


Between reality and fiction: the history of England in the 9th  
century from the perspective of the medieval and the  
contemporary /

*Entre o real e a ficção: a história da Inglaterra do século IX pela  
ótica do medievo e do contemporâneo*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper intends to discuss the presence of history in the medieval documents *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred* and in the contemporary literature by Bernard Cornwell, specifically in his historical novel *The Last Kingdom* (2004). These texts deal with the history of England in the 9th century from the period called the Viking Age from different perspectives. Fiction and history come together to represent significant moments of the period. The goal is to identify how these texts from different historical periods present the historical reality in order to understand the power relations between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians through the medieval perspective and its reception by the contemporary world. This paper discusses the production context of the texts and the historical contextualization of the portrayed period, promoting a brief reading of excerpts based on theorists who seek to conceptualize the historical fiction literary genre.

**KEYWORDS:** History of England. Viking Age. Medieval. Contemporary. English Literature.

## RESUMO

O presente artigo faz uma reflexão a respeito da presença da História nos documentos medievais *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* e *The Life of King Alfred* e na literatura contemporânea de Bernard Cornwell, especificamente, em seu romance histórico *The Last Kingdom* (2004). Esses textos abordam a história da Inglaterra no século IX do período denominado Era Viking em diferentes perspectivas. Ficção e história entram em confronto, a fim de representar momentos significativos da época relatada. O artigo objetiva, dessa forma, observar como o real histórico é apresentado nos textos de diferentes épocas, com o fim de compreender as relações de poder entre anglo-saxões e escandinavos pelas óticas do medievo e de sua recepção no mundo contemporâneo. São discutidos neste artigo o contexto de produção dos textos e a contextualização histórica da época representada, para então, promover uma breve leitura de trechos com base em teóricos que procuram conceituar o gênero literário ficção-histórica.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** História da Inglaterra; Era viking; Medievo; Contemporâneo; Literatura Inglesa.

## 1 Introduction

*The Last Kingdom* (2004) is the first book of *Saxon Stories* (2004 - ), a series by the British author Bernard Cornwell, composed of thirteen volumes until this moment. It tells the history of England during the Viking Age, presenting in a fictional way how the Scandinavian invasions in English territory occurred. The history of that period in England as it is known today is mostly due to research from two sources: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is a compilation of annals originally written in Old English, which chronicle the trajectory of the Anglo-Saxon people, and *The Life of King Alfred*, originally written in Latin by the monk Asser<sup>1</sup>. The original manuscripts are probably from the 9th century. The author himself, Bernard Cornwell, acknowledges that he consulted these documents, as well as others, to construct his narrative.

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred* are medieval narrative texts, recognized as historical documents, archeology that helps in the reconstruction of the history of the period and space to which they refer. Even though researchers and historians dispute the use of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Keynes and Lapidge (2004), Asser was born in the region of Dyfed, a territory that is part of Wales. The authors claim that he wrote *The Life of King Alfred* in 893.

narratives as sources for historiography, as they present aspects of fiction, such writings can be considered representations of the historical reality they report, since the desire to record real events in these texts is remarkable. Likewise, we can also consider *The Last Kingdom*, by Cornwell, as a representation of historical reality, since it is a contemporary literary text, which elicits memories from the past.

Bearing that in mind, we will outline some considerations regarding the texts used for the analysis, and provide a brief description of medieval sources to contextualize and introduce the reflections intended with this study. In addition, we will present the summary of the plot in *The Last Kingdom*. Then, there will be a brief historical-geographical contextualization of the nineteenth century in England, since it is a reference in this study. Finally, we will discuss how the “historical reality” happens in different texts: the first being documental and medieval, and the second, literary and contemporary. In this perspective, the understanding of the relationship between fiction and history is essential in reading and conceiving the historical representations in the texts proposed for this study.

## 2 The medieval documents

*The Life of King Alfred* is such an important text because it is “the first report of an Anglo-Saxon king of which we have a record [...]” and “[...] an important document for those who wish to study Anglo-Saxon England” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2012, p. 40) (our translation)<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* chronologically reports significant events in Anglo-Saxon England.

In her doctoral thesis entitled *The identity relations between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians: a comparison of the Wessex kingdom with the Danelaw region (IX-X Centuries)* (2017)<sup>3</sup>, Isabela Albuquerque sustains, through the perspectives of Comparative History and Discourse Analysis, the presence of identity in the relations between the two medieval peoples in English territory. The researcher analyzes the documental sources, including the two mentioned

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] o primeiro relato sobre um rei anglo-saxão de que temos registro [...]” sendo “[...] um documento importante para aqueles que desejam estudar Inglaterra anglo-saxã” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2012, p. 40).

<sup>3</sup> Original title, in Portuguese: *As relações identitárias entre anglo-saxões e escandinavos: uma comparação do reino de Wessex com a região da Danelaw (Séculos IX-X)* (2017).

here. At first, she identifies the strong presence of Christianity in these sources. For instance, she indicates two facts present in *The Life of King Alfred*:

Regarding the episodes narrated in the first part of *Vita*, two issues call our attention. The first one is Alfred's lineage and his relationship with biblical characters from the Old Testament. Among the descendants of the king of Wessex are Seth, Noah, Enoch and ultimately, Adam.

Another account that calls our attention is Alfred's pilgrimage to Rome, in which Pope Leo IV - possibly - already appointed Alfred as future king, properly ordering him and confirming him as his adopted son. Whether the passage reported by Alfred is true or not, we do not know (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 69) (our translation)<sup>4</sup>.

The author claims a possible lack of veracity in these reports. Even so, her description shows how the perspective of this source valued Christian relations with Anglo-Saxon life, consolidated in the figure of King Alfred.

The other historical source, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, encompasses several manuscripts apparently written at the same time, but in different regions, which explains some differences between them. In order to bring some references to this study, we chose Michael Swanton's translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, specifically the edition from 1997, in which the translator seeks to gather the manuscripts in a way that they complement and form a complete version of the chronicle. Swanton's edition does not have the translation of every manuscript. Still, the translation has good references, presenting complementary explanations in the excerpts.

Albuquerque (2017) notices, in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a certain syncretism between the pre-Christian beliefs of Anglo-Saxons and Christianity, highlighting that this is possibly due to the process of building the identity of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. However, we can see that the Catholic Church occupies most of the space in this text:

In the ASCs we find a series of references to the pre-Christian past, even though at the time the text started to be compiled, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were already Christianized. However, the presence of cultural elements before Christianity does not relativize the belief of these peoples but shows us that they were inserted in a cultural tradition that went back to the period preceding

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<sup>4</sup> Com relação aos episódios narrados na primeira parte da *Vita*, duas questões chamam nossa atenção. A primeira é a linhagem de Alfred e sua relação com personagens bíblicas veterotestamentárias. Dentre os descendentes do rei de Wessex estão Seth, Noé, Enoque até chegar a Adão. / Outro relato que nos chama atenção é a peregrinação de Alfred a Roma, na qual o papa Leão IV – possivelmente – já apontava Alfred como futuro rei, ordenando-o propriamente e confirmando o mesmo como seu filho adotivo. Se a passagem relatada por Alfred é verdadeira ou não, não sabemos (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 69).

migrations into the island and that this tradition was part of their identity construction as a group.

It is precise during the Alfredian period, when the ASCs began to be organized, that the syncretism between the pagan past and the biblical past came together, linking the first patriarchs of the book of Genesis to figures from the pre-Christian period and building the logic of the new royal genealogies.

[...] The beginning of the narrative is the British Isles and the history of the Roman Empire from the arrival of Julius Caesar. Events from the European continent and other parts of the world are also highlighted at times, especially those related to the history of the Church (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 65-66) (our translation)<sup>5</sup>.

Historians, by using *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred* as sources, value their literary features, because as they are narrative, they present fictional aspects. However, we assert that the intention of registering and documenting events without a specifically literary or artistic purpose is remarkable in these texts. Perhaps this is understandable when considering the following statement by Peter Gay: “history is an art for a large part of the time, and an art because it is a branch of literature” (GAY, 1980, p. 168 apud WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 19) (our translation)<sup>6</sup>.

### 3 *The Last Kingdom*: a brief review

The two medieval sources cited here document English history during the period of Scandinavian invasions from a Christian perspective. Conversely, *The Last Kingdom* contains real characters (or rather, representations of these), like King Alfred and the Lothbrok brothers, and fictional, like the protagonist himself, Uhtred. Such characters converge to represent a new story, to give a voice to those who have been silenced by the historical documents of Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>5</sup> Nas ASC encontramos uma série de referências ao passado pré-cristão, muito embora no momento em que o texto passou a ser compilado, já fossem os reinos anglo-saxões cristianizados. Todavia, a presença de elementos culturais anteriores ao cristianismo não relativiza a crença desses povos, mas nos mostra que eles estavam inseridos numa tradição cultural que remetia ao período anterior às migrações para a ilha e que esta tradição fazia parte de sua construção identitária enquanto grupo. / É justamente durante o período de Alfred, momento em que as ASC começavam a ser compiladas, que o sincretismo entre o passado pagão e o passado bíblico se encontram, ligando os primeiros patriarcas do livro dos Gênesis a figuras do período pré-cristão e construindo a lógica das novas genealogias régias. / [...] O início da narrativa são as Ilhas Britânicas e a história do Império Romano a partir da chegada de Júlio César. Eventos do continente europeu e de outras partes do mundo também são por vezes destacados, sobretudo os que estão relacionados à história da Igreja (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 65-66).

<sup>6</sup> “[...] a história é uma arte durante boa parte do tempo, e uma arte por ser um ramo da literatura” (GAY, 1980, p. 168 apud WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 19).

England, only reported from the viewpoint of the "others". In this case, the "others" are the Scandinavians as described by the Anglo-Saxons.

During the Anglo-Saxon period, the clergyman Henry de Huntingdon (1088-1154) claimed the existence of seven kingdoms<sup>7</sup> that would later unite to form the nation: Sussex, Wessex, Essex, Kent, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria (FORESTER, 1853). Cornwell's fictional narrative promotes the memory of the formation of England, as it describes events from the period of Alfred's reign (871-899), in which a political project began that aimed at the union of these small kingdoms so that the dream of building "an England" would be consolidated.

The story of the protagonist, Uhtred, in *The Last Kingdom* (2004) begins in 866 d. C. During that period, only four great kingdoms prevailed, as presented by Cornwell's fiction: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, and Mercia. The Bebbanburg fortress, located in Northumbria, was ruled by the biological father of Uhtred, coinciding with the arrival of the Danes on the site. Uhtred was a nine-year-old Anglo-Saxon boy when the invaders captured him after the battle that resulted in the death of his biological father. From that moment on, he gains a new family, which surrounds him in a new culture.

His uncle Ælfric is now ruling Bebbanburg (Bamburgh Castle), and plots the death of Uhtred to avoid future demands from the true heir of those lands. This event incites in the protagonist the will of revenge to recover the lands that should be his by law. This is the main goal of Uhtred throughout *Saxon Stories*.

Danish earl Ragnar raises Uhtred as his son, who learns to love the Danes. He abandons his native Christian faith and embraces the gods of Nordic religiosity. Uhtred learns to fight, and once he is old enough, he joins the Great Heathen Army, led by the Lothbrok brothers, Ubba Lothbrokson and Ivar the Boneless. Ragnar takes an oath to serve Ivar, and thus Uhtred follows his lead. As a soldier in Ivar's army, Uhtred invades East Anglia and Mercia, helping them to conquer most of Saxon England. Uhtred realizes at that moment that he was born to be a warrior in battle and that he is among the few men who appreciate the massacre and madness of the shield wall - a very popular military strategy in ancient times and the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, Uhtred begins to feel divided between the love he feels for the Danes and the sense of duty to his former Anglo-Saxon origins. These identity conflicts gains strength when

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<sup>7</sup> "Heptarchy" is a popular term, dated to 16<sup>th</sup> century that refers to this idea of seven kingdoms.

<sup>8</sup> This paragraph is an adaptation of the Plot available at: <http://allreaders.com/book-review-summary/the-last-kingdom-saxon-chronicles-1-39526>. Accessed on: June, 10th 2019

Kjartan, a Dane from Uhtred's group, treacherously kills his Danish adoptive father, Ragnar. This event makes the teenage Uhtred and his Anglo-Saxon friend and companion, Brida, who has also been taken by the group of Danes, look for Alfred, the king of Wessex.

Ragnar's son, also called Ragnar, returns from Ireland and meets Uhtred and Brida again. Uhtred goes back to living with his old friend Beocca, who was a priest in Bebbanburg, but who had become a servant of Alfred in Wessex. The priest incites Uhtred to take the oath to serve King Alfred as a warrior, which Uhtred eventually does. Ragnar and Brida urge their friend Uhtred to join them in pursuing his life as a Viking. Although tempted by the invitation, Uhtred remains in Wessex. As a result, Uhtred marries Mildrith, a very devout Anglo-Saxon. This action was practically ordered by King Alfred, with the promise of new lands for the warrior. However, once married, Uhtred discovers that his wife's only inheritance is debts to the Church, left by her father.

The summary shows how the trajectory of Uhtred is constituted by the transition from the Anglo-Saxon to the Scandinavian context. In short, the historical context, which serves as the backdrop for the narrative in the first book, focuses on the first attacks by the Danes on the Anglo-Saxons (in the 9th century), up until the moment when Wessex became the last kingdom to resist. Based on these facts, which cover the history of Alfred and Wessex, the storyboard involves the history of other British regions, such as Northumbria and regions that until then were not part of the Anglo-Saxon complex.

#### 4 England in the 9th century: a contextualization

Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians are both members of the Germanic group, which implies that there is a degree of relatedness between them. The first point that would separate them is the almost five hundred years of history, from the moment when the Anglo-Saxon formation groups (Angles, Jutes, Saxons, and others) left their regions to migrate to the territories of Britannia to merge a new culture. An outcome of this period of migration, the Christianization of Anglo-Saxons is what really distinguishes them from the Scandinavians. Religion has basically turned them into opposing groups in this historical context that we are analyzing. However, there are remnants of their closeness that continue to this day, particularly through the English language itself.

In the 9th century, a period in which we focus on, it can be said that the Anglo-Saxons were almost totally Christianized, since at that time their rulers strongly professed and imposed the

Christian faith, as is observed in historical documents, like *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred*. However, we can suggest that in this period there were some Anglo-Saxons who preserved the memories of their ancestors. Albuquerque (2017) describes that the annals of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* present these memories, not in the religious sense, but with the aim of revitalizing the identity of the peoples inhabiting the English lands.

The period of migration of the Scandinavian peoples is often called the Viking Age. Johnni Langer explains that the Viking Age is traditionally divided into two periods. The First Viking Age, which begins "with hostile incursions, surprise attacks (raids) in the late 8th century and settlements created in the Scottish, British and French regions" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212) (our translation)<sup>9</sup>, is the period that interests us, as it is the historical context of our object of study. Soon after comes the Second Viking Age, "characterized by the creation of permanent dynasties and the intensified process of Christianization [...]" while Scandinavian merchants still affected "[...] the urbanization process in Europe" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212) (our translation)<sup>10</sup>.

In the First Viking Age, Scandinavians had pre-Christian beliefs, similar to the beliefs of the ancient Anglo-Saxons, who worshiped several gods. In the Second Viking Age, Scandinavian peoples began to be Christianized, and as Langer points out, quoting Henry Lyon, "a Scandinavian stopped being a Viking when he became a Christian" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212) (our translation)<sup>11</sup>. Vikings did not use any term to describe their beliefs, thus, we often call these beliefs "Norse paganism" today. Johnni Langer explains that "according to Boyer, there were religious practices and not a single religion" (LANGER, 2015, p. 357) (our translation)<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, we cannot understand Norse paganism as a uniform practice. Beliefs and preference for some gods could vary according to the region of old Scandinavia.

According to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the first violent attack by the Vikings on the inhabitants of the English lands occurred during the spring of the year 793. A group of Norsemen arrived in the northwest of England, attacking a monastery. Not only did the Norsemen take the wealth from the monastery, but they also killed many monks and took others as slaves. The

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<sup>9</sup> "[...] com as incursões hostis, os ataques de surpresa (razias) no final do século VIII e as povoações criadas na região escocesa, britânica e francesa [...]" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212).

<sup>10</sup> "[...] caracterizada pela criação de dinastias permanentes e do processo intensificado de cristianização [...]" enquanto os mercadores escandinavos ainda afetavam "[...] o processo de urbanização da Europa" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212).

<sup>11</sup> "[...] um escandinavo deixava de ser um viking quando se tornava um cristão" (LANGER, 2017, p. 212).

<sup>12</sup> "[...] segundo Boyer, ocorriam práticas religiosas e não uma única religião" (2015, p. 357).



*Chronicle* manuscripts record that in the same year, “terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: [...] immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air” (SWANTON, 1997, p. 55). In a footnote, Swanton suggests that perhaps these poetically reported “portents” may refer to long-tailed comets that have appeared in the region, as well as bad weather. However, the very word “portent”, already indicates that the Anglo-Saxons received signs of what was to come since after that it is registered that “the great famine immediately followed these signs [...]” and mainly, the attack of pagans who “[...] miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter” (SWANTON, 1997, p. 57).

Other attacks followed that event, not just in the British Isles. Most of the Norse explorers from that period were members of an elite: “People who were persecuted in their regions of origin or who sought wealth, glory and fame through adventures, this elite that moved was marked by a select group of travelers” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 142) (our translation)<sup>13</sup>. The Viking Age featured the fear and horror that the Norse warriors brought to almost all of old Europe.

In the following years, the Vikings carried out several other attacks, more or less disorganized, however, disastrous, on monasteries in islands and in the English and Scottish coasts, mainly in Northumbria. Then, still according to the records of the *Chronicles*, in 865 a skillfully organized army landed in East Anglia, led by Ivar Ragnarsson (or Ivar the Boneless “Boneless”) and his brother Halfdan, sons of Ragnar Lothbrok (Loðbrók), and in the course of the next fifteen years, they took over almost every eastern part of England (OLIVEIRA, 2016 p. 33) (our translation)<sup>14</sup>.

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* manuscripts indicate elementary differences between the attacks that occurred in the first half of the 9th century and those of the second half. The first one “refers only to the presence of an army (here), which leaves the region occupied as soon as ‘peace is made’, certainly after payment for that purpose” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118) (our

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<sup>13</sup> “Pessoas perseguidas em suas regiões de origem ou que buscavam riqueza, glória e fama através de aventuras, essa elite que se deslocava era marcada por um grupo seletivo de viajantes” (2017, p. 142).

<sup>14</sup> Nos anos que se seguiram, os Vikings realizaram diversos outros mais ou menos desorganizados, porém, desastrosos ataques a mosteiros em ilhas e nas costas inglesa e escocesa, principalmente na Northumbria. Então, ainda conforme os registros das *Crônicas*, em 865 um exército habilmente organizado desembarcou na Ânglia Oriental, liderado por Ivar Ragnarsson (ou Ivar the Boneless “Sem-Ossos”) e seu irmão Halfdan filhos de Ragnar Lothbrok (Loðbrók), e no decorrer dos quinze anos seguintes se apossaram de praticamente toda parte oriental da Inglaterra. (OLIVEIRA, 2016 p. 33)

translation)<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the invaders were concerned only with the acquisition of valuable assets (either through violent attacks or peace agreements/treaties). The records that present the second attacks “allude to a large army (*micel here*), which suggests that the Scandinavians came, in fact, in greater numbers than in the previous years” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118) (our translation)<sup>16</sup>, which suggests to us the ambition for territorial occupation by these peoples.

The main invaders of the British Isles were probably the Danes. In *The Last Kingdom*, protagonist Uhtred explains that Scandinavian invaders “[...] were called Vikings when they were raiders, but Danes or pagans when they were traders” (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 12). Michael Drout (2006) explains that “Danes” was a term commonly used by local people to refer to all Scandinavians, whether they came from Denmark, Norway, or other regions in Scandinavia.

The Great Heathen Army landed in England in 865. In the following years until 875, the army conquered several territories, such as the kingdoms of East Anglia and Mercia. The reasons that led to the arrival of this great army are uncertain, “it is not even known who had the idea to undertake an audacious campaign to conquer territories in England” (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 325) (our translation)<sup>17</sup>. However, the memories that emerge from this context permeate not only the English but especially Scandinavian societies, as we can see from the following explanation:

[...] some reports of the time claims that the reason for the attack by the Norsemen was due to the intention of avenging the death of Ragnar Lothbrok. Three alleged sons of the hero, Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan, and Ubba, would have encouraged Danish and Norwegian chiefs to form a coalition. According to the *Ragnar Lothbrok saga*, the hero was executed in a snake pit by King Aella of Northumbria and his three sons have led a powerful army to avenge their father's death and conquer England (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 325) (our translation)<sup>18</sup>.

Ragnar Lothbrok is one of the great Viking names immortalized by Scandinavian memory, mainly by means of medieval literature. According to Miranda (2017), his popularity in Scandinavian

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<sup>15</sup> “[...] referem-se apenas à presença de um *exército (here)*, que deixa a região ocupada tão logo “a paz é feita”, certamente após o pagamento para tal finalidade” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118).

<sup>16</sup> “[...] aludem a um *grande exército (micel here)*, o que nos sugere que os escandinavos viessem, de fato, em maior número que nos anos anteriores [...]” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118).

<sup>17</sup> “[...] inclusive se desconhece de quem teria sido a ideia para empreender ousada campanha para conquistar territórios na Inglaterra” (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 325).

<sup>18</sup> [...] alguns relatos da época apontam que o motivo do ataque dos nórdicos deveu-se ao intuito de vingar a morte de Ragnar Lothbrok. Três supostos filhos do herói, Ivar Sem Ossos, Halfdan e Ubba, teriam incentivado chefes dinamarqueses e noruegueses a formar uma coalizão. Segundo a *Saga de Ragnar Lothbrok*, o herói foi executado num poço de cobras pelo rei Aella da Nortúmbria e com isso seus três filhos teriam liderado um poderoso exército para vingar a morte do pai e conquistar a Inglaterra. (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 325)

medieval narratives, as he is a legendary or semi-legendary king from the Viking period, practically certifies that Ragnar did not exist in the way he is represented in mythical narratives. Academic debates indicate it is possible that this “mythological character is the result of an amalgam between various historical characters, or the product of the Scandinavian imagery of the Viking Age, and, mainly, of later times” (MIRANDA, 2017, p. 583) (our translation)<sup>19</sup>:

The narratives around Ragnar Lodbrok contributed a lot to the romantic image that we see the Vikings, since the character has a life based on an adventure in the seas, by plundering Christian kingdoms and by violence in combat and death, ideals also attributed to his children. However, his figure also contributes to build an example of how Scandinavians in the Middle Ages imagined their heroic past (MIRANDA, 2017, p. 583) (our translation)<sup>20</sup>.

The narratives regarding the legendary Ragnar suggest that the three possible people responsible for the Danish army were supposedly his sons. Most likely, Ivar (Hingwar), Halfdan and Ubba were real historical characters, as not only the Scandinavian sagas mention these names, but also some Anglo-Saxon historical documents. However, the absence of archaeological material that goes beyond literary fiction leaves uncertainties regarding the possible brotherhood of them (Ivar, Halfdan and Ubba) and their blood relationship with the figure of Ragnar Lothbrok. Cornwell maintains in his narrative the identity of Ivar, Halfdan and Ubba, as the "Lothbrok brothers". However, their possible father Ragnar is never mentioned. On the other hand, we have another fictional Ragnar character who swore an oath to Ivar. Would the narrative intend to elicit an example of a Ragnar character, who could merge with other "Ragnars" who were the legendary Lothbrok? It is a question to think about.

As already mentioned, the dominant context in *The Last Kingdom* begins by presenting a historical plot regarding the Scandinavian establishment in England in the 9th century, more specifically when the Danish army captured York and seized Northumbria in 869. In 871, the Danes arrived in Wessex. The following year, King Aethelred and his brother Alfred organized themselves to safeguard from the attacks, and “after months of fighting against the Scandinavians, the king of

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<sup>19</sup> “[...] personagem mitológico ser o resultado de um amálgama entre vários personagens históricos, ou produto do imaginário escandinavo da Era Viking, e, principalmente, de épocas posteriores [...]” (MIRANDA, 2017, p. 583).

<sup>20</sup> As narrativas em torno de Ragnar Lodbrok contribuíram muito para a imagem romântica que possuímos dos vikings, haja vista que o personagem possui uma vida pautada pela aventura nos mares, pelo saque aos reinos cristãos e pela violência em combate e em morte, ideais também atribuídos aos seus filhos. Mas a sua figura também contribui para construir um exemplo de como os escandinavos na Idade Média imaginaram o seu passado heroico (MIRANDA, 2017, p. 583).

Wessex died, leaving his brother as his successor” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118) (our translation)<sup>21</sup>. The king of Mercia, Burgred, went into exile in Rome in 873. The last kingdom to resist was Wessex. This episode is the focus of our object of study, as its name, *The Last Kingdom*, already indicates.

The greatest military victory of Alfred against the Norse people was undoubtedly the Battle of Edington (878) (Ethandun, as set by Cornwell, who aims to maintain the toponymy of the time in his narrative). In this battle “the Anglo-Saxons took hostages from the Scandinavian side [...]” and “[...] promises that the invading army would leave the kingdom and that King Guthrum would be baptized” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 120) (our translation)<sup>22</sup>. In summary, King Alfred was unable to defeat and oust the Danes, but he assured peace, for a short time, by signing an agreement with King Guthrum, known as the Treaty of Wedmore. This treaty granted “the delimitation of the borders of an area that it would be restricted to the Danish leaders, leaving Wessex, at least for now, out of the focus of Scandinavians” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 120) (our translation)<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, the agreement also claimed Guthrum's baptism and his incorporation into the Anglo-Saxon leadership system. Thus, the English territory was divided into two kingdoms: Wessex, the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons, and Danelaw, a territory ruled by the Scandinavians.

One of the great consequences of these cultural and political clashes is that “the fight against Scandinavians represents the last organizing issue of English identity, from the presence of a foreign and common enemy to the other kingdoms of the island” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 141) (our translation)<sup>24</sup>. From this perspective, the author Bernard Cornwell states that, “actually, the history of the creation of England is a narrative of how the Saxons claim their lost kingdoms, starting in the south and moving inexorably towards the north” (CORNWELL, 2016, p. 347) (our translation)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> “após meses de lutas contra os escandinavos, o rei de Wessex morre, deixando seu irmão como sucessor” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118).

<sup>22</sup> “sem dúvida, a Batalha de Edington (878) (Ethandun, como colocado por Cornwell, que busca manter a toponímia da época em sua narrativa), na qual os anglo-saxões garantiram reféns do lado escandinavo [...]” e “[...] promessas de que o exército invasor deixaria o reino e de que o rei Guthrum seria batizado” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 120).

<sup>23</sup> “[...] a delimitação das fronteiras de uma área que seria restrita a lideranças danesas, deixando Wessex, pelo menos por ora, fora do foco dos escandinavos [...]” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 120).

<sup>24</sup> “[...] a luta contra os escandinavos representará o último elo organizador da identidade inglesa, a partir da presença de um inimigo estrangeiro e comum aos outros reinos da ilha” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 141).

<sup>25</sup> “[...] a história da criação da Inglaterra é na verdade uma narrativa de como os saxões reivindicam seus reinos perdidos, começando no sul e seguindo inexoravelmente para o norte” (CORNWELL, 2016, p. 347).

In sum, Uhtred's fate combines with the history of the unification of England. In his essay entitled "The creation of England," in the sixth book of the series, Cornwell aims to briefly describe the guiding principle of Uhtred's narratives.

The Chronicles note that Alfred was "king of all Englishmen", but then they add the cautious and crucial warning, "except for the part that was under Danish rule". Actually, a major part of what would become England was under Danish rule; all of Northumbria, all of East Anglia and the northern counties of Mercia. Undoubtedly, Alfred wanted to be king of all Englishmen, and at the time of his death he was by far the most notable and powerful leader among the Saxons, but his dream of uniting all the lands where people spoke English had not come true. However, he had the fortune of having a son, daughter, and grandson who were as committed to this dream as he was and over time made it happen. This is the story behind these Uhtred narratives; the history of the creation of England (CORNWELL, 2014, p. 373) (our translation)<sup>26</sup>.

In *The Last Kingdom*, there are constantly descriptions of the relationship between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, which makes us think about the possible implications for the constitution of local identities and, mainly, for English identity in general. We can perceive these relations and impacts in the narrative encompassing several aspects: political agreements, religion, geography, food and customs, and not least, the language.

From these principles and first historical events, Cornwell conducts his novel, taking into account the life of the protagonist and his fictitious participation in the history of the formation of England, which is primarily due to the persistent attempts to expel the Scandinavian invaders. Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that, in general, the narrative in *Saxon Stories* expresses several circumstances that reverberate the relations of the two cultures in focus, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian, which maintained contact for so long until they merged into the different aspects of English culture, especially in language, politics, and geography.

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<sup>26</sup> As Crônicas observam que Alfredo foi "rei de todos os ingleses", mas então acrescentam a advertência cautelosa e crucial, "a não ser pela parte que estava sob domínio dinamarquês". Na verdade, boa parte do que iria se tornar a Inglaterra estava sob domínio dinamarquês; toda a Nortúmbria, toda a Ânglia Oriental e os condados da Mércia mais ao norte. Sem dúvida Alfredo queria ser rei de todos os ingleses, e na ocasião de sua morte ele era de longe o líder mais notável e poderoso entre os saxões, mas seu sonho de unir todas as terras onde o inglês era falado não se realizara. No entanto, ele teve a fortuna de ter um filho, uma filha e um neto que eram tão comprometidos com esse sonho quanto ele próprio e com o tempo o fizeram acontecer. Essa é a história por trás destas narrativas de Uhtred; a história da criação da Inglaterra (CORNWELL, 2014, p. 373).

## 5 Between fiction and reality

It is indisputable that *The Last Kingdom*, as well as all the other books of *Saxon Stories*, mainly involves the confrontation of powers of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples, leading to broadening considerations regarding the clashes between Christians and pagans. From this perspective, the series, by relating fictional and real characters, provides a historical reading of the time reported. Cornwell's productions play a significant role when it comes to creating and maintaining memories, as well as questioning the historiographic performance of the period he narrates in his fiction.

Concerning the literary genre, we can state that Bernard Cornwell is a historical fiction writer, reaching an audience interested in history. In this sense, the British author is an investigator of history together with his readers, as Carlos Sanz Mingo mentions in his book *The Arthurian World in Bernard Cornwell's The Warlord Chronicles* (2017), introducing the idea that Bernard Cornwell writes historical novels. Mingo contrasts historical romance from traditional romance by highlighting the role of the writer as a reader of history.

The pioneer of studies on novels that seek to represent history was György Lukács. Mingo uses, at first, the principles of Lukács to establish that *The Warlord Chronicles*, a work of Cornwell that he analyzes, is a historical novel:

[...] Lukács states that any historical novel is not a complete novel if the following three points are not taken into account:  
(a) The characters have to be placed within a historical context.  
(b) There must be an impression of historical verisimilitude or realism.  
(c) The novel has to offer a possibility to criticise and analyse current affairs and events through a narration of the past. (MINGO, 2017, p. 15)

Following this perspective, we can state that *Saxon Stories* by Cornwell belongs to the historical fiction genre. There are fictional characters and the representation of real characters, all of them situated in the same historical and geographical context: the 9th century in England. Mingo (2017), emphasizes that in *The Warlord Chronicles*, Bernard Cornwell not only places his characters in a historical context but also places real historical characters to interact with common characters in his fictional narrative. Likewise, in *The Last Kingdom*, we notice that the protagonist

himself is not an iconic character in history, like King Alfred, but a fictional character who interacts with him and other great historical figures, such as the Lothbrok brothers

The verisimilitude of Cornwell's narrative with "historical reality" is very remarkable, and beyond this, at the end of the book, the author writes a "Historical Note" in which he justifies the limits of what is fiction and what is based on real facts in his work. According to the interpretation of Marilene Weinhardt (2011) of György Lukács, "good historical romance results from understanding the relationship between the historical past and the present time" (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 29) (our translation)<sup>27</sup>. In other words, the historical novel must not be built to escape the present time. First, we understand that memory is the thread that connects the present and the past. In this way, historical fiction intends to "seduce us with the memory of men and the facts that came before us" (BASTOS, 2007, p. 13) (our translation)<sup>28</sup>.

In *The Last Kingdom*, Cornwell leaves traces of this relationship by inciting thoughts on the formation process of England, especially concerning the influences of the relationship between the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon peoples. For example, the novel reflects on these influences in the English language, in the formation of habits and practices of English society, and, mainly, the predominance of Christianity, not only as a religion but as an ideological conductor.

It is not possible to affirm that the texts *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred* certify the historical reality that they narrate. Therefore, by repeating this reality through words, the narratives modify it. Likewise, the series *Saxon Stories*, by reiterating the history told in medieval texts, makes it new and different. These realities exist through language. At the same time, these representations reflect about what is real in history. The medieval texts, seen here as historical documentation, help historians in an attempt to reformulate the past. On the other hand, the literary text by Cornwell, by means of memory, creates a new historical reality that enables readers to have a panoramic knowledge of "real" historical events, and also, incites critical questions about what is known of this "historical reality" reported.

According to Weinhardt, based on André Daspre, the historical novel must propose a "form of objective representation of history [...]" with the novelist being able to make an "[...] analysis of

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<sup>27</sup> "[...] o bom romance histórico resulta da compreensão do relacionamento entre o passado histórico e o tempo presente" (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 29).

<sup>28</sup> "[...] seduzir-nos com a memória dos homens e dos fatos que vieram antes de nós" (BASTOS, 2007, p. 13).

an era as much as the historian” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 32) (our translation)<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, the question is: how is reality represented by historiography? In practice, we can notice that contemporary researchers, like the Brazilian Isabela Albuquerque, appropriate several sources, such as the narratives of Anglo-Saxon England, to represent history according to their readings and interpretations, eliciting new meanings. Roland Barthes characterizes historical discourse as an “ideological elaboration” and he adds that “the fact never has more than linguistic existence [...], and yet, everything happens as if its existence was nothing more than the pure and simple copy from another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the reality” (BARTHES, 1988, p. 115) (our translation)<sup>30</sup>.

Based on the concepts of Benedito Nunes, Weinhardt explains that “the concept of representation is a fallacy [...]” for both fiction and historiography, because, “it is impossible to reconstruct what no longer exists [...]” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21) (our translation)<sup>31</sup>. In this sense, even though there are several sources and documents available to both the historian and the fiction writer, “it is necessary to use the imagination to establish links between them to recreate the facts, or rather, create them, since recreation is an impossibility” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21) (our translation)<sup>32</sup>. According to Weinhardt, Nunes considers representation as “figuration”, and the act of reading, as “reconfiguration”. However, it is necessary to point out that “the historical and fictional discourse may get closer, but they are not confused” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 25) (our translation)<sup>33</sup>, because, even though they are two verbal constructions, “the historical narrative is built of real facts, and fictional narrative of imaginary facts” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21) (our translation)<sup>34</sup>.

We understand that the narratives of reality happen in different ways in historiographic and fictional work. It is the organization and the interpretation that define the historian's work at the moment of representing, while the fiction writer conceives “a destabilizing representation of the

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<sup>29</sup> “[...] forma de representação objetiva da história [...]” sendo o romancista capaz de fazer uma “[...] análise de uma época tanto quanto o historiador” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 32).

<sup>30</sup> “[...] o fato nunca tem mais do que existência linguística [...], e, no entanto, tudo se passa como se sua existência não fosse senão a cópia pura e simples de outra existência, situada num campo extra-estrutural, o ‘real’” (BARTHES, 1988, p. 115).

<sup>31</sup> “[...] o conceito de representação é uma falácia [...]” tanto para a ficção quanto para a historiografia, pois, “é impossível reconstruir o que já não existe [...]” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21).

<sup>32</sup> “[...] é preciso recorrer à imaginação para estabelecer nexos entre eles de modo a recriar os fatos, ou melhor, criá-los, visto que a recriação é uma impossibilidade” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21).

<sup>33</sup> “[...] o discurso histórico e ficcional podem se aproximar, mas não se confundem” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 25).

<sup>34</sup> “[...] a narrativa histórica se constrói sobre fatos reais, e narrativa ficcional sobre fatos imaginários” (WEINHARDT, 2011, p. 21).



world [...], a destabilizing representation of representations” (COSTA LIMA, 1989, p 102) (our translation)<sup>35</sup>. Such thought agrees with the Aristotelian view stating that the historian "narrates events" and the poet, "facts that could happen" (BASTOS, 2007, p. 18).

Linda Hutcheon, one of the most significant names when it comes to rethinking historical fiction in the context of postmodernism, coined the term "historiographical metafiction". In her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), the author begins by emphasizing that both history and fiction are "human constructs" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 5). From this perspective, the idea that only history aims to reach the truth is rejected and questioned, since "both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 93).

It is important to emphasize that historiographic metafiction differs from traditional historical fiction of the 19th century. To consolidate her idea, Hutcheon challenges Lukács<sup>36</sup>, who, according to her, defended that the "historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates [...]", which means that the protagonist "[...]" should be a type, a synthesis of the general and the particular "(HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 113). Hutcheon specifies that, on the other hand, in historiographical metafiction the protagonists can be anything but types themselves: "They are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history [...]" and "[...] even the historical personages take on different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 114). In this sense, "historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record [...]" which makes certain known historical details to be "[...] deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history" (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 114).

Hutcheon also challenges Lukács's defense that historical characters should act in the fictional narrative through secondary roles. For the Marxist scholar, the heroes should not be the great historical figures, because for him it was not important to repeat the great events but to put on stage the popular sphere that lived these experiences. In the author's words, "the most common and superficial events, the smallest relationships [...] are more appropriate than the great

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<sup>35</sup> "[...] uma representação desestabilizadora do mundo [...], uma representação desestabilizante das representações" (COSTA LIMA, 1989, p. 102)

<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that György Lukács (1885-1971) and Linda Hutcheon (1947-) belong to different historical moments, which contributes to Hutcheon's attempt to advance the Lukács's ideas and concepts.

monumental dramas in world history” (LUKÁCS, 2011, p. 60) (our translation)<sup>37</sup>. Because of this perspective, Lukács distinguishes the novel from the epic poem, claiming the first intends to reflect the popular class of society, while the second is played by the figures esteemed by history.

Hutcheon, however, refutes this idea that occurs in many traditional historical novels, in which, in her words, “the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 114). The author explains that this does not happen in historiographical metafiction, as it “espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 114).

Nonetheless, we insert *Saxon Stories* both in some parameters of the traditional historical novel, as well as in historiographic metafiction, since the work is a connection between the past and the present time (LUKÁCS, 2011), employing memory, and offers several questions about the historiographic and fictional creation (HUTCHEON, 1991). By the following comparative analysis between the medieval documents and the book *The Last Kingdom*, it will be possible to observe a historical novel, as it follows some of Lukács’s perspectives. At the same time, we also identify that the work has a “metanarrative” content, by protesting against the “historical truth” told, in large part, by Anglo-Saxon Christianity, thus inserting itself in the assumptions of Hutcheon's postmodernism, which conceive historiographic metafiction. Bernard Cornwell, in this sense, incorporates the interfaces of these two theoretical outlooks.

## 6 Between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians: Christianity versus paganism

The idea of the existence of exchange of culture and memories between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians is widespread in Cornwell's narrative, which often shows Anglo-Saxon characters who pretend to be Christians but still worship the old Germanic gods, or who are Christians, but demonstrate a certain nostalgia for their old culture:

My mother wanted our banner to show the cross, but my father was proud of his ancestors, though he rarely talked about Woden. Even at nine years old I understood that a good Christian should not boast of being spawned by a

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<sup>37</sup> “[...] os acontecimentos mais corriqueiros e superficiais, as mais miúdas relações [...] são mais apropriadas que os grandes dramas monumentais da história mundial” (LUKÁCS, 2011, p. 60)

pagan god, but I also liked the idea of being a god's descendant [...]" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 9)

In this excerpt, Uhtred, by telling about his Saxon family, confesses his father's pride in his pagan origins and shows that he is aware of the fact that they lived in a society already dominated by Christianity. However, as Albuquerque (2017) points out, the memories that refer to a pre-Christian past also contributed to Alfred's aspirations to establish an English identity. Thus, when investing in writing, Alfred proposed not only to focus on the "Sacred Scriptures and the heavenly world", but also, by adopting the vernacular language (Old English), and not just Latin, he supported the record "of traditions of the pre-Christian world" (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 119) (our translation)<sup>38</sup>.

Pagan practices by Anglo-Saxons, and not specifically their memories, were considered transgressive, as we can see better in the dialogue between the boy Uhtred and his father:

'The raven is Woden's creature, isn't it?' I asked nervously. My father looked at me sourly.  
'Who told you that?'  
I shrugged, said nothing.  
'Ealdwulf?' He guessed, knowing that Bebbanburgh's blacksmith, who had stayed at the fortress with Ælfric, was a secret pagan.  
'I just heard it,' I said, hoping I would get away with the evasion without being hit, 'and I know we were descended from Woden'  
'We are,' my father acknowledged, 'but we have a new God now.'  
(CORNWELL, 2005, p. 16).

Although his father demonstrates a certain "pride" in his possible descent from a pagan god, he accepts and reaffirms the Christian God. However, another character draws attention: Ealdwulf, secretly adept of "pagan" practices. Most medieval Christian documents oppose Christians versus pagans so that they mean the same as Anglo-Saxons versus Scandinavians: that is, every Anglo-Saxon was considered a Christian. As can be seen in the quoted passage, *Saxon Stories* intends to denounce this belief: not all Anglo-Saxons were Christians, but there was a process of control of discourses to consolidate the Christian ideology among Anglo-Saxons.

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<sup>38</sup> " [...] Sagradas Escrituras e no mundo celeste", mas também, ao adotar o idioma vernacular (o *Old English*), e não apenas o Latim, apoiava o registro "de tradições do mundo pré-cristão" (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 119).

To deepen our analysis, we will present two excerpts recording the same event extracted from the medieval documents, to contrast with the fictional representation of that moment in *Saxon Stories*. The first, taken from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the second, from *The Life of King Alfred*. Both refer to the same episode: King Edmund of East Anglia's fight against the Danes.

871 [870]. Here the raiding-army went across Mercia into East Anglia, and took winter-quarters at Thetford; and in that year St Edmund the king fought against them, and the Danish took the victory, and killed the king and conquered all that land, and did for all the monasteries to which they came. At the same time they came to Peterborough: burned and demolished, killed abbot and monks all that found there, brought it about so that what was earlier very rich was as it were nothing. [...] (SWANTON, 1997, p. 71)

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 870, [...] Edmund, king of the East-Angles, fought most fiercely against that army. But alas, he has killed there with a large number of his men, and the Vikings rejoiced triumphantly; the enemy were masters of the battlefield, and they subjected that entire province to their authority." (KEYNES; LAPIDGE, 2004, p. 78)

Even though the texts are objective, we can identify that Christianity is omnipresent in both. The first excerpt places King Edmund as a saint by the abbreviation "St", and mentions the violence and destruction caused by the Vikings to the monks and bishops. The other passage, like all others in *The Life of King Alfred*, at first emphasizes "the year of the incarnation of our Lord," accentuating the Christian discourse in advance. However, in this second excerpt, there is, curiously, the recognition that the "enemies" were "battle masters." Additionally, the translator Michael Swanton comments in a footnote that the manuscript *F The Canterbury Bi-Lingual Epitome* "[...] adds that the names of the leaders who killed the king were Ivar and Ubba." (SWANTON, 1997, p. 70). We consider this an important note since such characters star in this moment in Cornwell's fiction.

As already mentioned, the Scandinavians gain space in the literary discourse in *Saxon Stories*. Uhtred, who comes to live with the Danes, often references the Scandinavian culture as aspects of their folklore and religion. It is also possible to verify in the Uhtred's speeches of Scandinavian characters his impressions about Anglo-Saxons and other peoples, and mainly of Christian practices. In *The Last Kingdom*, there is a chapter practically dedicated to describing, in detail, the episode of the killing of King Edmund by the Danes, in which the brothers Ivar and Ubba are highlighted, historical characters and at the same time legendary, since they are considered sons of the also legendary Ragnar Lothbrok.

‘There are many gods,’ Ivar snapped back, ‘many! Everyone knows that.’  
‘There is only one God, and you must serve him.’  
‘But we’re winning,’ Ivar explained patiently, almost as if he talked to a child, ‘which means our gods are beating your one god.’  
The king shuddered at this awful heresy.  
‘Your gods are false gods,’ he said, ‘they are turds of the devil, they are evil things who will bring darkness to the world, while our God is great, he is powerful, he is magnificent.’  
‘Show me,’ Ivar said. Those two words brought silence. The king, his priests and monks all stared at Ivar in evident puzzlement. ‘Prove it,’ Ivar said, and his Danes murmured their support of the idea. King Edmund blinked, evidently lost for inspiration, then had a sudden idea and pointed at the leather panel on which was painted Saint Sebastian’s experience of being an archers’ target. ‘Our God spared the blessed Saint Sebastian from death by arrows!’ Edmund said, ‘which is proof enough, is it not?’  
‘But the man still died,’ Ivar pointed out.  
‘Only because that was God’s will.’ Ivar thought about that.  
‘So would your god protect you from my arrows?’ he asked.  
‘If it is his will, yes.’  
‘So let’s try,’ Ivar proposed. ‘We shall shoot arrows at you, and if you survive then we’ll all be washed.’ Edmund stared at the Dane, wondering if he was serious, then looked nervous when he saw that Ivar was not joking. [...]”  
(CORNWELL, 2005, p. 120)

The previous text demonstrates that, unlike the medieval documents, the characters have life and voice, especially the Scandinavians. The characters Ivar, Ubba and King Edmund dialogue and discuss their religious beliefs, which allows Scandinavians to justify the murder of the king, even though there is no omission of their violent actions. At that moment, the protagonist places himself as an observing narrator, giving place to historical characters. This fact converges with the defense of Hutcheon, who, differently from Lukács, determines that historical characters have a voice and a significant presence in historiographic metafiction. The author states that in postmodern literature, “even the historical personages take on different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status” (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 114).

Cornwell’s narrative clearly shows the clash of power relations present in medieval narratives: the conflict between Christianity and Paganism. However, while in medieval sources Christianity tells the story from its point of view and in an objective way, in *Saxon Stories*, there are interfaces of the different beliefs from argumentative dialogues between Christian and pagan characters, as shown in the previously quoted excerpt. Norse paganism is, most of the time, predominant, because the protagonist and narrator Uhtred frequently makes fun of Christian belief and practices, as when he tells in detail how King Edmund was killed, in an extremely humiliating

way. The protagonist reiterates that nobody tells this story anymore, since Christianity teaches that the brave Saint Edmund “[...] stood up to the Danes, demanded their conversion and was murdered” (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 122).

By using the adverb "nowadays", the protagonist refers to his present time, which, at the same time, is set in the reader's present time. Indeed, King Edmund became a constantly present martyr not only in Christian memory, but especially in English memory. In contrast, Uhtred refutes these memories when he states, for instance, that “so now he is a martyr and saint, warbling happily in heaven, but the truth is that he was a fool and talked himself into martyrdom” (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 122). This is another example in which the protagonist elicits the word "truth" as contrary to the history written by Christianity.

### Final considerations

In this paper, we discussed how different materials represent the relations between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in 9th century England. We analyzed two texts dating from the same period which they report, and are therefore used by historiography as sources for reconstructing the history of that period, and a contemporary text of literary purpose, which proposes to retell that same story.

*The Last Kingdom*, by Bernard Cornwell, focuses on the Viking Age in the 9th century and its impacts on the creation of what we know today as England. We can consider this work a literary representation of historical representation, as it proposes a new reality with new reflections on the historical past told by medieval texts and historiographic studies.

By demonstrating how history is presented by fiction, we conclude that *The Last Kingdom* fits in some parameters of the traditional historical novel, as well as those of historiographic metafiction, as the work is a connection between the past and the present time (LUKÁCS, 2011), through memory, and offers several questions about historiographical and fictional creation (HUTCHEON, 1991).

In this sense, Cornwell's literature transforms the reality present in texts such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred*, a reality that has also been modified by the process of representing and by studies of historiography. In a way, the representation of the real, both in

history and in art, is guided by power relations, which, in the case of the texts studied here, are the relations between Christianity and Norse paganism presented in and by means of language.

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