimilated into the local culture and language and converted to Christianity. In the same years, cadet sons of the Norman nobility left for southern Italy to seek their fortunes; the Altavilla brothers were the first to distinguish themselves: William Popeye was made count of Melfi; Robert Guiscard was recognized as duke of Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily by the

⁸ The Danelaw will be further elaborated in 2.3.

⁹ Færøer are now part of Kingdom of Denmark, while Orkney and Shetland are part of Scotland.

¹⁰ Born in Norway, Erik the Red sailed west in the spring of 982 after being exiled for three years from his homeland because of a murder he had committed. He was 47 years old when he reached Greenland, settling first in this country he named for its vast green meadows. In the years that followed, a large number of colonists established themselves with him, and he became their protector and judge.

papacy. All of southern Italy was reunified under Norman authority, until the Swabian dynasty (1194) took control.

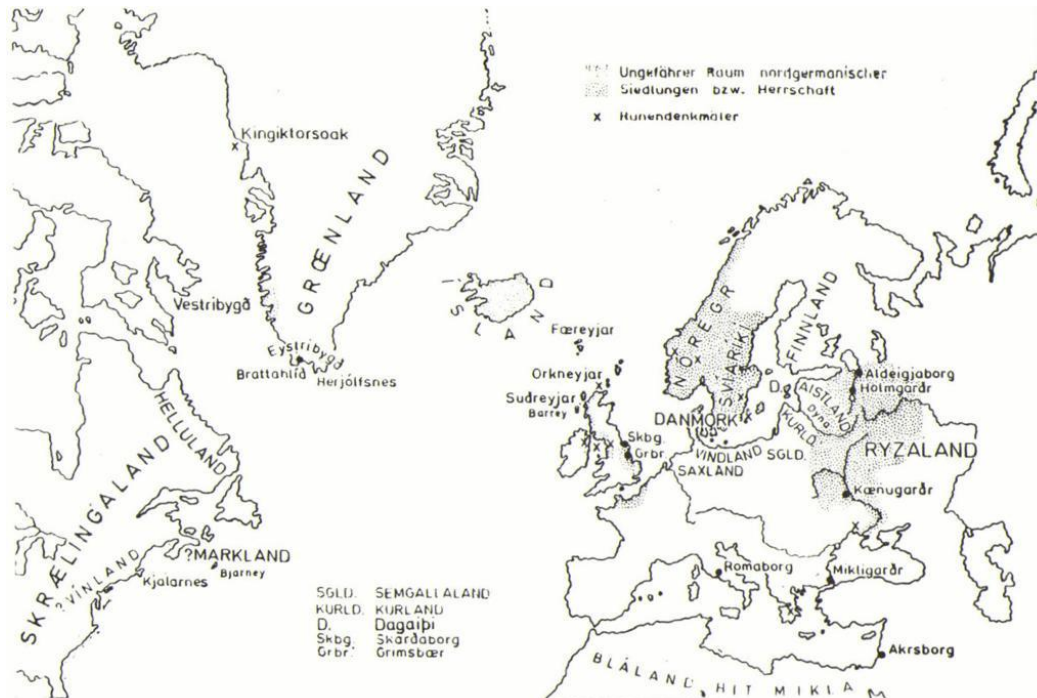


Fig. [1]. The Viking Expansion (Dolcetti Corazza 2009, 32)

2.2 Language

Taking a step back and studying how the Vikings spoke is essential to understand how they communicated with the Anglo-Saxons. This has been difficult to do, because, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, our sources for the history of the 8th and 9th centuries are incomplete and very biased, since no Viking accounts detailing of Scandinavian language are available for this period. Or rather, they do exist, the sagas, but they are not to be considered entirely reliable as in them facts and fiction coexist together. This matter will be expanded in chapter 3.1. The documents that have come down to us that describe the Viking movement and address the language aspect in more detail are the writings of medieval English chroniclers (among many, noteworthy is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that will be examined below in 2.3). One of the aims of this thesis is to analyse the language contact between Old English and Old Norse, for which it is

necessary to define what languages they are. The origins of these languages and their common points will now be explained through the history of their development.

First of all, it should be made clear that the language spoken by Scandinavians during the Middle Ages is referred to as “Old Norse”. This language is part of what originally was the Germanic language-group, which developed in what is now southern Scandinavia and northern Germany and then spread to other parts of the world. Part of the same group are, geographically speaking, the North-Western European modern languages: English, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian (Dano-Norwegian and New-Norwegian), Icelandic, Faroese and Frisian (divided into West, East and North Frisian). It is important not to make the mistake of conceptualize the linguistic entity of “Germanic” that existed in the Germanic period (which historically ends with the so-called Age of Migrations¹¹) as monolithically static and unified. We must also consider old Germanic a variety of language that was, like every variety, subject to constant change and influenced by sociolinguistic variation, just like it happens in every language even today. The matter of Germanic dialect groupings has received much controversy and two early sources of Germanic which have been considered suitable for observe the differentiation process of such dialects have been used in previous studies (K. M. Nielsen, 1989). The first are some linguistic records dating back to the period A.D. 200-500 in the shape of runic inscriptions (found mainly in southern Scandinavia). Although they are brief and challenging to interpret, they appear to be surprisingly uniform, that is why we can compare them to the other available source: the surviving sections of the Gothic Bible, of which the main translation by Wulfila¹² was made in the middle of the 4th century. So we have one source from northern regions (the runic inscriptions) and the other from eastern ones (the Gothic Bible). The Gothic, as opposed to the runic inscriptions, has shown particular developments. This assertion is severely condensed, but what is important to note is that the Gothic Bible demonstrates that divisions had arisen in the Germanic complex in the 4th century A.D. The comparison and analysis of these two sources reveal that there were two distinct varieties of Germanic, which are conventionally divided between North and East Germanic. The language of early runic

¹¹ A.D. c. 350-550.

¹² Wulfila was a Christian who had Cappadocian origins, but was born among the Goths. His native language was therefore Gothic, but he also spoke and wrote in Latin and Greek.

inscriptions is traditionally recognized as Proto-Norse or Primitive Norse (in Danish it is called *urnodisk*), and is the antecedent of later Norse. Many experts like M. Syrett and K. M. Nielsen (Townend 2002, p. 21-25) have attempted to group Germanic dialects on the basis of linguistic similarities, and their conclusion is that, given the resemblances between them, one can say that there was a North-West Germanic continuum which contained (in proximity) speakers of the antecedents of both Norse and English. The date for when this continuum split and distinct dialects began to emerge has been determined to be A.D. c. 500, with the events of the Age of Migrations and particularly because of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, which increased interactions with other languages that resulted in influencing each other.

Old English also had several dialects, and their evolution is a question that needs to be addressed. As there are certain Old English dialects with closer links to Norse than others (for example the "traditional" dialects of Yorkshire, Lancashire, The Lake District, and Lincolnshire), this is a topic that is very well-worn. Researchers question whether the existing differences date back to pre-migration, or developed after the invasion and both schools of thought find adherents. R. Jordan (1906), thinks that the language of the Anglo-Saxons invaders was largely undifferentiated and that dialectal differences arose after settlements. M. L. Samuels (1971) thinks the opposite. Also H. M. Chadwick (1907), basing his argument on phonological evidence, tells the same of Nielsen. Nielsen's analysis, therefore, shows that the language of Scandinavian settlers in 9th century did not show any especial closeness to any dialect of Old English. (Townend 2002, p. 27-28)

To summarize one can say that at the time of the early runic inscriptions, the antecedents of Old English and Old Norse did not yet emerge into distinct dialects, but they are believed to have been part of a North-West Germanic continuum. During the 5th and 6th centuries there were trade contacts, though isolation may not have been total. But despite this, after the separation of the North-West Germanic continuum, the divergence in linguistics was increasing. Nevertheless, after migrations when the peoples began to distance geographically from one another, the frequency of contact must have decreased dramatically, and eventually all overseas contacts disappeared. A small contact persisted into the first quarter of the 7th century, but then the separation between speakers of Norse and English seems to have been more or less complete, and developments in one language have not typically affected the other one. When they made contact at the beginning of the

Viking age, Norse and English speakers had been isolated from each other for about 200 to 250 years. During this time, the phonological systems of the two languages remained remarkably similar unless affected by the conditioned sound changes. Most of the divergent sound-changes that had occurred were predictable, as they were regular.

2.3 Vikings raiding westwards

Language contact between Old English speakers and Old Norse speakers needs to be contextualised and placed in a historical framework, which is why this section will provide an overview of the situation in England and Scandinavia in the 8th and 9th centuries.

As mentioned earlier in 2.2, in that period there were Anglo-Saxons in England. The Anglo-Saxon invasion of England had begun in the 5th century and its consolidation took almost two centuries. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians invaded England and settled there, organising the territory into separate kingdoms which will be described below.

Meanwhile, as previously described, the Vikings settled on the Scandinavian peninsula, when nations were not as we know them today. Today, Denmark is made up of the Jutland peninsula, four sizable islands (Zealand, Fyn, Lolland, and Falster), as well as 470 other smaller islands. Yet it also embraced Skåneland and Halland, currently part of Sweden, during the Viking Age. The Swedish Vikings travelled mainly eastwards, in the direction of Russia. The Norwegian and Danish Vikings, instead, were the first to sail westwards, where expanded across a wide area. Beginning shortly before 800 AD, they began attacking England for three centuries. Especially Norway entered an expansionistic phase under Harald Fairhair¹³ and his son Eric Bloodaxe in the 9th century. As Viking activity in England lasted for many centuries, it is not to be considered a single phenomenon. By analysing the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*¹⁴, it is possible to distinguish two different phases: the first phase (789-864) featured sporadic raids and looting; the second phase (865-896) involved permanent colonization in some places, which will be briefly discussed in this section. The settlements did not, however, prevent the Vikings from

¹³ He was the first King of Norway, he reigned from c. 872 to 930.

¹⁴ A group of chronicles compiled during the reign of Alfred the Great, at the end of 9th century.

raiding the rest of England. The most famous event was the devastating Viking attack on St Cuthbert's church in Lindisfarne, in 793. It is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and passed into history thanks to the Christian community which survived, and recorded the event on the famous "Domesday stone"¹⁵. It was such a violent attack that it shocked the European population and it is considered the beginning of Viking Age. However, the Lindisfarne attack was not the first: as early as 792 King Offa of Mercia had already started measures to strengthen the coastal defence system, suggesting that other raids that haven't been recorded may have taken place. In fact, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the first recorded Viking raid in England took place in 789, when three lost sheep from Hordaland (in west Norway) landed at Portland¹⁶ and killed the unfortunate royal reeve who tried to collect taxes from them. After killing him, they sailed on. The west coast of Scotland was also subject to raids, to the Hebrides, in particular to the holy island of Iona (which suffered violent attacks in 795, 802 and 806), which was the religious centre for the Celtic druids. The northern and western islands and the whole Caithness fell under the direct rule of the Norwegian aristocracy, eventually forming, especially in Orkney Islands, a significant political and cultural centre. Also the Danes began landing in England in 835, and this led to a heavier raiding campaign.

From the middle of the 9th century, the second phase of the Viking invasion began: the first settlements were negotiated. It is necessary to clarify that England as it is today did not exist yet. When Anglo-Saxons had begun to settle in England by the 5th century, they divided the territory into seven different kingdoms (East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex and Wessex). The kingdom of Wessex then absorbed the kingdoms of Essex, Kent and Sussex in 825, 871 and 860 respectively, leaving only four of the seven kingdoms: East Anglia, Northumbria, Wessex and Mercia. Wessex was ultimately the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom to remain unharmed during the Viking invasions of the 9th century. At that time, Viking attacks began to be accompanied by permanence even during the cold months, with an increasing presence of women, which improved the stability of the settlements. Above all, England became the prevailing destination of operations. From 865 the Viking Great Army makes its appearance in

¹⁵ On this stone found in Lindisfarne, are carved armed men brandishing swords and battle axes in the Viking style.

¹⁶ A very small island in the English Channel.

Anglo-Saxon sources. It was an army of approximately three thousand organised warriors, among whom were Ivar Boneless and Halfdan, which according to the sagas were sons of the famous Ragnar Lodbrok, sacker of Northumbria and Paris. East Anglia was the starting point for the Viking Great Army's invasion that eventually resulted in the development of what came to be known as the Danelaw. In fact, it was the first kingdom to be defeated by Vikings. King Edmund¹⁷ was taken prisoner, possibly tortured, and then assassinated. He would later be referred to as Edmund the Martyr for this reason. Mercia was conquered by the Viking Great Army in 874, after forcing King Burgred into exile. Ceolwulf II, who succeeded the exiled Mercian king, ruled until his death in 879 and was the last king of independent Mercia. Northumbria reached the peak of its power in the middle of 7th century, but when in 867 c. the Northumbrians had a civil war (because of conflict between King Osberht and King Ælle), the Viking Great Army exploited the moment to settle permanently in England. Finally, as already mentioned, only Wessex remained intact, even though it had been under attack since 870: the new king Ælfred the Great, despite various military reverses and the alternating support of the local lords, still managed to build up a minimally adequate fleet and raise a victorious army at Edington (878).

The Danelaw was then shaped. It was a territory between the Thames and the Tees, in which the customary laws observed in local courts were strongly influenced by Danish legal customs. In 970 c. king Edgar¹⁸ officially granted it legal autonomy.

The cohabitation of these two peoples in England led eventually almost to a fusion of the two, and from the 11th century there were even English rulers who had Scandinavian origins. The most important of these was Cnute¹⁹, of Danish origin, who united Danish and English institutions and in 1017 divided the country into the four counties of Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria and East Anglia. His heirs reigned until 1042, when the crown became English again.

All this is important to underline how significant the Viking presence was in England, and to comprehend that the consequences were of course also constant and long-

¹⁷ King Edmund was King of East Anglia from c. 855 until his death in 869.

¹⁸ King Edgar was King of the English from 959 until his death in 975.

¹⁹ Also known as Cnut the Great, he was King of England from 1016 and King of Denmark from 1019, both until his death in 1035.

lasting linguistic contacts: Old English was affected by the presence of Old Norse speakers and vice versa.

Along with having a significant impact on the names of several locations, it has already been explained that Old Norse also had a significant impact on everyday speech. New Anglo-Norse dialects emerged and in order for people to interact with one another in The Danelaw in topics of household, work, trade and administration, it was necessary to immediately develop a kind of language that everyone could speak and comprehend. For this reason, the existence of a pidgin has thus been the subject of much academic debate, which will be covered in more detail in section 3.2.

CHAPTER 3 – EARLIER STUDIES AND HYPOTHESIS

3.1 Earlier Historical Sociolinguistic Studies on Old English and Old Norse Contact

Now that it has been clarified how the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons spoke, we can finally address the question of early contact between the two peoples. But how did these two peoples communicate with each other? This question has certainly been the subject of many studies, some of which will be presented in this section. In the previous chapter it was illustrated that English and Scandinavian peoples were geographically very close and had many occasions of contact which lasted for centuries, but clearly since there are few historical sources there is no certain evidence. This is why the hypotheses concerning this matter are various, so I have selected the three main ones that will be analysed in this thesis. Before expounding these theories, however, I think it is necessary to present the studies that have already been conducted regarding early contact.

The study of language contact must inevitably be oriented toward cultural contact. There are several well known examples in which contact between Old Norse and Old English speakers is reported, but they often omit how the protagonists spoke to each other, being speakers of two different languages. I have chosen an Anglo-Saxon source for this analysis, which is “The voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan” in the *Old English Orosius*. It is one of the major Old English works produced during the reign of King Alfred (that lasted from c. 886 until the king’s death in 899). It was written by Paulus Orosius and tells of some voyages credited to Ohthere, who is a Scandinavian speaking to an English king, and Wulfstan, who is an Englishman in Scandinavia. Ohthere was a Norwegian who lived by hunting, whaling and trading; he probably went to King Alfred’s court precisely to trade. He had traveled in Norway, around the Kola Peninsula and in the White Sea. He had been in the ports Skiringssal and Hedeby. Much less is known about Wulfstan, only that he set out from Hedeby to the east and visited Truso, near the coast of present-day Poland, and the regions beyond the Vistula. Their tales were so interesting that one or more scribes were commissioned to record them. The special feature that gives this work so much value is that, unlike other travellers’ tales that circulated at that time, they were concise and did not expand on fantastic parts. As such, they are valuable because they show life outside the monasteries and royal courts of Viking Europe. While Ohthere’s

origins are certain, as he himself says he was originally from Hālgoland and therefore Norwegian, Wulfstan's origins are omitted. Being relatively more fluid, however, he is thought to have been English. In contrast, Ohthere's narrative seems much more fragmented, not as smooth as Wulfstan's, because his native language is not Old English. I selected this work because it is the one that best answers the question we asked. In the work, in fact, the dialogue between Ohthere and the king is reported, not in great detail, but it is enough to make assumptions that do not leave much room for excessive imagination. Since there is no mention of an interpreter, the question is raised as to how they were able to understand each other since they spoke different languages. There are some characteristics in Ohthere's speech that suggest that he probably spoke Norse or that in any case his English was conditioned by his native language. There is in fact a strong influence of Norse in Ohthere's narration, which could be caused by two reasons: either Ohthere spoke an English influenced by his mother tongue, or the scribe who was taking notes in English, listening to Ohthere speaking Norse became influenced by his Norse.

For these reasons, it really does seem that Ohthere was speaking Old Norse, and since there is no sign of interpreters, this must mean that he was for the most part understood by the English audience that was listening. After all, as Christine Fell (1984, 56) points out, Ohthere as a merchant should have been able to speak other languages. And since the Danes had been present in England for a number of years, King Alfred and his court must by then have become familiar with the Old Norse. She then adds that at that point the two languages were still moderately close, enough to seem similar (and therefore mutually intelligible).

Thus, the idea of the existence of an interpreter was rejected, but B. Odenstedt did his own work and presented a new theory. According to him, speakers of Old Norse and Old English in the Viking Age did not understand each other, so the presence of interpreters was required and Wulfstan was actually Ohthere's interpreter, who translated into Old English what Ohthere said in Old Norse. Furthermore, in his opinion the scribe who took note of the interpreter's translations made a very common mistake that made it appear that Ohthere's voyage had been made by Wulfstan. Odenstedt states that in reality what is presented as Wulfstan's voyage would be the second part of Ohthere's voyage, from Hedeby to Estland. But this theory has been disproved for a number of reasons that

will now be explained. The first thing that is hard to believe is that no one has reviewed the work of the scribe. Really no one would have noticed this mistake? This would already be very strange, but several experts have demolished this theory for other reasons as well. A very interesting article in which there are objections to Odenstedt's theory is *Ohthere and Wulfstan: One or Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred?* by J. F. Cuesta and I. S Silva. Several objections are made in this article, for example it is pointed out that it is clearly written in the story that the ship of the first part of the voyage is different from the ship of the second part, so the continuous voyage hypothesised by Odenstedt is not credible. Furthermore, Odenstedt does not explain why loans from Old Norse and errors are so concentrated in Ohthere's part, while in Wulfstan's part they are not that frequent. Odenstedt would therefore leave out the very important question of the linguistic differences between the two stories. The linguistic differences include, among others, the already described? difference in fluency: Wulfstan's speech is much smoother than Ohthere's, which sounds more fragmented. The question of the stylistic divergence is indeed avoided in Odenstedt's theory.

To conclude, this situation can be explained by the intelligibility hypothesis rather than the bilingualism hypothesis.

Although "The voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan" may not be entirely accurate, it was written under Alfred's reign, which as has already been stated, lasted from c. 886 until 899. This means only twenty years after the Scandinavian settlements in England, that is why this source has great value.

Almost a century later, when Viking raids had been going on for 200 years and settlements had been present for a century, Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicle*²⁰ was composed. In this source it is possible to see how an Englishman had an interest in the Norse language. This may seem irrelevant, but it actually demonstrates that the difference between Old Norse and Old English was perceived.

The last source I would like to mention in support of this thesis is Ælfric's homily *De Falsis Diis*²¹. Again, this work has been chosen to demonstrate how individuals in Viking Age England were aware of and recognized differences between the two

²⁰ Æthelweard composed a Latin adaptation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in late 10th century.

²¹ Ælfric was an Old English prose writer. He composed *De Falsis Diis* between the late 10th and early 11th century.

languages. In this homily, the comparison Ælfric makes between the Norse and classical deities is very interesting. The most important point for the current analysis is precisely the fact that this comparison presupposes that there was a difference between the two, which was well known to the author. In fact, in some passages, Ælfric explains how the classical gods are called with different names by the Danish people. To give just a single example, a verse is quoted here:

“They appointed the sixth day to the shameless goddess called Venus, and Frigg in Danish.” (Townend, 2002, 131)

From all this, it becomes evident that a clear distinction between Old Norse and Anglo-Saxons was recognized.

Foreign languages also occasionally appear in the sagas, and for the point we are making it is worth having a look at them. Sagas tell stories of ancient Viking kings and warriors, but also the adventures of the gods of the Norse pantheon. The problem is that often the heroes of these stories are romanticized, because they are presented as models, so sagas should not be taken as biographical tales. They are certainly not reliable historical sources. Despite this, they do talk about the fact that other peoples spoke different languages, and sometimes even explain how they communicated with each other. Often the heroes were educated and thus were able to speak foreign languages.

For example, in the story told in the saga *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* some details are included regarding the conversation between Norwegians and English speakers. In the two speeches that are reported there seems to be no communication problems, so it looks like they could converse without too much difficulty.

The same happens in the *Egils saga* concerning Norse and English. A similar treatment is not given to languages such as Irish, Wendish and Bjarmian, which make it clear that the language issue was actually an issue between them (see Townend, 2002, p. 150-159).

Since the TV series *Vikings* will be analysed in this paper, I feel it pertinent to discuss how the issue of different languages is dealt with in the saga of Ragnar. It is important to specify that even in the saga of Ragnar this matter is not dealt with, it is taken for granted. This could mean that the issue was easily solved, or that the problem really did not exist. Naturally, it must be underlined again that it is a saga, and therefore its objective is not to recount in detail historical facts that really happened. Its purpose is to

celebrate the protagonists of the events: Ragnar and his sons are portrayed as heroes, without imperfections, brave and strong, so it would certainly not have been necessary to emphasise that their lack of understanding of Old English was a weakness. In any case, I think this is another confirmation that there were no problems of intercomprehension between English and Scandinavians, and if there were, they were minimal and could be easily solved.

In conclusion, all of this suggests that really English and Norse speakers were mutually intelligible and that between them there were no noticeable communication problems. The sagas thus consistently present a coherent situation; unfortunately, on the other hand, they only show the Scandinavian point of view.

Such a wealth of texts does not exist in Old English, so the English point of view is much poorer. Two English texts that recorded some dialogue are *The Battle of Maldon* and *Ælfic's Life of St Edmund*, (see Townend, 2002, p. 161-171) which do not mention either bilingualism or the presence of interpreters for Anglo-Norse speech. As done before for the sagas, consequently, we can assume that language difficulties were absent. It is true that interpreters are mentioned in the English texts, but only with regard to communication with Icelandic speakers. For Anglo-Norse communication, interpreters do not seem to be required.

To conclude, from the evidence of the proposed sources which could be complemented with the study on personal names and place names that need not be explored here (see Townend 2002, p. 189-200), it can only be supported the intelligibility between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in the Viking Era.

This does not mean that the understanding was perfect and free from misunderstanding, but that it was sufficient to avoid interpreters and to understand each other without being bilingual. Of course, as is the case with all spoken languages, it is impossible to recover them now, but at least from a lexical point of view it is clear that mutual understanding was adequate. We can therefore say that Viking Age England was a bilingual society, but this does not mean that a large number of bilingual individuals were present in the society. As explained by René Apel and Pieter Muysken²², there are different types of bilingual societies. In some societies all individuals are bilingual, while

²² Apel and Muysken (1987) in Townend (2002), p. 189-200.

in other communities groups of bilingual individuals may coexist together with groups that are monolingual. Finally, as in the case of Viking Age England, a situation can be found where the two languages are spoken by different groups and each group is monolingual. These are obviously theory forms; in reality it is very easy to find mixes of these types of communities.

All this is in regard to spoken language. Concerning written language, a separate discussion needs to be conducted. As we know, literacy reached the barbarians only with Christianity. Before its arrival, Scandinavians were illiterate, runes aside. Viking Age England was a society in which Old English was the language of documents, while there is no evidence for the use of Old Norse as a written language, despite the fact that the two languages were proven to be on the same level and neither was considered more prestigious. The most that has been found are texts written in English with numerous borrowings from Old Norse, which often actually had by then become terms of standard English. The few fragments of Old Norse that have come down to us are written in runes.

3.2 Hypothesis on Anglo-Norse contact

As explained in the previous section, the problem is that in the stories that are told and that have come down to us, the way in which the protagonists of different languages communicated is frequently omitted. For this reason, the previously mentioned studies leave open room for numerous hypotheses that unfortunately cannot be confirmed, as we have seen due to lack of evidence.

We have seen how the mutual intelligibility hypothesis is the most noticeable one, which is why it is also the one that most researchers support.

Analysing the *Life of St Edmund* it would seem that the hypothesis of the presence of interpreters could also be defeated, as it is clearly specified how interpreters were needed to communicate between Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders. If they were also essential for communication with the Norse, they would have been mentioned as well.

It has already been mentioned in 2.3 that some researchers say there was a need to create a pidgin in the Danelaw, and I would like to expand on these theories.

It should be known that usually when two communities that do not share a common language meet, they need to find a way to communicate. So, out of necessity, they invent

a new simplified and restricted language which is called pidgin. Pidgin languages enable speakers of different languages to communicate, usually for economic reasons (trade, navigation, labor management).

When a wider range of functions are needed, pidgins develop until they become stable enough to be passed to the next generations as mother tongue, and are called Creole. This process is called “creolization”. Clearly, Creoles have more extensive vocabularies than pidgin languages and more complex grammatical structures.

J. Hines²³ is one of those scholars who support the existence of a pidgin. He also claims that Old English and Old Norse were mutually intelligible, but adds that in an early stage of contact there was a pidgin, which he calls “Scandinavian English”. According to him, Scandinavian English is the variant of English language heavily influenced by Scandinavian culture, particularly in the vocabulary, following the Scandinavian settlements in England during the Viking Age. His reasoning starts from the fact that, as McIntosh²⁴ estimated, more than 1,000 words with Scandinavian roots can be found in Middle English documents. It is therefore logical to conclude that these words’ occurrence marks the switch from Old to Middle English (which is conventionally dated around the end of the 11th century).

Before proceeding with the reasoning, a parenthesis is needed with regard to the conclusions drawn by Werner²⁵. He explains how there was a period of literary inactivity in Northern and Eastern England. When English reemerged in written documents, it took the form of Middle English, and in this language variety Norse features are fully included. The process of free mixing was complete and bilingualism had already ended by the time written records appeared. Most likely because Old Norse was no longer an independent language in England at that point, or at least it was no longer the language of the dominant social class of the occupiers. Because of this, the process of language mixing during the Old English period is invisible to us; instead, we can only see the results of this process directly in Middle English texts. It must be kept in mind that a bilingual environment can be advantageous because there are usually many expressions available, allowing phrases

²³ Hines (1984) *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the pre-Viking period*.

²⁴ McIntosh (1978) *Middle English word geography: its potential role in the study of the long-term impact of the Scandinavian settlements upon English*.

²⁵ Werner (1968) *Die Erforschung des Inselnordischen*.

from the other language or dialect to fill in any gaps that may exist in one language. It can therefore be deduced that it was the desire of English itself, not just the pressure or prestige of Norse, that drove its features into English. Perfectly in line with Apel and Muysken's description of different types of bilingual societies that was presented above, Werner believes there might not have been many true bilingual people. Instead, as the two languages were still relatively similar and speakers were used to hearing each other, they could comprehend each other, so each person spoke their own language.

Referring back to Hines, he argues that it is probable that Scandinavian English originated as a basic common means of communication between speakers of Old English and Old Norse in the early stages of contact, adopting the characteristics of a model pidgin. This is because throughout the Middle Ages, English has evolved through a process comparable to pidginization, in which verbal inflection variation has decreased and the language has shifted from synthetic to analytical syntax, as is the case with most Germanic languages. However, neither phonologically nor morphologically are there any evidence of a Scandinavian impact on these particular alterations that resulted in Middle English.

Hines also tried to investigate whether there was a dominant language between English and Scandinavian, but as already discussed, opinions on this are conflicting and in fact he has a slightly different idea from Werner's. He thinks that Scandinavian predominated in the early days since it was the language of the conquerors and colonists who took over large portions of eastern and northern England. In a less well-known process of Anglo-Scandinavian acculturation that took place from the late 9th century, it is similarly plausible that the language situation was eventually reversed. The settled areas embraced Anglo-Saxon culture more widely during this process, although Scandinavian features were also kept. The end result is not just a mixture of different civilizations in contact, but a society in which sociolinguistic patterns are systematized. Perhaps people who spoke the same language had a sense of belonging to a group in the society that had been developed, also to distinguish themselves from other groups. This is a sociolinguistic pattern which can be seen to occur frequently.

To summarize, in Hines' opinion Scandinavian English can be defined as a Creole sociolinguistically speaking. In conclusion, we can say that in the first phase of Scandinavian permanence in England, contacts were consistent, but not so strong to create

a language mixing Old English and Old Norse. Confirming this is the large occurrence of Scandinavian terms within Old English (which we recall existed from mid. 5th century to mid. 11th century). On the contrary, in the second phase, it seems that the mixing with Scandinavian and also French languages became so evident that it created a new language, which we call Middle English, which lasted from late 11th century to late 15th century (when it became Modern English). This is why it would not be appropriate to speak of “creole” before Middle English, because it is a successive stage. Before “creole”, one can speak at most of a “pidgin”, but the language spoken in Viking Age England up to the 11th century lacks the requisites to call it properly “creole”.

In order to better understand the theory that is about to be expounded, it is necessary to make a premise: it should be reminded that, as mentioned in the second chapter, Germanic languages can be grouped into Eastern, Western and Northern. The East Germanic in this thesis will not be of interest; we must dwell on the Northern and Western Germanic to which Old Norse and Old English respectively belong. West Germanic includes English, Frisian, Dutch (Netherlandic-Flemish), Afrikaans, German, and Yiddish; North Germanic languages include Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Faroese, and Icelandic.

Domingue, Bailey and Maroldt were the first researchers who argued in 1977 that language contacts and then creolization were responsible for the switch from Old English to Middle English, so they developed the thesis of Middle English as a creole. This theory arose from a doubt that many researchers have raised: during the period in which these studies were conducted, three phases of English (Old, Middle and Modern English²⁶) were recognized, but are we sure that Old English and Middle English are simply ordinary phases of a single language, or perhaps they are two closely related languages that actually have separate historical origins? These researchers have questioned what has always been taken for granted, namely, that Middle and Modern English actually descend from Old English, as is the case with other languages (e.g. German), because Middle English presents so many differences with Old English. Linguists who claim that do so because they have noticed substantial changes between Old English and Middle English. The main

²⁶ Old English: from mid 5th century to mid 11th century; Middle English: from late 11th century to late 15th century; Modern English: from late 15th century to 19th century; Present Day English: from 19th century to the present.

difference that is noticeable is the grammatical complexity, which in Middle English is much more simplified. In fact, inflected forms in Middle English have been dramatically reduced: there was a radical simplification of the declension of nouns and many old conjugation patterns have been lost from the verb system. Word order also became more rigid, simplifying syntax, and as we have seen, all of this is typical of pidgin and creoles. For all these reasons, Bailey and Maroldt have formulated the Middle English creole hypothesis. According to them, Middle English is the result of three successive creolizations: first, an Old Norse/Anglo-Saxon creolization; then, before 1200, a major French creolization; finally, in the 13th and 14th century, a minor French creolization (borrowing lexical items from French).

This theory has become well known, but it has not been supported at all. On the contrary, it is harshly criticized even today. The fact is that even before the arrival of the Old Norse and French this simplification was in place, so many think these changes have not depended on these languages.

Another problem of their thesis is Bailey and Maroldt's definition of creolization:

"By creolization the authors wish to indicate gradient mixture of two or more languages; in a narrow sense, a creole is the result of mixing which is substantial enough to result in a new system, a system that is separate from its antecedent parent systems" (Poussa 1982, 21).

But, as Görlach (*English as a world language*, 1986) says, defining every mixed language a "creole" would make the term useless, because every language is the result of evolution and the encounter with other people.

Moreover, Middle English exhibits many features which are not common in creoles, including the distinction between singular and plural, verb inflections for person, and many strong verbs, despite being extensively simplified. Finally, there have been arguments that a creole would not be an appropriate term, as it is supposed to emerge when communities of people do not share a common language. The mutual intelligibility of Old English and Old Norse does not seem to require a new language since they were mutually intelligible at some level.

As the focus of this thesis is on the encounter of Old Norse with Old English, it seems appropriate to me to discuss Patricia Poussa's theory, which partly supports Bailey and Maroldt's idea but at the same time demolishes part of it. She accepts that English is

a creole, but argues that creolization involved only English and Scandinavian and Norman French did not participate. According to her, in fact, Scandinavian peoples had much more influence in the shaping of Middle English than what is recognized in their Middle English creole hypothesis. She argues that Bailey and Maroldt did not bring enough evidence that the decisive influence on Middle English was French and that it was overvalued.

CHAPTER 4 – VIKINGS

4.1 *Vikings*' historical sources

Now that it has been described as it may have really been the reality of the events, although with very little evidence, we can turn our attention to Michael Hirst's proposed multimedia adaptation: the TV series *Vikings*²⁷. This TV series is not the only multimedia re-adaptation: the Vikings are a fascinating, often overly romanticized people who have won great popularity. Indeed, they have become the protagonists of films, TV series, and video games precisely because of their mysteriousness that gives them attractiveness. This makes the audience really enjoy them.

Naturally, a distinction must be made between multimedia products according to their type, whether they are documentaries, TV series or video games, and thus are not meant to report only true facts. In general, however, the image of the Vikings is distorted in the common perception, also because of such products. For example, they are often depicted wearing helmets with horns, which was not true. Or at least, historians have not found any evidence to confirm this.

We have already said that sagas are not to be considered historical sources. In fact, they were often written to praise heroes; they are not impartial. Nevertheless, they were fine for the purpose of writing the series, which did not claim to be historically accurate, although the author tried not to be overly imaginative.

Among the sagas and tales that were selected as primary sources there are: *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons*, *Ragnar's Poem*, *The Lay of Kraka*, *The Saga of the Icelanders*, *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, *The Saga of Erik the Red*, *The Tale of Bolli Bollason*, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, *The Saga of the Ynglings*, *Saga of the Völsungs*, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, *The Saga of the Faroese*, *Raudúlf's Tale*, *Landnámabók*, *Islendingabók*, *The Poetic Edda*, *Snorri's Heimskringla*, *The Prose Edda*, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and *The Roskilde Chronicle*. In addition to the Scandinavian, also European chronicles and annalists were employed, such as *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, *Bella*

²⁷ *Vikings* is a 2013 Canadian television series, created and written by Michael Hirst, produced by Octagon Films and Take 5 Productions.

Parisiacae Urbis, Aethelweard's Chronicon, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Annales Bertiniani, Annales Cambriae, Annales Fuldenses, Annales regni Francorum, Annála Uladh, Annales Xantenses, Dudo of St. Quentin's Gesta Normannorum, Grandes Chroniques de France, Rimbert's Vita Ansgari. Since there are so many, to list here all the resources from which *Vikings* is inspired would be a pointless task. Other classic resources worth mentioning include Venerable Bede's *De temporum ratione*, Asser's *Vita Alfredi regis Angul Saxonum*, *The West Saxon Charters of King Athelwulf and His Sons*, *The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan*, Gildas the Wise's *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* and Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*.²⁸

Although many of the facts recounted in *Vikings* are taken from real events and many characters are based on real historical figures, it cannot be regarded as a documentary. That is because, for the purposes of the storytelling, both the events and the characters have been revisited. Historical facts are combined and altered to make the narrative more engaging and exiting. Certainly, author Michael Hirst took several licences with the aim of attracting the public and getting them passionate. Undoubtedly, to the untrained eye, this series might seem entirely historical and non-mythical, and I think this makes it perfect for someone who is looking for a series that romanticises the Vikings, that provides an interesting plot with many references to Norse myths, that is set in beautiful landscapes, and in general for someone who does not have the need for historical accuracy.

We may briefly analyse some of the reinterpretations the authors decided to make, starting precisely with Kattegat, the central town where most of the events take place. In *Vikings*, Kattegat is presented as a city of Norway that becomes more and more prosperous as the years pass, becoming an important commercial centre. In reality, it was not a trading town as it is presented in the series, but rather a strait separating Denmark from southern Sweden. This village is the anchor point where the whole story develops, which is why it was given the name of the strait between the two countries that, according to the sagas, Ragnar would have been ruling. Kattegat is a name with a symbolic meaning. Despite being a fictional place, it is structured as Viking villages were, something that we know thanks to archaeological excavations.

²⁸ Pollard & Hirst, 2015; p. 18-21.

Just as it was in real Viking villages, in Kattegat it is possible to find small fields for growing wheat, oats, barley and rye and for breeding some animals, such as sheep, pigs, goats, geese and chickens. Even fish traps are installed in the water. In addition, in Kattegat there are the typical Viking houses, which, being shaped like a rectangle, are commonly called longhouses. Here comes a small discrepancy: since Kattegat is supposed to have been in Norway, the houses should not have been made entirely of wood. To better protect against the cold, Norwegian houses used to have roofs that went down almost to the ground, made of several layers of wood, thatch or grass. For practical purposes, it was more convenient to use Danish-type buildings in order to have more lighting during the filming. Having wooden walls, they allowed more light to pass through, so they were perfect for filming indoor scenes, which would otherwise have been too dark. So here again we see how a basis of truth is always there, but choices had to be made according to the purpose of the TV series and in order to build a more practical set from the point of view of filming, editing and transporting props.

With regard to the characters, we have already pointed out that they do not always correspond to reality. This is actually quite normal, because the sagas themselves are ambiguous. For example, in *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, Ragnar's first wife is Thóra, who dies after giving birth to Ragnar's first two sons (Eirekr and Agnarr²⁹) and Ragnarr's second wife is Kráka, who in *Vikings* is called Áslaug³⁰. Ragnar and Áslaug's sons are, in order, Ivar Boneless, Bjorn Ironside, Hvitserk, Rognvaldr, Sigurd Snake-in-Eye. The same tale is told in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, which is used as the main basis for the plot development. In this version, Ragnar's first marriage is to Lagertha, a shield-maiden who after she and Ragnar divorced, murdered him. In the series, this does not happen. In *Vikings*, Ragnar is initially married to Lagertha, by whom he has a son (Bjorn Ironside) and a daughter (Gyda, who dies while still a child during the plague in Kattegat). After a miscarriage, Lagertha is no more successful in having children. During one of his expeditions, Ragnar meets Aslaug, and by her he will have four sons, in order: Ubbe, Hvitserk, Sigurd "Snake-in-the-Eye" and Ivar "the Boneless". But Lagertha does not kill Ragnar; on the contrary, the two meet several times. They have a friendly relationship

²⁹ Agnarr, the youngest son, died against Sweden and his brother Eirekr was killed shortly afterwards.

³⁰ Like Áslaug in the series, Kráka is the daughter of Sigurdr and Brunilde.

and care for each other until the end. Even between Lagertha and Aslaug, who later becomes Ragnar's new wife, there is a relationship of tolerance and, if necessary, cooperation. Both women are independent and know what the interests of their children and the people are, and they try to preserve the peace, also because they will both become queens.

Speaking of women, it is pertinent to mention that in the series there is an attempt (successful in my opinion) to show how significant women were in the Viking world, whether this is true or not. Certainly, unlike in other contemporary Viking societies, women played a very important role, but in the series can be seen women becoming earl alone, without a husband. This, as advanced as the Vikings were in this respect, was unfortunately not true. As with Lagertha and Aslaug, also Siggy and Porunn are powerful and emancipated characters.

Siggy is married to Earl Haraldson, but when Ragnar kills her husband, she is forced to cope on her own. It should be remembered that in society a woman's social position was subordinate to that of her husband, so being a widow was very difficult. But Siggy is a very intelligent and determined woman and she has a strong character like most of the women in the series. Finally, Porunn is also an emancipated and very complex character. From being a slave she becomes a free woman and then a shield-maiden, marries Bjorn and together they have a daughter, but after a period of depression she abandons Kattegat leaving the daughter with her father. All these women therefore have their own story, they are not necessarily linked to the stories of men, they are empowered and they decide on their own lives.

In fact, Michael Hirst himself said that one of the aims was to show how women in Viking society had more freedom and rights than in Europe at the same epoch. It is interesting in this regard how astonished European women were when they realised that it was not only men who invaded their cities and carried out raids. For example, in the seventh episode of the fourth season, Paris is attacked by Vikings, but the French successfully defend themselves and win the fight. At the end of the battle, the French princess Gisla goes to the battlefield and is astonished by the presence of so many female bodies among the fallen soldiers. She says: "So many women, who'd have thought. They're as brave as the men". When her husband Rollo explains to her that sometimes women are even braver than men and that the bravest of all is Lagertha, the princess is

fascinated and expresses her desire to meet such a strong and fearless woman. Gisla did not even think it was possible for women to fight alongside men; European armies were composed exclusively of men. For her, all this is very unusual, but she does not judge it. On the contrary, she finds it fascinating.

In fact, many women participated in the expeditions, not all of them remained at home to look after their homes and children. In medieval European societies, as it is well known, women had far fewer rights and freedoms than men. In *Vikings*, this can be seen very well, as the confrontation between the different societies is possible in almost every scene. Indeed, the comparison of cultures is one of the aspects that the authors wanted to emphasise the most with this series. To give a few examples, we can name the scene in which Queen Judith of Northumbria is sentenced to have her nose and ears removed because she had betrayed her husband, King Aethelwulf of Wessex: it is well shown how, in European societies, women were subordinate to men.

Concerning kings and queens, not all those that appear in *Vikings* actually existed. King Ecbert is a figure who really existed: he was king of Wessex from 802 to 839, and this also happens in the series, despite the fact that the timing of the series is revisited according to the needs of the narrative (this topic will be discussed in more detail below). At the time, he was the most powerful monarch in the British Isles. After his death, his son succeeded him, thus building the basis for the national unification of England³¹. The characters of Princess Kwenhthryth of Mercia and King Ælle of Northumbria, on the contrary, are not exactly as they were in reality. Their figures are based on historical figures that really existed, but are not really contemporary with each other. The character of Kwenhthryth is based on several women who really existed, including the 8th century Mercian queen Cynethryth, the Mercian princess Cwenhthryth, and Aethelflaed, the daughter of King Alfred. These are all women who played an active role in politics in the late Middle Ages, and who managed to have more control than they were allowed as women. The character of Kwenhthryth in fact has the same characteristics as these women.

King Ælle is based on the homonymous King Ælle of Northumbria, who ruled during the middle of the 9th century. As it happens in the series, also in the sagas King

³¹ It is necessary to remember England was divided into seven kingdoms: East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria, and Wessex.

Ælle is held responsible for the death of Ragnar, and just like in the series, killed him by having him thrown into a pit of snakes. The discrepancy only concerns the period.

In conclusion, it needs to be said that, together with the historical advisor and the dialogue coach, figures as accessories and prop makers, tailors, set decorators and costume designers contributed to making the series as true to the facts as possible, as Michael Hirst longed for. The discrepancies that exist result from the need to make the plot interesting and from practical needs related to filming and set design.

4.2 Language intercomprehension represented on screen

What is of most interest for this thesis is the aspect of linguistic intercomprehension. *Vikings* is made even more appealing by the presence of several languages, which are not translated into English, but remain subtitled. The choice to show the difficulties of communication between different language speakers was not that easy, because it meant an enormous amount of work behind it. The languages that appear in the series are plentiful: Old English, Old Norse, Old French, Old Low Franconian, Old East Slavic, Latin, Byzantine Greek and Sicilian Arabic. In order to bring them to the screen, it was necessary to create dialogues using even dead languages, which as we can imagine is not easy at all. What this thesis is interested in is the intercomprehension between Norsemen and Englishmen, so the focus will be on this.

To create those dialogues, Michael Hirst employed experienced linguists, each specialising in one language. They are Kate Wiles³² for Anglo-Saxon and Erika Sigurdson³³ for Old Norse. Aided by a team, they managed to create linguistically accurate dialogues, which the actors then had to learn. But the hard work did not end there: the actors were assisted by a dialogue coach who taught them how to pronounce unusual sounds that were not present in their mother tongue and to make their interpretation appear as natural as possible.

From a linguistic point of view, therefore, the whole series is very accurate. However, we have seen on several occasions that the historical period and/or the timing

³² Linguist and medievalist from Leeds University.

³³ Linguist from the University of Iceland.

are not entirely accurate. In fact, all the time periods in the series are a bit incongruous, especially the fact that many characters seem to learn languages quickly.

It will be explained later in 4.3 that Ragnar, the Viking hero protagonist of this story, will learn Old English because the monk Athelstan will teach it to him. He is not the only character who will learn a foreign language: for example, the Viking Rollo will study Old French. The difference between the two, however, is that it took Ragnar less time to learn English than it took Rollo to learn Old French. Or rather, the timings are basically the same, but the authors clearly showed how difficult it was for Rollo to learn Old French. Surely the personality of the character also had something to do here: Ragnar had the desire to learn Old English while Rollo was forced and did it out of necessity. In fact, Rollo had married the French princess Gisla by an arranged marriage, he had never spoken to her because he did not know the language. He is therefore forced to learn it, which was not something he was interested in doing. But the authors probably also wanted to emphasise these difficulties of Rollo. After all, Old French was not a Germanic language, unlike Old English, and was consequently more difficult for a native speaker of Old Norse to learn. Rollo struggles a lot, there are scenes entirely dedicated to him trying to learn this language, which is so different from his own and sounds so foreign. In all the situations in which other English or Scandinavian characters learned Old English or Old Norse, there are not the same scenes. On the contrary, they seem to learn the other language almost effortlessly. Only initially do we see Athelstan teaching Ragnar a few words, but it ends there. In the end, even Rollo takes a short time, except that more is shown of the difficulty and frustration of this man struggling to learn Old French. A disastrous Old French lesson for Rollo is depicted in the third episode of season four, but already in the sixth episode he is able to speak well, to understand and be understood. Only a few weeks have passed in the meantime.

For this reason, the viewer often does not even notice that two characters who previously did not understand each other, suddenly manage to talk to each other from one episode to the next. Certainly to make the viewing experience more comfortable for the viewer, who is after all watching a series and not following a lecture, the timing of learning other languages is accelerated. In reality, for the genre of the series, which is presented as a “historical drama”, all this attention to the languages of the characters was not to be taken for granted; on the contrary, it is certainly an added value. But the authors

at some point stop, and give (quite rightly in my opinion) priority to the narrative. Of course, it is natural that in a multimedia product like this one cannot go into all aspects of everyday life, at some stage the story has to evolve. Perhaps if *Vikings* had been a book, the situation would have been different: in a TV series, the narrative must be relatively faster than in a book. In a book, the reader can easily go back if he or she does not remember something, and through reading even the most superficial information is assimilated, whereas when watching a series there are many details that can go unnoticed. In a book, therefore, it would have been easier, for example, to wait five months before Ragnar learned Old English from Athelstan and was able to communicate independently with the Anglo-Saxons. Evidently, the TV series requires restricting time and this clashes with what might happen in the same situation in reality. As a result, two characters who had never spoken to one another before, almost magically manage to communicate from one moment to the next.

It is also interesting, with regard to the fact that some characters undertake to study the language of others, that there are situations that in my opinion are hard to believe. In particular, I refer to Aethelwulf of Wessex, son of King Ecbert. He is heir to the throne for the first few seasons, then after the death of his father he becomes king. Being such an important person, he would not need to take the effort to learn another language: he could have people translating for him. Yet in *Vikings* he learns Old Norse. It is true that also his predecessor King Ecbert learns it before Aethelwulf, but they are two completely different personalities: Ecbert is more curious and less hostile than Aethelwulf, who is much more disinterested and feels nothing but hatred and disgust towards the Viking invaders. He has no interest in approaching their culture, but despite this he learns their language to talk to them during negotiations and battles. His father, on the other hand, is more open to Scandinavian culture, and it is understandable that he has an interest in learning more about the Vikings through learning their language.

4.3 Interpreters in *Vikings*

At this point we have all the elements to note that perhaps another occasion in which Hirst departed from reality is when he opted for the presence of interpreters. Based on the analyses of the previous chapters, we can assume that Old Norse and Old English were

mutually intelligible, but in *Vikings* we see that this theory is not embraced: in the series, the problem of the different languages spoken by the characters is real, and is even highlighted by the presence of interpreters. Without them, characters speaking different languages could not understand each other.

To analyse how the authors decided to represent the linguistic difference between Norsemen and Englishmen, we can take as an example the second episode of the first season (titled *Wrath of the Northmen*), the one in which the first meeting between Athelstan and Ragnar occurs. In this episode, the Vikings (departing from Kattegat, in Norway) set sail westwards, and eventually arrive at the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria, where Athelstan lives with the other monks. The contact between the two peoples therefore occurs almost immediately, it is a central point in the series. The spectator is initially confused because the way this situation is reproduced on the screen is not immediately comprehensible.

When the Vikings talk to each other, the actors speak English, because there are no communication problems between them as they speak the same language. Scenes showing the Vikings' sea journey are interposed with scenes showing peaceful life at the monastery, where the monks pray, work and copy manuscripts. But the first words the monks speak to each other are in Old English, despite the fact that - as it happens with the Vikings - they speak the same language to one another. This only happens with the first sentences spoken by the people who appears on screen for the first time, it is a kind of "introduction" for the viewer, who understands in this way that the language spoken at the monastery was Old English. With the first change of scene, also set at the monastery, the actors switch back to English, because they actually have no communication problems and the characters share the same language. In the scenes at Lindisfarne it can be seen that the monks pray in Latin, which is something we may point out but is nothing original compared to other adaptations. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear prayers and chants in Latin in many films and TV series set in the Middle Ages. In this episode, as the Vikings approach the monastery, there are constant scene changes. On the one hand there are the Vikings landing in Northumbria and coming closer and closer to Lindisfarne, and on the other hand there are the monks who know that Vikings are arriving and try to lock the

doors of the monastery and hide, while praying³⁴. Whenever there is a dialogue between Vikings or between monks, it is performed in English. Thus, as noted above, it is confirmed that only the first few sentences in which a people appears for the first time the original language they speak is heard, but then they switch back to English. A fully subtitled series, after all, would become much more exacting. This is done precisely because the authors want to emphasise the fact that the peoples speak different languages, yet agreed to switch to English as soon as possible. But then, once the two peoples meet, they go back to speaking their own language (Old Norse for the Vikings and Old English for the Anglo-Saxon monks). To explain this better, the dialogue from the second episode of the first season (*Wrath of the Northmen*) is quoted here:

Athelstan: (in Old Norse) “Don’t kill me”

Ragnar: (in English) “You speak our language. How do you speak our language?”

Athelstan: (in English) “I’ve travelled. We are told to travel, to take the word of God. Please, don’t kill me.”

This shows that Athelstan is a native speaker of Old English, but he can also speak Old Norse. The dialogue is therefore played out in English, because the two understand each other.

Moreover, by now the viewer should have understood that the Saxons spoke Old English and the Vikings spoke Old Norse, and that they did not understand between the two. Only those among the English who were familiar with Old Norse could communicate with the Vikings, while the remaining people needed someone to act as translator. As seen in previous chapters, this is not thought to be reality. In none of the documents that have come down to us are interpreters mentioned with regard to these two languages.

But in *Vikings*, Old Norse and Old English are not mutually intelligible: it can be seen that the authors decided that in their series the interpreters would be crucial to make English and Scandinavian characters communicate. The first example in which a character acting as an interpreter appears is in the fourth episode of the first season

³⁴ The monks were waiting for the “Judgement Day”, and when they saw those terrifying men coming from the sea, they thought that day had come.

(entitled *Trial*), and he too is a priest. Vikings led by Ragnar raid a church during mass in Hexham, Northumbria, and order the priest to tell the crowd that no one would kill them if they did not resist. Ragnar is speaking Old Norse, but the dialogue between him and the priest is in English, as the priest understands what Ragnar is saying. The audience knows that they would actually speak Old Norse only because it is the only language that Ragnar knows. Finally, as can be imagined, when the priest speaks to the crowd, the actor playing him performs in Old English.

In the seventh episode of the first season, the Vikings visit King Ælle's court to talk to him. They are in Northumbria, where the inhabitants speak Old English, so all the dialogues are in English. But obviously, when the Vikings talk to each other, they speak Old Norse and are subtitled in English. In the meantime, Ragnar has had Athelstan teaching him to speak Old English, so there is no need for interpreters for now, he is the interpreter himself.

The scenes in which characters playing the role of performers appear, increase in number in the third season, in which the diplomatic relations between the two peoples are more frequent. In fact, the Vikings begin to invade Wessex, where King Ecbert reigns. He, being a very curious and clever man, starts learning Old Norse to communicate with intruders from Scandinavia. The person teaching him is Athelstan himself, who in the first season had joined the Vikings as a free man, but was subsequently captured and became a prisoner of war of the Anglo-Saxons. In the ninth episode of the second season there is an important scene in which King Ecbert wants to make a treaty with the Vikings and invites Athelstan to be the interpreter, because he is not yet able to converse properly in Old Norse. Then we find Ecbert, princess Kwenrith of Mercia and Aethelwulf (who speak Old English) sitting at a table with Ragnar and Lagertha (who speak Old Norse), while Athelstan stands and translates from Old English to Old Norse and vice versa.

The situation becomes more complex in the third season, because at this point some of the characters have learned to speak the other's language, while others have not. In the first episode there are Lagertha, Ragnar, Ecbert and Kwenrith sitting at a table. Ragnar and Lagertha speak Old Norse to each other, and Ragnar translates for Lagertha what the Anglo-Saxons are saying in Old English.

In this scene, Old English is performed in English, while Old Norse (spoken by Lagertha, Floki, Bjorn, Rollo, Porunn and the other Vikings who accompany Ragnar and

do not know Old English) is subtitled in English for the viewers. When the Vikings talk among themselves in Old Norse, Athelstan translates for Ecbert who cannot understand what they are saying to each other. Finally, just as in diplomatic meetings today, Ecbert speaks and Athelstan instantly translates for the Vikings and vice versa.

For this purpose, we can affirm that the character of Athelstan is crucial to the encounter between the two peoples. From the very first episode in which he appears becomes fundamental when it comes to communication between the English and the Vikings.

Athelstan and Ragnar initially manage to talk only thanks to Athelstan's ability to speak Old Norse. As he knows much more than the Vikings about the world, he becomes interesting to Ragnar's eyes, and pushes him to approach the Christian world. This is very relevant to the plot, because Ragnar's desire to know will take him on several adventures.

It is probably for these reasons that it has been chosen to give so much importance to Athelstan: he is a gateway between the two worlds. This character also enables to deal with the issue of faith, being in perpetual spiritual crisis, and being divided between two worlds that are so different but yet ultimately have so much in common.

In addition, Athelstan allows Ragnar to learn Old English. Without him, probably Ragnar would have never learnt it. For all the above reasons, I would think that although Michael Hirst was aware that in all likelihood the interpreters were not essential, he chose to include them anyway with the aim of making the narrative work better.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Initially, I collected the essential information necessary to outline the aspects that we were interested in about the Viking people. I opted to do so because I became aware of how many misrepresentations about Vikings exist in the world of cinema and elsewhere. Then, I researched Anglo-Saxon and, as much as possible, Scandinavian sources that documented the encounter between the two peoples. In the end, guided in my reasoning by the analyses previously conducted by M. Townend in *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (2002), I came to the conclusion that the most likely hypothesis was that the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons did not need the support of interpreters to talk to one another. In fact, we have seen that the linguistic differences were so minimal that the hypothesis of mutual intelligibility between Old English and Old Norse speakers is the most reasonable one, not surprisingly, it is also the one supported by most academics. From this I arrived to comment on Bailey and Maroldt's hypothesis that Middle English is actually a creole derived from the Anglo-Saxons' encounter with other peoples (especially the French), a hypothesis harshly contested by many researchers. Afterwards, I focused on the reasoning developed by P. Poussa, as she states that, in her opinion, it was the Scandinavians rather than the French who had the greatest influence on what later became Middle English. These studies are constantly being developed, as the resources we have are the same and do not provide as much useful information. There cannot, at this stage, be a single version of the historical facts, this thesis merely analyses and compares the different theories that have been proposed, and provides cause for reflection for future work.

To conclude, I then turned to the TV series *Vikings*, which provided the input for compiling this work. In fact, my interest in the subject had grown while watching the series and this work originated precisely to discover whether what was being depicted was true. After analysing the historical sources from which the series is based, it could be concluded that, as is to be expected from a non-historical series, not everything corresponds to reality. To my pleasant surprise, a large team of linguists was employed to create the dialogues in the dead languages in the series, which are therefore accurate. There is a lot of work behind it, which makes it all sound correct from a linguistic point

of view. On the other hand, the occasions on which author Michael Hirst has allowed himself to deviate from the sagas from which he took inspiration are several, but this is understandable given that the product is aimed at an audience that does not demand historical accuracy. The author himself said that he tried to remain as faithful as possible to the sagas, but that he was then forced by practical necessity to revisit certain points. For instance, we can imagine how complicated it becomes to transport oversized ships on our roads, which is why the size of the ships used for filming has been reduced; or we can imagine how complicated filming would have been in places that were too dark, which is why even the buildings were slightly modified from how they looked in real life. We can generally conclude, that *Vikings* succeeded in creating a coexistence of fantasy and reality appropriate for its target audience; it did not invent too many details but revisited some of them, making it enjoyable for a wide audience.

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RIASSUNTO

La presente tesi ha come oggetto lo studio dell'intercomprensione linguistica tra antico inglese e norreno in epoca vichinga, comparato alla trasposizione su schermo della serie televisiva *Vikings*.

Questo lavoro nasce infatti dalla curiosità suscitata in me durante la visione della serie, la quale narra delle avventure del famoso eroe vichingo Ragnar Lodbrok ed è ambientata in Scandinavia e in Inghilterra in epoca medievale. In quel tempo, i Vichinghi avevano iniziato a viaggiare non solo verso oriente, ma iniziarono a spostarsi anche verso occidente, cominciando proprio dall'Inghilterra. Dopo una prima fase di spedizioni per compiere razzie, vi insediarono e dall'IX secolo iniziarono ad avere rapporti costanti e duraturi, fino a creare il Danelaw, un'area in Inghilterra in cui vigevano le leggi danesi. Questo ha creato una situazione in cui gli Scandinavi e gli Anglosassoni, che parlavano lingue diverse, avevano la necessità di comunicare l'uno con l'altro. Infatti, in *Vikings* già dal primo episodio compaiono lingue diverse dall'inglese, la lingua originale in cui è stata girata la serie. Compaiono diverse lingue morte, tra cui appunto l'antico inglese e il norreno.

L'obiettivo primario della presente tesi era dunque quello di confrontare ciò che era la realtà storica dell'Inghilterra in epoca medievale con ciò che invece è stato messo su schermo dagli autori di *Vikings*. Per farlo, naturalmente, il primo obiettivo è stato capire come fosse davvero la realtà, ossia capire se le due lingue fossero mutualmente intelligibili o se magari esistessero degli interpreti per far funzionare la comunicazione tra i due popoli, informazione necessaria per effettuare poi la successiva comparazione.

Quindi, questo lavoro si compone di quattro capitoli: dopo una breve introduzione nel primo capitolo, il secondo presenta una descrizione generale sulla lingua e società dei Vichinghi, ritenuta fondamentale per affrontare le analisi contenute nei capitoli successivi; il terzo capitolo si concentra maggiormente sulle lingue parlate dalle popolazioni esposte nei primi capitoli, cercando di confermare o confutare le ipotesi già formulate sulle modalità di contatto linguistico tra l'inglese antico e il norreno antico. Infine, il quarto e ultimo capitolo è completamente incentrato sulla serie televisiva *Vikings*, che viene analizzata e confrontata con le conclusioni tratte nei capitoli precedenti.

La panoramica generale sui Vichinghi è stata ritenuta necessaria, essendo questa popolazione un argomento che negli ultimi anni ha acquisito molta popolarità, ed è di conseguenza ritratta talvolta con immagini totalmente o in parte non veritiere. Per questo motivo, il secondo capitolo presenta una descrizione di tutte le popolazioni germaniche, delle quali anche i Vichinghi facevano parte. Tramite *Commentarii de bello Gallico* di Cesare e *De origine et situ Germanorum* di Tacito, considerate le migliori fonti da cui trarre informazioni sulle popolazioni germaniche, vengono descritte brevemente la struttura sociale, le loro credenze religiose e il loro metodo di scrittura, il *futhark*. Viene poi inserito un approfondimento sull'espansione vichinga, che si può dire abbia posto le basi per la formazione dei moderni stati europei. Una sezione del secondo capitolo è dedicata interamente alla lingua che parlavano i Vichinghi: il norreno. Prendendo in considerazione delle iscrizioni runiche trovate nella Scandinavia meridionale e alcune parti della Bibbia Gotica di Wulfila, si è potuto raggruppare i dialetti germanici, e grazie agli studi precedentemente condotti da M. Syrett e K. M. Nielsen si è giunti alla conclusione che gli antecedenti del norreno e dell'antico inglese facevano parte dello stesso continuum nordoccidentale. Questo capitolo si conclude con l'inquadramento storico dei contatti tra Scandinavi e Anglosassoni, illustrando la situazione sociopolitica nell'Inghilterra medievale tra il VIII e il IX secolo e spiegando come si formò il *Danelaw*, causa e conseguenza dei contatti linguistici duraturi e costanti tra Scandinavi e Anglosassoni.

In seguito, il terzo capitolo presenta alcuni studi condotti da ricercatori quali C. Fell e B. Odenstedt. Questi studi contengono analisi di diverse risorse in cui sono raccontati episodi di incontri tra Scandinavi e Anglosassoni, con lo scopo di capire se e quanto le due lingue fossero simili. Tali risorse sono *I viaggi di Ohthere and Wulfstan* di Paolo Orosio, *Cronaca latina* di Æthelweard e *De falsis diis* di Ælfric. La maggior parte degli studiosi è giunta alla conclusione che la migliore ipotesi fosse quella che sosteneva che antico inglese e norreno fossero lingue talmente simili che non ci fosse bisogno di fare affidamento a degli interpreti per capirsi. Effettivamente, in nessuna delle opere prese in considerazione c'è traccia di figure che svolgessero questo ruolo di mediazione. D'altronde, le due lingue sono entrambe appartenenti al ceppo germanico, quindi le differenze linguistiche che ci sono sembrano essere facilmente superabili. Odenstedt non concordava con questa teoria, e sosteneva per una serie di motivi che in realtà gli interpreti

fossero indispensabili. J. F. Cuesta e I. S. Silva hanno smentito la sua supposizione, giungendo ancora una volta a confermare l'ipotesi della mutua intelligibilità. Per dare il punto di vista delle popolazioni scandinave, nello studio è inclusa anche l'osservazione di alcune saghe, che nonostante non siano da considerare fonti storiche affidabili, possono essere prese in considerazione per rendere l'analisi più completa da tutti i punti di vista. Ancora una volta, né nella *Egils saga*, né nella *Saga di King Harald*, né nella *Saga di Ragnar* vengono menzionate problematiche riguardo la comprensione reciproca tra le due popolazioni. In conclusione, notando una situazione coerente in tutte le opere prese in considerazione, possiamo confermare che la teoria che Scandinavi e Anglosassoni si potessero capire con relativa facilità, senza dover apprendere la lingua dell'altro, sia l'unica possibile.

Si arriva quindi a parlare anche di società bilingui, delle quali esistono diversi modelli: non è detto che in tali società tutti gli individui parlino entrambe le lingue. È ricorrente trovare situazioni in cui le due lingue sono parlate da gruppi diversi e ogni gruppo è monolingue, ed è proprio quello che accadeva nella società che si era formata nell'Inghilterra dell'epoca vichinga.

Alcuni studiosi, tra cui J. Hines, sostengono che i rapporti tra i parlanti antico inglese e norreno abbiano portato col tempo all'invenzione di un pidgin, una nuova lingua semplificata e ristretta che solitamente si crea per necessità nelle società in cui due gruppi non condividono una lingua comune. Da questa teoria ne nascono altre, come ad esempio l'ipotesi che attraverso un processo chiamato "creolizzazione", il pidgin si sia poi consolidato e sia stato trasmesso alle generazioni successive, diventando un creolo. Bailey e Maroldt hanno sviluppato la teoria che la fase dell'inglese medio, che va dalla fine dell'XI secolo alla fine del XV secolo, sia effettivamente un creolo nato dall'incontro tra l'antico inglese e il francese (che era stato portato in Inghilterra con l'invasione normanna nel 1066). La loro ipotesi è stata molto criticata, ma qualcuno l'ha anche in parte appoggiata. Ad esempio, P. Poussa, la quale sostiene che il creolo abbia iniziato a formarsi prima dell'invasione normanna, quando ancora l'influenza scandinava era consistente.

Dopo l'esposizione di queste teorie, la situazione è chiara e si può passare finalmente a confrontarla con la serie televisiva *Vikings*.

L'ultimo capitolo infatti comincia con l'elencare le fonti da cui l'autore della serie Michael Hirst ha attinto per creare questo riadattamento multimediale. Tra le fonti utilizzate compare la Saga di Ragnar, con la quale ci sono però notevoli differenze, sia per quanto riguarda la trama, sia per quanto riguarda i nomi dei personaggi. Le licenze che gli autori si sono presi, in effetti, sono molteplici, a cominciare dalla città di origine di Ragnar, il protagonista, che nella realtà non esiste. Le incongruenze storiche riguardano anche i periodi e i personaggi storici, come i re e le regine: non tutti quelli presenti nella serie sono esistiti nella realtà, e quelli che sono esistiti sono stati trapiantati nel periodo storico più conveniente ai fini della narrazione. L'incongruenza più importante, che tuttavia passa inosservata ad uno spettatore poco esperto, è il fatto che in *Vikings* gli interpreti ci sono, e sono addirittura necessari affinché i personaggi che parlano lingue diverse si capiscano. Nella serie, quando i Vichinghi e gli Anglosassoni si incontrano, riescono a comunicare solo se ci sono determinati personaggi che si comportano da mediatori. Questo, come è stato visto nei capitoli precedenti, non è veritiero. La mia conclusione è che probabilmente sia stato scelto di inserire questi personaggi in quanto aiutano a rendere la trama più fluida e in qualche modo più interessante. Ad esempio, il monaco Athelstan è un personaggio di origini Anglosassoni, che quindi parla antico inglese, ma che avendo studiato il norreno può parlare con Ragnar. Di conseguenza, diventa una sorta di ponte tra le due culture, fa nascere in Ragnar della curiosità, che poi lo spinge a viaggiare ed esplorare, e di conseguenza è molto importante per lo sviluppo delle vicende.

In ogni caso, gli episodi di mediazione sono curati nei minimi dettagli: i dialoghi nelle lingue morte (antico inglese, norreno, antico francese) sono stati costruiti da esperti e gli attori sono stati aiutati da un dialogue coach per imparare la pronuncia e l'intonazione degli stessi. L'autore quindi, lasciando i dialoghi in lingua originale, propone allo spettatore il problema dell'incomprensione linguistica.

In conclusione, possiamo dire che le scelte degli autori di discostarsi dalla realtà storica dei fatti siano state consapevoli, dopotutto questo è comprensibile visto che il prodotto si rivolge a un pubblico che non pretende l'accuratezza storica. L'autore stesso ha dichiarato di aver cercato di rimanere il più possibile fedele alle saghe, ma di essere poi stato costretto da necessità pratiche a rivisitare alcuni punti.

In generale, possiamo concludere che in *Vikings* si è riusciti a creare una coesistenza di fantasia e realtà adatta al pubblico di riferimento, che non cerca certo un documentario; non sono stati inventati troppi dettagli ma ne sono stati rivisitati alcuni, rendendolo un prodotto godibile per un pubblico davvero ampio.