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Sagas and Artifacts: How Tales from the Past Help the Interpretation of Archaeological Remains

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Introduction:

It can be difficult to find an accurate record of historical events. People are imperfect and biased, often leaving gaps in information or placing their own opinions in their writings. It is important for scholars to try and form a more complete picture of history by taking in multiple accounts and combining them with the archaeological record in order to provide a more accurate picture of the past. Take the Viking invasion and settlement in England, for example. Much of the information used is garnered from the Anglo-Saxon perspective, in the form of annals and chronicles. As the Anglo-Saxons were victims of raids and violence, this caused them to record raids and battles more than anything else in respect to the Vikings. Naturally, this leaves the reader with an image of an angry, violent group of people, whose motivations were greed and gold-lust. In the archaeological context, this also make it difficult to accurately interpret artifacts from the Vikings themselves, as the Anglo-Saxons understandably did not include the Viking cultural perspective in their writings. I argue that historians and archaeologists should consider the Viking perspective in the form of sagas when analyzing Viking activity in England, in tandem with the Anglo-Saxon record. This way, it is possible to garner a more complex understanding of the past, as scholars can take both the Viking and Anglo-Saxon view in account in order to complete the picture. In addition, this allows archaeologist to interpret Viking artifacts from a Viking cultural perspective, not the Anglo-Saxon perspective. This removes a middle-man from the analytical process and allows archaeologist to consider what would be closer to a primary source on the interpretation of artifacts. In order to address this issue fully, I

shall first provide the historical information presented by written sources other than the sagas. Second, I shall describe the types of Viking artifacts found in England and how they can be analyzed. Third, I shall explain the faults of the sagas as historical sources. Fourth, I shall use *Egil's Saga* as an example and explain how instances in this particular saga can be used to aid archaeologists.

Section I: The History of the Vikings in England

Much of the textual record of the Viking invasions of England used by historians comes from an Anlgo-Saxon point of view. The Vikings raided the Anglo-Saxons fairly frequently, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Naturally, this led them to record the attacks in annals or chronicles, many of which survive today. This means that much of the history we know today is shrouded by the violent activity, as the Anglo-Saxons recorded history from their perspective. Archaeological and textual evidence show that the Vikings were well-traveled. They traveled as mercenaries, traders, and unfortunately for England, as invaders. Through different Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, we understand that the Vikings invaded England multiple times over a 200-year period.[1] The first known invasion occurred sometime from 786-802, under the reign of Beorthric of the West Saxons.[2] As Clare Downham describes in her chapter "Vikings in England" in *The Viking World*, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that three ships of Northmen arrived at Portland (Dorset) where they killed the local reeve and his followers."[3] She goes on further to describe other attacks on the island, such as the raid of the church of Lindisfarne in 793 and attacks in Northumbria in 794. Unfortunately, as she explains, the

[1] For a map of Anglo-Saxon England, see Figure 1. For an map of the Viking invasions of England, see Figure 2
[2] Clare Downham, "Vikings in England," in *The Viking World* ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (New York, New York: Routledge, 2008): 342.
[3] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans., Dorothy Whitelock (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962). As cited by Clare Downham, "Vikings in England," 342.

Chronicle does not discuss any further raids until 835, but diplomas dated from 792 until 822 from the kings of the Mercians discuss Viking activity in Kent.[4]

Much to the misfortune of the Anglo-Saxons, the 830s and 850s brought a new wave of Viking invasions. These invasions left one recorded alliance between the Vikings and Cornishmen in 838. Records in the Franklin Annals of St-Bertin, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, and the Fragmentary Annals of Ireland discuss an English defeat in 844 leading to Viking power in the area.

In 867, the Vikings seized the city of York, cementing their center of power in Northumbria, as shown in figure 1. This means there would be a greater archaeological presence in England from that point on, as the Vikings now had a center of power in what was once simply a raiding destination. A second victory in 869 over King Edmund (r. 855-869) allowed the Vikings to conquer the East Anglian kingdom. Mercia fell to the same fate in 873, and in 878 Wessex fell as well. King Alfred (r. 871 – 899) cut off this string of victories in 878, slowing down England's aggressive invaders.[5] This caused a fleet of Vikings to leave the country for Francia, or modern France, instead. In c. 890, King Alfred and Guthrum – a Viking leader who arrived in England in 871 and eventually took control of East Anglia in 874 alongside Anwend and Oscetyl, two other Viking leaders – wrote a treaty that divided the country between the Vikings and the English.[6] The area under Viking rule came to be known as Danelaw in the coming centuries, with York as its capital, as shown in figure 2. This marks the political acknowledgment of Scandinavian authority in England.

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[4] A diploma, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "an official or state document." Although the word, today, refers to the sheet of paper handed to alumni at graduation, a diploma can also be a royal statement, sometimes dealing with land distribution and its purpose, alongside other state matters. "Diploma," Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, accessed November 8, 2016. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diploma.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

In 892, the Vikings of Northumbria and East Anglia attempted to move south starting with an invasion in Kent. Unfortunately for the ambitious invaders, King Alfred had constructed a network of forces, reorganized his army, published propaganda for the sake of unity, and created treaties in order to prevent alliances between his enemies.[7] King Alfred's precautions proved valuable, as the Viking army dispersed in 896, either to settle in the Scandinavian sector of England or to sail to mainland Europe.

However, conflicts between the Vikings and the English continued. In 910 Edward (r. 899 – 924), the son of King Alfred, defeated a Viking army in modern-day Staffs.[8] The Vikings no longer had a main leader in their midst, causing their power to dwindle and fragmenting them, leaving them as individual mini-kingdoms. Without a unifying power, it is difficult to remain a threatening force. However, the Viking presence remained in England, thanks to an invasion from Ireland led by Rognvalder (r. 918-921). After a large, well-documented battle at Corbridge, he became the king of York in 918.[9]

In 927, King Edward's son, Athelstan (r. 924 to 927 as King of the Anglo-Saxons, r. 927-939 as King of the English), took over as the king of York after removing the current king from power by capturing the city.[10] From there, he ruled Northumbria until he died in 939. After his

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[7] Ibid.

[8] During this battle three Viking kings, Ívar, Eowils, and Hálfdan, were killed. As Downham explains, "This seriously weakened Viking power in England. [….] Political fragmentation may be hinted at, as no king of Vikings in England is clearly identified from 910 until 918, but there is reference to jarls ruling individual fortified centres." Downham, "Vikings in England," 344.

[9] This battle was documented in *The Annals of Ulster*, *The Fragmentary Annals of Ireland,* and "The Scottish Chronicle". For more information, please see the following: "The Annals of Ulster," ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Dublin Institue of Advanced Studies 1983); *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*; Benjamin T. Hudson "The Scottish Chronicle" in *Scottish Historical Review* vol. 77, no. 204 (October 1998): 129-161.

[10] It was at this moment that King Athelstan became the first king to completely unite England, as describe by Clare Downham in "The Vikings in England," which has been cited multiple times throughout this essay. She also mentions that King Athelstan took part in the famed Battle of Brunanburh, which is chronicled by the poem of the same name. Although it is clear the battle did take place, no one is quite sure where Brunanburh actually was. For the "The Battle of Brunanburh," other manuscripts related to the poem, as well as academic scholarship published

death, the Vikings took the city once more, as well as the lands south of the Humber.[11] This instability continued in the area until 954, when Eadred of Wessex annexed the area. From that point on, English kings tried to secure power in Viking territories. King Edgar's (r. 954-975) solution was to allow Viking settlements some autonomy, as long as they did not attempt to rise up against him.

Unfortunately, the death of King Edward's (r. 975-978) successor allowed his second son, a twelve-year-old, to take over the throne. This led to instability, allowing Gaelic and Scandinavian forces to invade once more. In the 990s, attacks were led by Olaf Tryggvason and Sveinn Haraldson, the future kings of Norway and Denmark, respectively. Aethelred, (r. 978-1013 and 1014-1016) who was the twelve-year-old son, was unable to defeat them, so in 1002, he ordered the killing of all Danes in England.[12] This resulted in what is now known as the St. Brice's Day Massacre.[13]

Despite this order and its consequences, Sveinn Haraldson (r. 1013-1014) conquered England in 1013, both with the help of his own troops and local support, as Aethelred had removed freedoms given to the locals by his father. A year after his victory, Sveinn Haraldson passed in 1014, and was succeeded by his son Cnut after a brief rule by Aethelred's son Edmund from 1014-1016.[14] The time period from Cnut's rule (1016-1035) until 1066 was tumultuous, as

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on the subject, please see the following book: Michael Livingston, *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, Liverpool Historical Casebooks (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool Univesrity Press).

[11] The Humber is an estuary on the east coast of Northern England. The area below this body of water is called "the five boroughs," which were the five main towns of the Danelaw. A map is shown in Figure 2.

[12] Downham, "Vikings in England," 346.

[13] Archaeology has provided little information about this massacre. It is apparent that Aethelred had little to gain from the endeavor, except for the alienation of the Danes and the enmity of Forkbeard, a leader in Danelaw and the man who briefly interrupted Athelstan's rule of England. Unfortunately, it is unclear how many people were killed. However, two mass graves in Oxford seem to be connected two the event. For more on this event and the mass graves in Oxford, please see the following: Nadia Durrani, "Vengeance: On the Vikings," *Archaeology* 66, no. 6 (2013).

[14] Ibid.

multiple contenders battled for the throne.[15] In 1066, Harald Hardrada, the King of Norway, and William the Duke of Normandy both invaded to take their claim to the English throne. While Harald Hardrada died at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, William defeated the king of England at the time, King Harald Godwinson, and less than a month later became the English ruler.

This information has all been garnered from written sources, and while important, is still a biased source of material. While it is important to understand the Anglo-Saxon side of history, it is important to use the Viking sources as well as archaeological data in order to get a more complete picture of history. Written sources from multiple sides, as well as material evidence, serve to support and strengthen our understanding of the past.

Part II: Viking Archaeology in England

While the written documentation of history is extremely important, it is further strengthened by the material data only an archaeologists can discover. In the context of England, there are four main types of artifacts found in relation to the Vikings. The first is coinage and jewelry, often found within silver hoards buried deep in the ground. The second is burials, which provides an archaeologist with both human remains and associated burial goods. The last is human remains themselves, which through proper analysis, can tell scholars a great deal about an individual.

[15] After Cnut died, along with his heirs, Edward (r. 1042-1066), Aethelred's son, received the crown. Although only one king ruled in-between Cnut and Harold Godwinson in 1066, multiple people had a claim to the throne. For example, Edward himself was childless, but Godwine the earl of Wessex helped Edward to the throne, which prompted Edward to grant the earl's son, Harold Godwinson (1066-1066), the throne of England. However, Cnut's descendants also had a claim to the throne, since their bloodline had a stake in England's throne since Sveinn Haraldson. Downham proposes this is what prompted Harald Hadrada (r. Norway 1046-1066) to invade England. At the same time, William the Conqueror claimed that King Edward had promised him the throne, disputing Harold Godwinson's rule. It could be said that these three separate claims to the English Crown led to the Norman Invasion, as well as their success, in 1066.

In his book *Viking Age Archaeology of Britain and Ireland,* Richard Hall describes the Viking raids of England as "hit-and-run affairs."[16] As this suggests, the raids themselves leave very little archaeological evidence. However, since some Vikings did eventually settle in England, archaeologists can still find evidence of the Viking Age in England. Some of the first artifacts identified by archaeologists were coins minted by Norse rulers.[17] Numismatics, the study of coinage and other forms of money, is important to the study of Vikings.[18] Coins are easily datable, given the rulers' names are normally printed on coins that are minted during their rule. For example, the coins found in England often had the ruler's name printed on them, and many had the names of Norse rulers found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.[19] When a king's name is printed on a coin, it becomes much easier to date the coin, as historical records often keep track of the years of rule. . This can help archaeologists establish a *terminus post quem*, which is the earliest date an artifact could have been buried. Coins can also feature culturally significant symbols and place of origin. They can help archaeologists date a site and other artifacts uncovered with coins, as well as indicate, if not direct contact with other cultures, far-reaching trade routes that indicate the connectedness of cultures at the time of the coin's burial.[20]

Coins are often found buried with other pieces of metal, normally silver, in a Viking context. These come in the form of silver hoards, which are often a collection of jewelry, coins,

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[16] Richard Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology in Britian and Ireland* (Buckinhamshire, UK: Shire Publications LTD, 1990): 9.
[17] Ibid. In addition, to see an example of a Viking coin, see my Figure 3.
[18] For more information on numismatics in Viking-age England, please see the following: Michael Dolley, *Viking Coins of the Danelaw and Dublin* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1965).
[19] Ibid.
[20] Granted, judging contact by coins found at a site can be tricky. For example, if an archaeologist found a roman coin in Norway, does that mean a Norwegian had direct contact with a Roman? Or did a Roman trade with an Anglo-Saxon who then traded with a Norwegian? Though a singular coin is probably more indicative of far-reaching complex trade systems than direct contact, multiple coins from one area could mean two people did meet and trade directly, or even live near each other for a time. Keep in mind, however, that this is difficult to judge without proper documentation, like inventories from trade ships.

and hacksilver buried underground.[21] Scandinavians would bury their coins alongside other wealth in their possession, perhaps as a safeguard against encroaching invaders or political instability. As such, silver hoards are an important feature of Viking archaeology.[22]

In a similar fashion to coins, jewelry can be identified roughly by time period and location, depending on the art style. Archaeologists often use the evolution of art to establish relative dates for artifacts. This means they place certain artifacts in a timeline relative to each other, though not necessarily alongside a numerical date. However, hard dates can be placed within this timeline if other forms of absolute dating, such as dendrochronology or radio-carbon dating, can be performed on artifacts found with the jewelry or other art-baring artifacts. For example, Viking Art tends to have interlacing vines or animals, and the types of images that appear in the interlacing vary across different time periods. At the same time, it takes a skilled eye to correctly identify these art styles, especially since Celtic knots can appear quite similar to Viking interlacing art. See figure 4 for an example of Viking art, and see figure 5 for an example of a Celtic knot.[23]

One important silver hoard site that includes silver and coins is at Cuerdale, Lancashire in northwestern England. A large silver hoard was found along a bank of the river Ribble in 1840. This find was four times the size of any other hoard, in fact. It had roughly 7000 coins and 1300 pieces of silver.[24] The silver was mostly ingots, but also included brooches and Irish arm rings. The coins also had a wide range of origins, as they were minted in King Alfred's Wessex, the

[21] Hacksilver is simply chopped up pieces of silver materials. I've elected not to discuss it further in this essay as it is often analyzed by weight, which is irrelevant to the topics I am discussing.
[22] For more information on Viking silver hoards, please see the following book: James Graham-Cambell and Gareth Williams, *Silver Economy in the Viking Age* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010).
[23] For information on the evolution of Viking art, please see the following: James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art* (New York, New York: Thames and Hudson Inc, 2013).
[24] Richard Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology in Britian and Ireland,* ed. James Dyer (Buckinhamshire, UK: Shire Publications LTD, 1990): 46. –SERIES EDITOR??????

Byzantine, Scandinavia, and the Carolingian empire to name a few. This coins in this hoard not only help to date its burial, but also demonstrate how wide-spread the Viking contact was, whether directly or through other trading partners.

Alongside man-manipulated materials, burials also play an important role in the study of Vikings.[25] Although individuals should not be sexed based on the objects found in their grave, grave goods help archaeologists interpret the kinds of occupations and lives people led during the Viking Age.[26] For example, an individual buried with an axe, shield, or other weaponry probably spent a portion of their life raiding other areas. The remains themselves serve a purpose as well, since marks on bones can be indicative of lifestyle and manner of death. For example, muscles leave certain markings where they attach to the bone. If someone lives a life of heavy-labor, these connections strengthen, leaving more robust marks on their skeleton. Depending on which part of their body was put to the most use, a bio-archaeologist can discern if someone lifted brick and rocks using their knees or lower back, or pulled fish-laden nets into shore using their upper back and shoulders. In addition, abnormal lesions and markings on bones can indicate disease or a healed injury. A hole or deep scratch in the bone may be the mark of a death-blow, showing an individual died a violent death.[27]

So long as the remains are well-preserved, archaeologists may also test any remnant DNA to distinguish where an individual was born.[28] They may also test their teeth to determine

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[25] For a good introduction to the study of Viking Graves in England and Ireland, please see Chapter 10: "Graves" in *Viking Age Archaeology of Britain and Ireland*, which has been cited throughout this essay.

[26] Take note, the idea that the materials someone is buried with indicates their occupation in life is an assumption made by most archaeologists, and should be taken with a grain of salt.

[27] To see more about the study of skeletal remains, please see the following: Debra A. Komar and Jane E. Buikstra, *Forensic Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford Univesrity Press, 2008).

[28] Although it can be difficult to find intact DNA on skeletonized remains, it does occasionally happen. When such DNA is available, it can be used to determine nationality, sex, and very rarely, an individual's identity, such as was the case for King Richard III. For more information on DNA analysis, please see the following: Kate Smalley Marin Richars, Bryan Sykes, and Robert Hedges, "Archaeology and Genetics: Analysing DNA from Skeletal Remains," *World Archaeology* 25, no. 1 (1993).

and individual's diet.[29] The skeleton, without DNA testing, can also give a rough estimation for age, sex, and population affiliation. However, as the only comparable data available to archaeologists about the measurements of population affiliations, sexes, and ages is that of humans in the modern day, such identifications are tentative at best. In addition, humanity is a spectrum, and it is often difficult to accurately identify population affiliation and sex solely on bone structure. This is particularly true in an archaeological context, as bones have often either been burnt, dissolved in acidic soil, or otherwise disturbed. For example, the gap at the bottom of the pelvis is an easy sex identifier. If it seems a baby could pass through the gap, the remains most likely belonged to a female. If not, then a male. However, if the pelvic bone is missing, it can be much harder to determine the biological sex of a deceased individual.

In some extremely rare cases, DNA can even be used to identify historical figures. Take King Richard III, for example. After his remains had been discovered underneath a parking lot, Dr. Turi King, Dr. Patricia Balaresque, Laura Tonasso, Professor Michael Hofreiter and Dr. Gloria Gonzales extracted his DNA to see if they could identify his skeleton. In this instance, they used mitochondrial DNA – called mtDNA – to see if they could make a connection between the skeleton and the surviving bloodline of Richard III's sister, Anne of York. This would work because the mtDNA is passed down through the ovum. This means a mother gives all of her children the same mitochondrial DNA, and is therefore continued through the female line. So,

[29] From the following: S. W. Hillson, "Diet and Dental Disease," *World Archaeology* 11, no. 2 (1979), 148-150. : Teeth can determine much about an individual's health in life. For example, the interrupted growth of certain layers of the enamel can indicate vitamin D deficiency, or periods of intense fevers, particularly during early childhood. The PH of plaque can demonstrate diet as well, as high-protein diets will result in alkaline plaque, while high-carbohydrate diets result in acidic plaque. Acidic plaque degrades the enamel, while alkaline plaque replaces it. Thus, the enamel can once again show the kind of diet an individual had. There are a whole slew of other ways teeth can aid archaeologists, and for more information I highly recommend the article above.

while Richard III would have the same mtDNA as his sister and her female descendants, the mtDNA from any of his possible descendants would be from their mother.

Thankfully, the researchers were able to find Anne of York's female-line descendants Michael Ibsen and Wendy Dulig. Since the mtDNA matched for these descendants, the skeleton of Richard III was identified.[30]

An example of a famous Viking-age burial site in England is the Ridgeway Hill Viking Burial Pit. In this site were 54 headless human skeletons and 51 detached skulls. The skulls and bodies were found next to each other, and the bodies had been thrown into a Roman quarry pit alongside an ancient roadway. The separation of the heads and bodies suggests execution by decapitation, which is further supported by the lack of textile remains in the pit. This suggests the bodies were naked when they were buried. They had other wounds aside from the results of their decapitation, but were otherwise tall and healthy. Isotopic analysis of their teeth suggests they were from Scandinavia, as it matched the other inhabitants of that region at the time. Such a burial is a prime example of how bioarcheology can be used to analyze a body, or in this case, several bodies, to determine cause of death, manner of death, and population affiliation.[31]

Archaeology has a wide range of possible materials to analyze in the study of the Vikings in England. From materials like silver and wood to the bodies of the Vikings themselves, there is a good amount of archaeological information available. However, it is difficult to properly analyze materials without a strong understanding behind the cultural context in which they were created, as it is far too easy to superimpose our own cultural perspectives on the artifacts. For

[30] All of the information regarding the identification of King Richard III came from the following: "DNA Analysis", Univesrity of Leicester http://www.le.ac.uk/richardiii/science/extractionofdna.html (accessed December 2nd 2016). Granted, it was truly only proven that the skeleton is from the same maternal line as Richard III. However, it is entirely possible the skeleton belonged to him.

[31] T. Douglas Price, "Vikings! Ad 750-1050," in *Ancient Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 324-325.

example, say there was a culture in which women were buried with weapons if they had died in childbirth, as that was considered worthy metaphorical battle in which to die. Without that cultural information, an archaeologist, upon discovering a burial containing weapons and a female skeleton, might instead assume that there was a large number of female warriors in the population. Cultural context is important, and in order to achieve this context, archaeologists should look to the Viking sagas.

Section III: On the Sagas and Their Problems

The Sagas of the Icelanders, or family sagas, provide significant textual information about medieval Norse people and their culture. This wealth information extends beyond their homeland into Norway, the country of their ancestors, and into whichever lands they decided to visit, including England. *Egil's Saga,* on which I will be focusing, is attributed to Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic noble, historian, and writer who lived from 1179-1241.[32] It is important to note that Snorri supposedly wrote these sagas down after the Norse world had been Christianized, which could affect many of the pagan elements in the original stories.[33] This touches upon the first problem associated with the sagas as historical sources: their temporal distance from the events they describe.

Given *Egil's Saga's* textual acknowledgement of *landnám* and the presence of the historical figure King Athelstan, it is easy to date the events of the text to roughly 850-1000

[32] Anthony Faulkes, "Introduction," in *Edda Prologue and Gylfaginning* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1982): xiii. I will be using the Penguin Edition of *Egil's Saga.* Which, though attributed to Snorri, does not have a definite author.
[33] Anthony Faulkes, "Introduction," (xv). In this section however, Faulkes is talking about the *Edda* and Snorri's writings that deal more with the mythology of the Norse. As he states, "Snorri was a Christian and needed to establish the relationship of his heathen mythology to his own beliefs" (xv). However, Snorri did not turn away from Christianity as he wrote the sagas. His religion remains an important piece of context that is worth mentioning in this work. Also, *landnám* is the term used for the initial settlement and distribution of land in Iceland.

CE.[34] In contrast, Snorri's authorship would date the text itself to 1220-40 AD. This creates a gap of anywhere between 200 and 400 years between the events of the text and the text itself. That would be akin to a modern-day historian writing about the American Civil War, or even the Revolutionary War, with little written documentation of the events. Within such a time span, there is a good amount of distortion that should be accounted for. Like in a historical game of telephone, events could be exaggerated, personalities skewed to fit the political climate of the time, and even cultural ideas and values could change as the distance between the story and text grows. However, it does appear Snorri had sources of some kind, as evidence appears in his other writings in the form of continuity errors.

These suggest Snorri took information from multiple stories and attempted to compile them into a single chronology, at least for some of his writings. For example, in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, there are mentions of Thor, Oku-Thor, Utgarda-Loki, and Loki. It appears that Thor and Oku-Thor refer to the same individual, but Utgarda-Loki and Loki are separate people altogether.[35] In the latter case, it is unclear why the prefixes have been added to their names, and what purpose they serve, but they do help distinguish between the two Lokis. The two Thors may have been separate characters at one time, or it may just be a separate name for Thor.

It is no easy task to gather enough information to make a somewhat comprehensive volume of sagas, so Snorri clearly had some motivation to do this work. One of Snorri's possible motivations for writing these sagas down in a comprehensive collection could have

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[34] Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga," in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*(New York: The Penguin Group, 1220-40). 3. Landnám is the name given to the settlement of Iceland, as well as the laws associated with land management. On page 12, the text describes the flight of many Norwegians to other country, stating "At this time, Iceland was discovered." Then, as the story continues, we learn Egil's ancestors were involved in the settling of Iceland as outlaws of Norway.

[35] Snorri Sturluson, "Gylfaginning," in *Edda*, ed. Anthony Faulkes(London: David Campbell Publishers 1220-40). 39-46.

stemmed from the political climate of the time. At the time of his writing, Iceland started falling to Norway's successful attempts at unification. Prior to the fall, Iceland had been a sanctuary for refugees from Norway as well as an independent nation for roughly 400 years.[36] Clearly, this was a time of turmoil and chaos for the Icelanders, and as a writer cannot escape from their context, this no doubt affected Snorri's writing. Anthony Faulkes describes Snorri in terms of that conflict:

> "Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) was one of the leading figures in Icelandic social and political life in the thirteenth century. He acquired great wealth and power and become deeply involved in the political turmoil in the country that led to the collapse of the legal and social organization that had existed since the settlement and eventually to the loss of independence in 1262-4, when Iceland became subject to the Norwegian throne."[37]

Though Faulkes does not directly connect the writing of the sagas to the political climate of the time, it is clear Snorri was a politically-minded individual.[38] This could further skew the sagas, as Snorri's purpose in writing them may have not been pure documentation. As a well-known political figure, he could have tweaked certain parts of the sagas to fit a narrative he would have been trying to create. This allows historians a glimpse into his mindset and goals as a politician, but it does affect the historical accuracy of the sagas Snorri wrote.

Additionally, some sagas certainly act as a preservation of oral history, in a way. "For stories and poems to be transmitted through centuries of oral tradition, they have to make sense

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[36] For a history of Iceland, see the following: Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, first ed. (Minneapolis: Univesrity of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[37] Faulkes, "Introduction," *Edda Prologue and Gylfaginning*, (xiii).

[38] For more information about Snorri, the political climate of Iceland, and *Heimskringla* in particular, please see the following: Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimsrkingla* (Berkeley: University of Calinfornia Press, 1991).

for their audiences from generation to generation," as Robert Kellogg explains, "and to do this, they must conform to the values, tastes, and perceptions of successive new audiences."[39] This suggests the sagas are not a direct conservation of the values and ideas of the distant past, but rather most closely represents the time period in which they were written down. To add another layer of complexity, the sagas may also represent the 13th-century concept of what the 9th, 10th, or 11th centuries were like. This is important to keep in mind for the sagas are less like a window to the past and more like a funhouse mirror. They can provide an idea of what life was like in the distant past, but it is distorted and may be more of a reflection of the time period in which the sagas was written down. This orality adds another layer of distortion to the saga's credibility, as time is not the only catalyst of change in this sense. The needs of a changing culture, as well, could have affected the stories between the events on which they are based and their documentation.

Unfortunately, there is a history of applying seemingly static stories to a changing culture. Anthropologists would write ethnographies about modern cultures, and historians would erroneously assume these cultural practices had been occurring for thousands of years. This denies the change that naturally occurs in culture, and makes the assumption that cultures are static. This is false, and is not the procedure I am proposing here. It is important to consider that cultures change overtime, and to keep that in mind during saga analysis.

In contrast, many sagas provide a rich and seemingly accurate genealogical history. This helps contradict the previous failings of the sagas, as their dubious narrative history functions alongside their recordkeeping. The existence of these family sagas not only provides scholars with a comprehensive familial history of characters, but also gives scholars a taste of the

[39] Robert Kellogg, "Intrduction," in *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Collection*(New York: The Penguin Group, 2000). xxxiv.

heritage-based society of the time. As shown by the heroes of the sagas, the proclamation of one's deeds, as well as the deeds of one's ancestors, was a form of identification and certification. This is also reflected in the naming tradition, as the Norse would take the first name of their father, add –son or –dottir to its end, and make it their last name. Many sagas also start at the beginning of a hero's lineage, and fail to mention the hero until a few chapters have been spent on their ancestry.[40] This occurs in *Egil's Saga*, as a good portion of the sagas is dedicated to the heritage of the titular character.[41] In this way, the sagas can function in a similar manner to church records in that archaeologists can find people's names, as well as the occasional time and place of birth and death.

Despite their plausible failings as historical sources, I argue that there are aspects of the sagas that can help archaeologists better interpret the artifacts they find in the ground. It is clear the sagas are not a perfect source, but in the absence of more reliable documentation, it is important to consider the information they present when studying the artifacts of the Norse culture.

Section IV: *Egil's Saga* as a Source

If archaeologists keep the sagas' flaws as a historical source in mind, they can still present useful information that could aid in the interpretation of artifacts. In this instance, I shall use *Egil's Saga* as an example for this type of historical interpretation. I chose this particular saga for a few reasons. First, Egil spends a good amount of time in England, so parts of the saga can be directly applied to my focus, which is the Viking invasions of England. Second, the saga talks about particular historical figures who historians knew existed. Athelstan, whom I

[40] For a reading on the scholarly debate on Icelandic Family Sagas, please see the following: Carol J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985): 239-315.

[41] Roughly 50 pages 180-page saga, in fact.

discussed briefly above in "This History of the Vikings in England," plays a significant role in the saga. In addition, the saga mentions his death and the continuation of his bloodline as royalty of England. This shows the saga has at least some historical basis, and is useful for my particular purposes.

I have identified multiple sectors of focus in which *Egil's Saga* can aid archaeologists: First is reasons for travel; second is trade goods, routes, and purposes; third is interpretation of treasures/wealth; fourth is discussion of battles, armies, and weaponry; fifth is the discussion of battle-wounds and burial; and sixth, which is particular to *Egil's Saga*, is the interpretation of disease. In this section, I shall explain and provide examples for each of these sectors from the text and from archaeological sources if available.

First, the reasons for travel are important to Viking archaeology, as we know they were a well-traveled people. However, people usually remember the Vikings as invaders, and assume they traveled simply to plunder and pillage. While plundering does have its place in *Egil's Saga*, and important message conveyed by the story is the refugee-like status of some of Norway's former inhabitants. The saga describes the new rule of King Harald Fair-Hair (r. 830-932), the king known for uniting Norway.[42] This king, though powerful, is not portrayed in a flattering light. The narrator describes how he kept a close eye on landlords he deemed likely to rebel, ultimately giving them an ultimatum. They could either pledge to his service, leave the country, or submit themselves to torture or possibly death, with the result that

> Many people fled the country to escape this tyranny and settled various uninhabited parts of many places, to the east in Jamtland and Halsingland, and to the west in the Hebrides, the shire of Dublin, Ireland, Normandy in France,

[42] As stated in the footnote of Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 9.

> Caithness in Scotland, the Orkney Isles and Shetland Isles, and the Faroe Islands. And at this time, Iceland was discovered.[43]

In this passage, those who traveled to Iceland and areas of Britain are refugees fleeing a tyrant king. This certainly explains the inhabitation of Iceland, but also clarifies the settlement in the British Isles and nearby areas. Furthermore, scholars know this settlement occurred between 800 and 1000 AD, which correlate with King Harald Fair-Hair's reign dates.[44]

In addition, the story discusses England in particular as a place of some refuge. Thorolf (Egil's uncle) goes to King Harald to serve him, but two men close to the king slander him by saying he does not pay his tributes in full.[45] One day, a trade ship of Thorolf's is captured, and when one sailor goes to tell Thorolf's father of the ordeal, he instructs the sailor to tell Thorolf the following: "My only advice is to leave the country, because [Thorolf] may be able to do better for himself serving the king of England or Denmark or Sweden."[46] This is served as a warning, as the father suspects "Thorolf would not enjoy the good fortune of the king's friendship indefinitely."[47] Thorolf is told to flee to this particular country when danger seems imminent. This shows that England, among Denmark and Sweden, could have been considered a country of refuge for outlaws and other fleeing Norsemen. The concept of England as a country of refuge adds depth to the archaeological record and Viking narrative. Not every person of Scandinavian descent found in England was a vicious raider. Some, as is often the case in history, may have been fleeing political persecution for the sake of their lives and freedom.

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[43] Ibid. 11-2.
[44] Thomas H. McGovern, "The Archaeology of the Norse North Atlantic," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19, (1990). 331.
[45] In this saga, this tribute is similar to a tax. It seems to act as a way to demonstrate your loyalty to the king by giving him a portion of your wealth.
[46] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 31.
[47] Ibid. 30.

Connected to the need for travel is the need for trade, as it is impossible to have one without the other. One of the most telling sections appears early in the saga:

> Thorolf had the ship made ready to sail and sent his men to look after it, loading it with stockfish, hides and ermine, and a great quantity of squirrel skins and other furs from his expeditions to the mountains, a very valuable cargo. He told Thorgils Boomer to take the ship to England to buy cloth and other goods that he needed. They skirted the coast to the south, then put out to sea and landed in England, where they did plenty of trading. After that they loaded the ship with wheat, honey wine and cloth, and set off for Norway again in the autumn.[48]

There are a few telling details in this passage. First of all, it provides information about many trading items that are likely to decay in the earth such as the stockfish, ermine, and the hides and furs. However, these may not have been common trading items, as the passage states they are a "very valuable cargo." This is further supported by a statement made later in the saga, as one person states "I can't imagine that so rich a cargo has ever been loaded on any trading ship in our day."[49] This emphasizes how strange such a cargo would be. This means an archaeologist can assume that, while such goods probably appeared in trade, they would not have carried the quantity described above. What is also interesting is the grand difference in the items they brought to England and the items they took back home. They traded furs and dried food for "wheat, honey wine and cloth." The wheat and cloth are presumably less hardy than the items Thorolf brought, as wheat perishes faster than stockfish since it is not dried and preserved, and cloth would be less useful in a harsh winter than hides and furs. In modern times, this may seem

[48] Ibid. 28.
[49] Ibid. 29.

like an unfair trade. Furs are perceived to be valuable, while cloth seems flimsy and cheap. However, cloth is more comfortable, and can be worn underneath fur. The saga does not explain why these specific items were required, but this could still provide some important information about the origin of certain items in Viking sites.

There is further proof, too, that wheat and honey were trade items that came specifically from England. At one point, King Athelstan sends Egil to Scandinavia from England with some goods. "King Athelstan gave Egil a good merchant vessel, and a cargo to go with it. The bulk of it was wheat and honey, and there was greater wealth still in other goods."[50] These are two mentions of wheat and honey-based materials traveling from England. This suggests that trade might have occurred between Scandinavia and England for items like wheat and honey, or at least that England exported these good in particular. While the reason for the importance of such items can only be theorized, the sagas provide information about perishable trade items between the two countries that would not survive to a great extent, although containers would help preserve these items.

That is to be said, however, that wheat could be found in the soil of certain sites if its pollen was allowed to flourish, or if it was buried in such a way that parts of the cell walls could be preserved. The outer shell of pollens is fairly sturdy, and can be preserved in the soil for centuries. As the shape of the shells is unique as well, this can aid in the identification of plants from ancient civilizations.[51] However, in order for this to work, the pollen must be present at the site of concern. It is possible that wheat was dried before it was traded, so it is less likely pollen would be present after the Vikings had taken it back home.

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[50] Ibid. 110.

[51] For more on pollen analysis, please see the following: J. A. Webb P. D. Moore, M. E. Collison, *Pollen Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1991).

Trade is also tied to treasure and wealth, as it aids in the accumulation of such objects. *Egil's Saga* discusses this subject as well in three types of situations: first as wergild; second as a reward; and third as a peace offering. One possible case of wergild, the exchange of monetary compensation for the death or injury of a loved-one, first appears after Egil's brother is killed in a large battle. First, the king ceremoniously presents Egil with a golden ring at a feast:

> […King Athelstan] unsheathed his sword, took a fine, large ring from his arm and slipped it over the point of the sword, then stood up and walked across the floor and handed it over the fire to Egil. Egil stood up, drew his sword and walked out onto the floor. He put his sword through the ring and pulled it towards him, then walked back to his place.[52]

This is a visually impactful scene. The glow of the fire shining off the swords and the arm-ring, Egil's steady stride as he makes his way to the fire, and his wordless acceptance of the gift are all emphasize the importance of this moment. While beautifully described, this ceremony raises a few questions for archaeologists. Is the ceremony what makes the event important, the arm ring itself, or a combination of both? The latter two options present some interesting interpretative possibilities for archaeologists, as arm rings can be found in silver hoards. For example, the Vale of York hoard, a famous and sizable silver hoard included some arm rings.[53] Nonetheless, the possibility exists that these buried arm rings were more than just wealth to their owners. They might have represented a bond, or even had served as the payment of a loved-one's life. Furthermore, it is important to closely analyze the Viking value of arm rings, for it is possible that the Anglo-Saxon perspective is slightly different. Once culture could value the rings more

[52] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 91.
[53] "Most Important Viking Treasure in 150 Years Is Jointly Acquired by Two British Museums", The British Museum https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2009/vale_of_york_acquisition.aspx (accessed December 15th 2016).

than another, or they could have been used in different contexts. However, in this particular Viking example, there is a link between the arm ring and a ceremonious presentation of wealth.

A clearer example of wergild soon follows. King Athelstan presents Egil with two chests of silver, and states the following:

> These chests are yours, Egil. And if you go to Iceland, you will present this money to your father, which I am sending as a compensation for the death of his son. Share some of the money with Thorolf's kinsmen, those you regard as the best. Take compensation for your brother from me here, land or wealth, whichever you prefer, and if you wish to stay with me for longer I will grant you any honour and respect that you care to name yourself.[54]

There are a few key phrases to note here. First is the explicit statement of wergild, "[…] which I am sending as a compensation for the death of his son." This is clearly states this particular treasure's purpose, which gives more meaning to particularly large silver hoards. These hoards might have served as wergild for important members of society. However, like Athelstan urges, the entirety of a wergild might not have stayed together as it could have been distributed throughout a family or community. Athelstan wishes Egil to "Share some of the money with Thorolf's kinsmen, those you regard as best." Wealth given as wergild could have easily been broken up, suggesting that smaller hoards could have pieces of such an offering in them as well.

This passage also shows that riches given in the name of wergild could have traveled quite the distance. Although Athelstan gives Egil the chests in England, he asks to take it to his father in Iceland. This means that as long as Vikings and Norsemen inhabited an area, wergild could have been distributed

[54] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 91.

there. This gives a greater depth of interpretation to silver hoards. Granted, it is impossible to say the purpose of any particular hoard, but it is important to note the possibility.

A second purpose of wealth presented in *Egil's Saga* is as a reward. After he is given the wergild, Egil decides to stay with King Athelstan for the following year. In the ruler's honor, Egil composes a poem, after which "Athelstan [gives] Egil two more gold rings weighing a mark each"[55] Here, the gold rings are shown as a form of payment for a service, or as a way of thanking the poet. Once again, this shows arm-rings had a special value. As evidence, the rings are given alongside "an expensive cloak that the king himself had worn."[56] This cloak is presented in a particular way, mention both its monetary worth as "expensive" and its cultural worth as the king had worn it himself. As the two rings are presented alongside this cloak, it emphasizes their worth as well. Their monetary value is presented in their weight as "a mark each," while they could be culturally valuable as their existence as rings. The two-instances of ring-giving, one as a ceremony and the other as a reward for a poem of praise, I believe suggests rings are culturally valuable in some form.

Finally, wealth is used as a way to deter battle. Before the death of Egil's brother in the saga, King Athelstan and King Olaf of Scotland meet for the Battle at Wen Heath.[57] Naturally, Athelstan attempts diplomacy before the battle, as it is clear to him that there will be a high number of casualties. One such effort at a peaceful resolution employs the use of monetary wealth: "Instead, he told them to return to Scotland, offering to give them a shilling of silver for every plough in all his realm as a pledge of friendship between them."[58] Keep in mind, this is a great amount of money. This means it

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[55] Ibid. 91
[56] Ibid. 91.
[57] This is also known as the Battle of Brunanburh, which is preserved by the famous poem of the same name. It appears in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, and scholars recognize the battle as a factual historical event. However, the location of the battle itself is unknown. In addition, the poem leaves out many details that the sagas includes, such as the attempts at diplomacy before the battle. . King Athelstan and Olaf (whose name was changed to Anlaf in the poem) both make an appearance in both accounts, however, and they agree that it was a bloody affair from which the Anglo-Saxons emerged victorious.
[58] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 83.

demonstrates the importance of peace to Athelstan. Aside from how it reflects on Athelstan, this use of money also demonstrates how currency could have been used during the Vikings invasions. In this case, it acts a sort of bribe, meant to encourage the invaders to go home and become allies with their would-be victims. Money serves as more than a symbol of wealth, but as a key part of diplomacy and peaceful solutions. It circulated battle-fields as well as shops. Furthermore, if the bribe had succeeded, the exchange itself would have become a symbol of friendship between the two opposing forces, adding more symbolic value to the English monetary system. However, the attempt failed and battle ensued anyway. Thankfully for Athelstan, the Anglo-Saxons won anyhow.

Additionally, The Battle of Wen Heath provides more material information outside of trade. Thankfully, there is a beautiful description of weaponry.

> Thorolf was equipped with a broad, thick shield and a tough helmet on his head, and was girded with a sword which he called Long, a fine and trusty weapon. He carried a thrusting-spear in his hand. Its blade was two ells long and rectangular, tapering to a point at one end but thick at the other. The shaft measured only a hand's length below the long and thick socket which joined it to the blade, but it was exceptionally stout. There was an iron spike through the socket, and the shaft was completely clad with iron. Such spears were known as "scrapers of mail."[59]

A few important notes to take from this passage include first, that this passage describes four items used by Thorolf in battle: A shield, a helmet, a sword, and a spear. This, among other sources, shows the types of items the Vikings could have carried into battle. Unfortunately, the saga does not give a great description for most of the items.[60] The spear, however, receives some special treatment. We get the length of the spear, as well as its shape. These things can be drawn by an artists in order to aid

[59] Ibid. 85.
[60] Please note, however, that the helmet is not described as "horned."

archeologists in the identification of artifacts. Thankfully, we also get a name for this type of spear: "scrapers of mail." This suggests this type of spear was not necessarily unique, but was a class of spear used by Vikings. In addition, the passage calls the weapon a "thrusting spear," which could mean this weapon was held past the shield and thrusted towards the enemy. In other words, it was not meant to be thrown. This means archeologists can apply purpose and action to the weapon by literary descriptions of its use. This helps portray the weapon in a more realistic light, as more of a useful item than a beautifully preserved piece of history.[61]

In addition, the saga also declares that "Neither [Egil nor Thorolf] wore a coat of mail."[62] I argue this suggests some Vikings would normally wear mail, and the mention of these two characters abandoning that practice is meant to amplify their heroic traits. Granted, the Viking use of mail is already well-documented. But, was it then some sort of feat to enter battle without chainmail? While that is possible, it was also true that chainmail was very expensive. As Anne Pederson explains, "Shirts made of thousands of iron rings welded together or closed with a rivet were doubtless expensive and available only to the very wealthy."[63] This complicates matters, as the average Viking would not have been wealthy enough to afford such protective gear. This also applies to weaponry, as swords, spears, and other weapons would have been expensive to make and keep. In addition, these expensive items could have been stolen from graves and sold. This could be textual proof of an act of heroism, though it is unclear if such a feat was replicated in history.

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[61] The display of artifacts is an issue for museums in particular. The museum effect, as defined by Svetlana Alpers, is that act of "turning all objects into works of art." Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). 26. The issue with this effect is that it robs artifacts of their cultural context, and thus their cultural meaning. A sword is no longer a brutal and useful weapon, but instead becomes a well-preserved masterpiece. The fact that people died because of this weapon is somewhat lost to the observer. To learn more about museums and how they shape the public's perception of artifacts, please see the following: Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

[62] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 85.

[63] Anne Pederson, "Viking Weaponry," in *The Viking World*(New York: Routledge, 2008). 207-8.

War, although it uses weapons and shields, also uses words. Athelstan tries a less violent tactic by making trades and performing trickery in order to avoid conflict. In an attempt to scare King Olaf away from a battle, he had his men "set up camp over a very long range at the narrowest point between the forest and river. Their tents stretched all the way from the forest to the river, and they had made camp so has to leave every third tent empty, with only a few men in each of the others."[64] Athelstan then told King Olaf that each of the tents were filled with men, as to give him the illusion of a large army. This strategy potentially leaves archaeologists with some puzzling remains. As this settlement would presumably be impermanent, there would be very little evidence of structures such as buildings or walls. However, there would be a certain amount of trash and lost items left wherever there was human occupancy. The empty tents could have been used as trash pits, especially since it would be far less effort to walk a few tents over than to the edge of the settlement to take care of any refuse. However, as a potentially small number of men was spread out across such a wide area, there would be small piles of garbage scattered over a very large area. This can make population estimations difficult. However, the information provided here suggests that it could have been possible that a small number of people lived spread out over a large area for a relatively short amount of time as a military strategy. If such tactic was actually employed at one point or another, this information could help scholars identify the location of the Battle of Wen Heath, or simply explain an odd distribution of trash piles. However, the saga discusses the passage of time pretty clearly, and this camp was only occupied for about three weeks and two days.[65] This means that there could be archaeological remains left from such an event, though would not be as likely as if the army had stayed for months.

There is some extra evidence that could aid in the search for the Battle of Wen Heath/Brunanburh. "The Battle of Brunanburh" mentions a place "called Dinges mere."[66] This name

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[64] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 83.
[65] Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga," in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*(New York: The Penguin Group, 1220-40). 83-7
[66] "Battle of Brunanburh," in *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. R. M. Liuzza(Toronto: Broadview Press). Line 54.

has been speculated by Steve Harding to be the ancient form of the place name Thingwall. This stems from the idea that the Th- in Thingwall became a D- when written by Anglo-Saxon writers. This could cause the discretion between the names Thingwall and Dingsmere.[67] This could refer to a few places near the Irish Sea, but it certainly narrows down the possible locations for archaeologists. If scattered evidence of small and temporary human settlement were found near those areas, alongside any pieces of armor or broken weapon shards, such evidence would suggest the archaeologist had found the site for the Battle of Wen Heath/Brunanburh.

What this battle is most remembered for is the amount of injury and death associated with it. While it is still unlikely evidence of the Battle of Brunanburh in particular will be found anytime soon, the evidence of conflict overall still exists in the skeletal record. As a matter of fact, this is one of the few parts on which the Anglo-Saxon and Viking record agree: The rampant violence. *Egil's Saga* gives some interesting descriptions of the actions taken in battle, though there is some fairly cartoonish violence. Take, for example, Thorolf's actions at the Battle of Wen Heath. "Then he drove the spear through the earl's coat of mail, into his chest and through his body so that it came out between his shoulder blades, lifted him up on it above his own head and thrust the end into the ground."[68] While it would be impossible to see evidence of the spear being shoved into the ground, the bones of the earl would retain evidence of the injury. If Thorolf had successfully struck the earl directly through the center of his chest, there would be a puncture wound in his sternum. As the spear has a point, this injury would manifest as sharp-force trauma, specifically a stab wound. This means the depth of the injury is greater than its length. In addition, as the spear went all the way through the bone, it would also be perforating. This means the weapon did not stop partway through the bone, but instead continued until it popped out the other side. If Thorolf had incredible aim, there may even be some

[67]"Battle of Brunanburh Ad937", The Univesrity of Nottingham https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/ncmh/dna/brunanburh.aspx.
[68] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 86-7

slash marks or a stab wound on the vertebrae of his victim. The slash mark would appear as a relatively long, shallow wound in the bone. For examples of a perforating stab wound and a slash wound, please see figures 6 and 7 respectively.

There would be quite the number of slash, chop, and stab wounds in battles against Vikings. Thorolf seems to go into such a fit of rage, as he "began fighting so furiously that he threw his shield over his back, grabbed his spear with both hands and charged forward, hacking and thrusting to either side."[69] The word "hacking" suggest a wild side-to-side movement, which could cause either chop or slash marks, particularly with a spear. If he was hacking wildly, multiple such marks could be found on a single skeleton. In addition, "thrusting" means Thorolf would have been making a stabbing motion, causing more puncture wounds in his victims. However, one issue with the archaeological record of such a fighting style is that Thorolf needed to hit bone for the evidence to survive. If armor prevented his attacks from penetrating muscle or fat, there could be very little evidence of his particular fighting style. People have a lot of bones, so it is likely he would have hit quite a few femurs, ribs, and skulls during the battle. However, it would be difficult to distinguish between blows dealt by Viking and Anglo-Saxon warriors. What could be distinguished, however, is that a large number of such marks could indicate involvement in a conflict around this time period.

Unfortunately, Thorolf's impressive fighting style did not serve him well. He eventually dies during the battle, and his brother Egil is left to bury him, the saga describes:

> He picked up his body and washed it, then dressed the corpse according to custom.
>
> They dug a grave there and buried Thorolf in it with his full weaponry and armour. Egil clasped a gold ring on to each of his arms before he left him, then they piled rocks over the grave and sprinkled it with earth. Then Egil spoke a verse.[70]

[69] Ibid. 86.
[70] Ibid. 89.

This passage describe how Egil washes the body before burying it. This would not be evident in the archaeological record, unless the washing materials were buried with the body. As there is no description of such an action, it is not wise to assume this occurred. The passage also says there was a certain way to dress the corpse, particular to Viking tradition. However, there is no more information than that. The lack of detail towards textiles is frustrating, but there is little to be done about this gap in knowledge. However, the passage does describe how Thorolf was "buried…with his full weaponry and armor." This shows warriors could have been buried with the weapons they used in life, as well as any chain mail or helmets they wore as protection. This could suggest that most, if not all, Vikings buried with weaponry had been involved in war or raiding. However, it is still unclear if people who were not buried with weaponry could also have been warriors. Their weapons could have been lost, or perhaps there was some other important aspect of their life that took precedence in death.

The final act is interesting as well. Egil gives Thorolf some arm rings, then he buries him underneath a pile of rocks. Once again, the importance of arm rings is presented, though their meaning is still unclear. What is truly important, however, is the pile of rocks, which is a known method of Viking burial. For an example of this kind of burial see Figure 8. These rock-burials can come in any number of sizes, but are often a pile of rocks placed over a shallow grave.

As these burials have been found in England, it is possible these graves belong to Vikings. For example, an excavation at Repton in the UK revealed a multitude of graves, some of which were contained in this type of burial:

> After the bones had been stacked in position, perhaps around the stone coffin of a Viking leader, they were covered with timbers and the whole area of the original structure was covered by a low stone cairn defined by a kerb of larger stones. Circular pits were dug through the north-west and south-west corners of the cairn; topsoil was

> then scraped up to form a low mound which was dressed with pebbles, and the pits were infilled.[71]

Other evidence found inside the surrounding graves, such as swords and a Thor's Hammer, support the conclusion that this grave belong to a Viking. As such, it is important to think about the preponderance of evidence; in other words, in the presence of mixed evidence, the conclusion that has the most evidence present is probably the explanation. For example, someone may find a grave with some Anglo-Saxon artifacts, a multitude Viking Artifacts, and artifacts that date the grave to the initial Viking invasions. As long as there is more evidence supporting the theory that this hypothetical grave belonged to a Viking, it is the conclusion that should be used if more concrete evidence, such as DNA testing, is not possible. This is also true for sexing an individual skeleton. There is a lot of overlap between stereotypically masculine and feminine features, but if there are more features that lean towards one sex than the other, that is genuinely how the skeleton is categorized in an archaeological context.

Alongside skeletal evidence as a whole, there is one interesting archaeological phenomenon I would like to discuss which is nearly exclusively particular to *Egil's Saga*. Egil has some extremely distinctive features. "With a wide forehead, busy brows and a nose that was not long but extremely broad. His upper jaw was broad and long, and his chin and jawbones were exceptionally wide. With his thick neck and stout shoulders, he stood out from other men."[72] It seems that he has a very large head, as well as particularly broad shoulders. The narrator explicitly that Egil looks different from other men, suggesting he did not look like the average person at the time. Even in death, people recognize how remarkable his bone structure is. A priest eventually finds his bones, and notes how it is "astonishingly

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[71] R. A. Hall, "Scandinavian Settlement in England - the Archaeological Evidence," *Acta Archaeologica* 71, (2000). 150.
[72] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 90.

large" and is "even more incredible for its weight. It was all ridged on the outside, like a scallop shell."[73] This information given here suggests his skull is particularly dense and large, remarkably so. The ridging also makes it seem as if the bone itself developed abnormally, growing thickly in layers like the shell of a mollusk. Furthermore, the priest takes a swing as at the skull with an axe. He does not even crack the skull, be instead leaves "[…] a white mark […] where he struck the skull." The saga even specifies that he fails to leave as much as a dent.[74]

It is clear Egil's skull is abnormal somehow, either literarily or physically.[75] Some scholars have looked into this, deciding that Egil might have had something called Paget's disease. The disease, as described by Thordur Hardarason and Elísabet Snorradóttir, causes the bone to soften and bend. The process of the disease is as follows:

> The body's attempts at repair increase bone mass and result in extremely hard bones with an irregular surface. The disease commonly affects the skull, causing damage to the cranial nerves and therefore deafness and blindness. Often the facial bones are unaffected, but if they are the patient develops a vaguely leonine appearance, with bilateral and symmetrical hypertrophy.[76]

The irregular surface could be connected to the shell-like appearance of his skull, while the constant repairs made to the bone leave them incredibly hard and thick. In addition, the asymmetry in the face could be mistaken for an expression, such as one described in Athelstan's mead-hall. "He wrinkled one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair."[77] The drooping of his skull would cause his eyebrow to appear fallen as well, giving Egil a sort of dubious expression. To

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[73] Ibid. 183.
[74] Ibid. 183.
[75] It is entirely possible that the description of Egil's stature and physique are for story-telling purposes only.
[76] Thordur Hardarson and Elisabet Snorradottir, "Egil's or Paget's Disease?," *British Medical Journal* 313, no. 7072 (1996). 1613.
[77] Sturluson, "Egil's Saga." 90.

further strengthen this argument, Snorradóttir and Hardarason discuss Egil's late-life ailments, as he complains of blindness, deafness, and poor posture. These, as they claim, are all symptoms of Paget's Disease, as the bone becomes deformed and inhibits the processes of the ears and eyes. The poor posture becomes apparent as the skull's weight becomes difficult to bare, making his head droop as he ages.[78] This discussion of disease and bones is an important example between literary description and archaeology. Although Egil's physical characteristics appear to distinguish him as a character, they also describe a disease identifiable through skeletal remains. This means it would be possible to identify Egil, or individuals like him, in the archaeological record. This is all thanks to the rich description and attention to detail given in the sagas. It is clear they can aid scholars in more fields than those which focus on literature.

Conclusions

The sagas have a level of detail and a cultural perspective unavailable in any other writings of the time. They also record enough truthful historical events to give them some credibility. In the absence of other sources, these writings should be considered when seeking context for archaeological finds. However, they should not be the sole source. Each account of any historical event should be used in the reconstruction of history, as each version can record a piece of the puzzle other versions had missed. Analyses of other sagas, similar to my own of *Egil's Saga*, can be used alongside Anglo-Saxon and other records in order to complete the historical picture. The sagas can explain strange archaeological phenomena, provide depth to the cultural understanding of artifacts, and help historians understand motives beneath certain events.

[78] Snorradottir, "Egil's or Paget's Disease?." 1614.

Furthermore, it is important to perform a close analytical reading of any historical document, and refrain from taking all of the information at face-value. Analytical reading provides cultural information that is otherwise hidden between the lines. Motivations, the cultural significance of items, and even theoretical archaeological remains can be found in a close reading of a text, as I have demonstrated with *Egil's Saga*. However, this information should be considered with a skeptical mind, as any historical writing can be skewed by time or the motivations of its author.

But it is necessary to consider whatever information is available about the past. In the absence of a time-machine, written sources and archaeology need to be used together. This includes written sources from every side of history. In the end, sources like the sagas are necessary for a more accurate and complex understanding of the past, and should be used alongside every other means available for a historical understanding in order to give history the record it deserves.

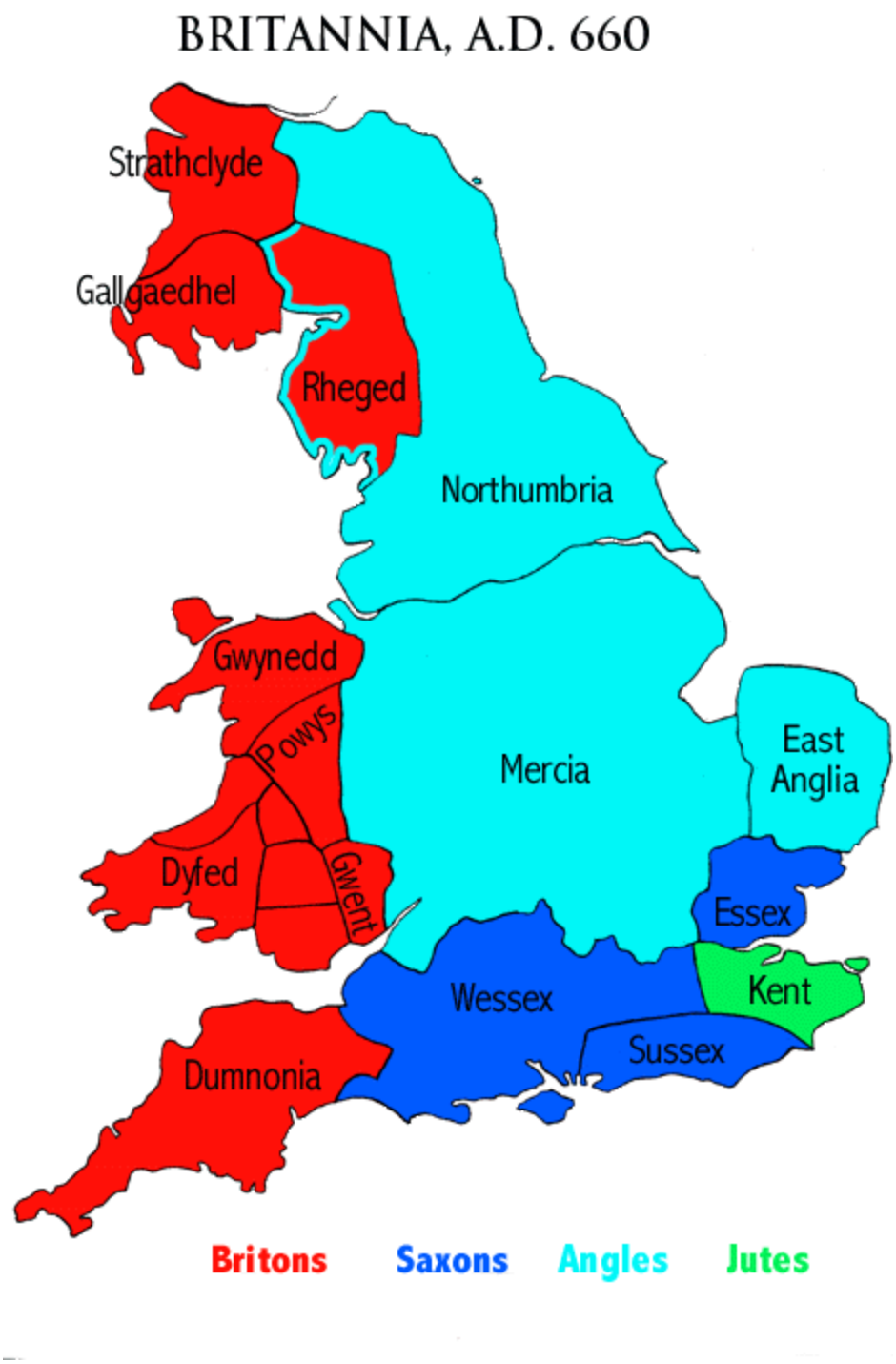

Figure 1: A map of the kingdoms of Britain, along with the people who inhabited certain areas.

(Source: http://www.ict.griffith.edu.au/wiseman/DECB/map660.gif)

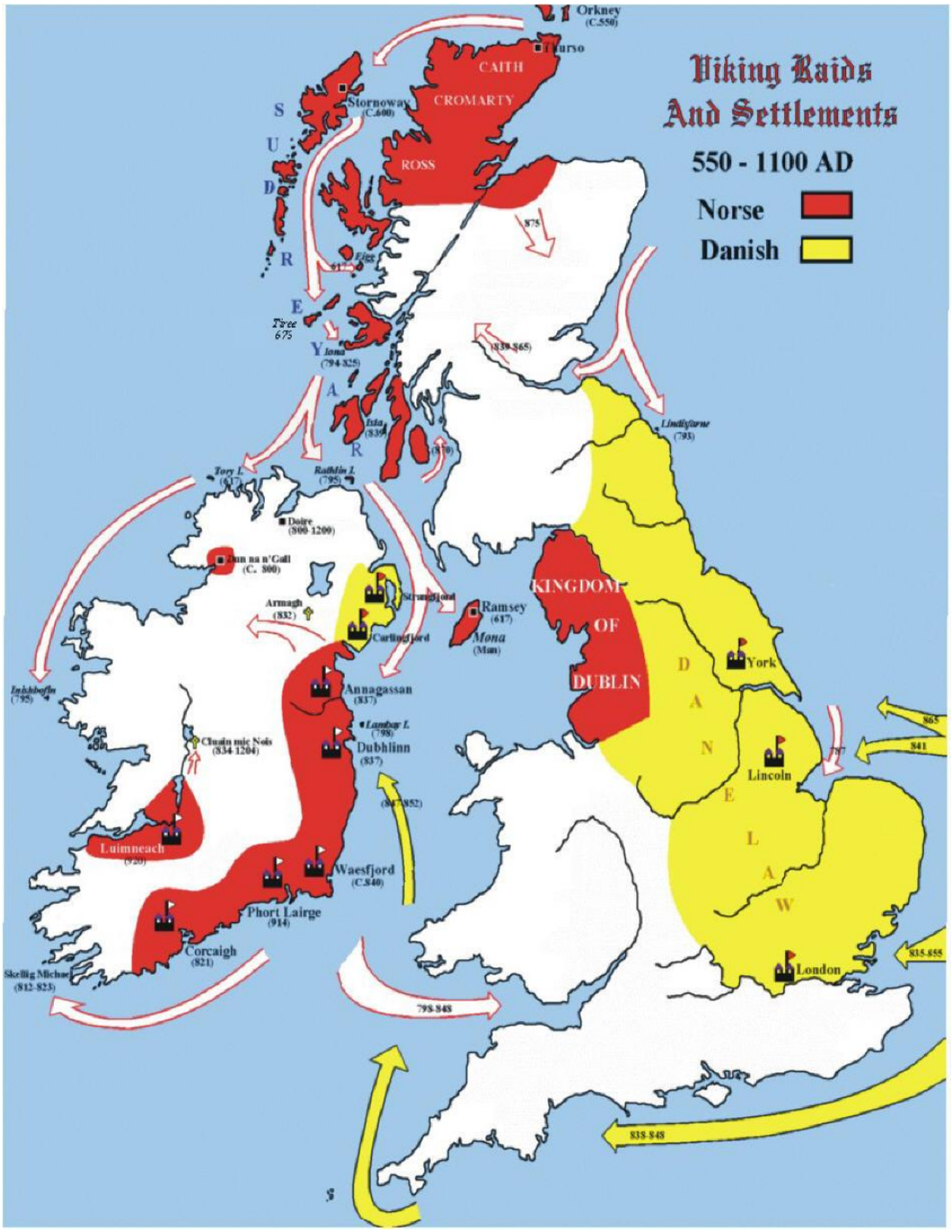

Figure 2: A map Viking raids and settlements in the British Isles. (Source:

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/426505027184273540/)

Figure 3: An example of Viking Coinage. (Source:

http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/dynamic/1/590x/Viking-coins-566334.jpg)

Figure 4: An example of Viking Interlacing Art. (Source:

https://c1.staticflickr.com/9/8529/8458859847_454e07453e_b.jpg)

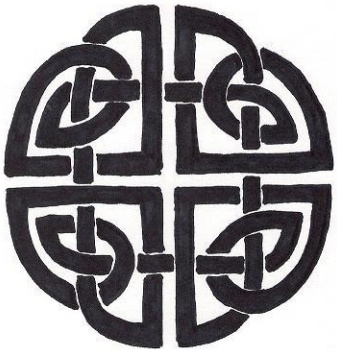

Figure 5: An example of a Celtic knot. (Source: http://www.gaelicmatters.com/image-files/celtic-knot-drawings-2l.jpg)

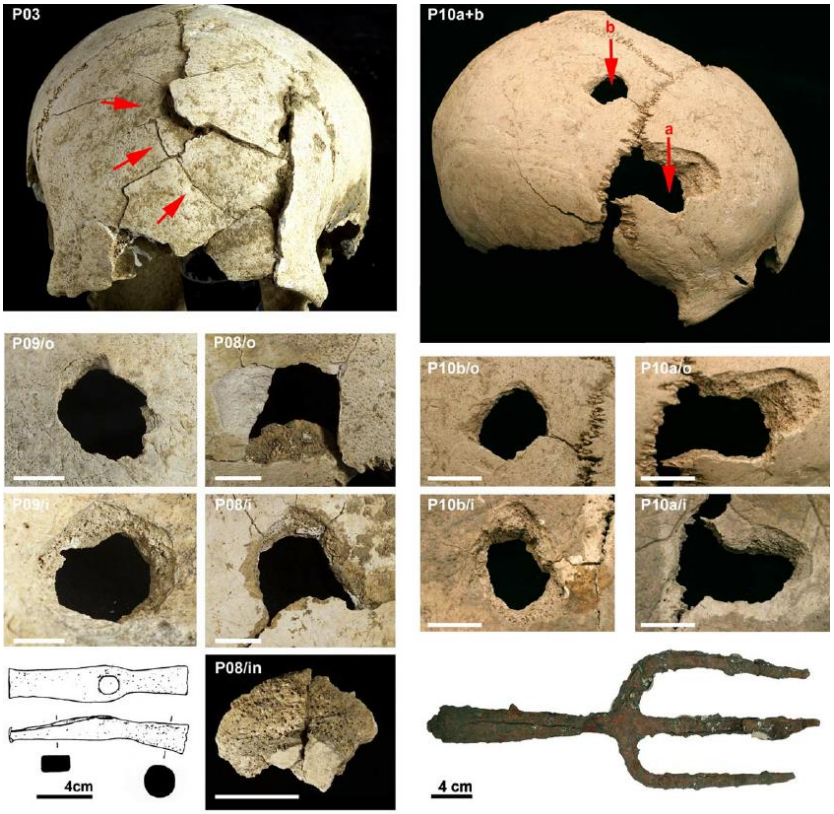

Figure 6: Here are two different types of wounds. P03 shows blunt force trauma, partially characterized by the multiple radiating fractures. P10a+b are perforated stab wounds, caused by the fork-like weapon shown at the bottom. (Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/7478431_fig4_Fig-5-Typical-perimortem-P-defects-found-on-the-gladiator-crania-o-view-on-the)

Figure 7: This skull fragment has both chop and slash wounds on its surface. The larger chunks taken out of the skull appear to be chop wounds, while the shallow markings are slash wounds. (Source: https://www.pinterest.com/jeppechrist/viking-age-battle-wounds/)

Figure 8: A Viking cairn. This was a common burial type in Viking culture, and is characterized by the pile of stones that rests over the body. (Source: https://www.bikerumor.com/2015/05/15/bikerumor-pic-of-the-day-molen-viking-cairn-norway/)

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