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The spectacle of history

Memory is a dynamic process. It connects something from the past (whether an object, event, text, or idea) with some later individuals or institutions. The subjects and forms of memories therefore vary not only by time and location but also by their origins; memories can arise from strictly personal interest, but they also can be rooted in politics, ideology, ethnicity, national identity, and other social impetuses. The one constant in this dynamic process is the fact that the result of memory is the creation of some kind of community across time. Performative rather than simply reproductive, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney point out, memory ‘is as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories’.¹

This is a book about what I have called northern memories, a purposefully capacious expression in which ‘memories’ is meant to capture the multivalence of the kinds of things being remembered as well as of the ways in which these memories took shape. Equally capacious is ‘northern’, which all at once suggests something produced in the north, directed at it, or associated with it. Many of the works I discuss imply still another sense: ‘north’ as an imaginative construct that connotes a set of cultural values as well as a physical space. Inevitably, north is also a relational term, to the extent that what is north depends on where the observer – the one doing the remembering – literally and figuratively stands. ‘Middle Ages’ may denote a specific (if still relational) time period between the antique and early modern epochs, but the conjunction ‘and’ is likewise purposefully accommodating. For the memories I talk about are variously descended from the medieval period, inspired by it, and constitutive of the modern as well as the medieval. Even the adjective ‘English’ conveys some capaciousness, defining the Middle Ages as they took place in England, as they were imagined to have taken place there, and as they relate to England’s larger

post-medieval concerns. All this means that the northern memories I discuss are less individual than collective – broadly shared cultural memories that, in their dynamics, fashion a present in the process of recalling a past.

Of course, the dynamic conjunction of Scandinavia with Britain predates even the medieval period. Migrants from what is typically called the North-west branch of the Germanic people inhabited both regions – in Britain beginning with the implosion of the Roman Empire and in Scandinavia much earlier – and they brought with them at least some common beliefs and practices. In early medieval Britain, such commonality was enforced, if also transformed, when Danish and Norwegian Vikings first raided, then settled, and eventually conquered their very distant Anglo-Saxon kin. Word borrowings, place-names, and folk traditions, especially in the Midlands and north of England, attest to the extensiveness of such contact. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, following the Norman Conquest and the cessation of migration from Scandinavia, the nature of this contact had changed considerably. No longer raiders or colonisers, descendants of the original Vikings had become English-speaking farmers and traders, living alongside descendants of the Anglo-Saxons and like them subservient to England's kings with increasing ambitions to assert the political integrity of England as a nation. It is no exaggeration to say, then, that the whole of the English Middle Ages cannot be understood apart from the Scandinavian influence on it.

Studies of art, language, literature, kingship, and politics have explored this influence in compelling if sometimes narrow detail. Elaine Treharne, for instance, describes the eleventh and twelfth centuries as a period in which the native English worked to resist what she calls the trauma of the Norman Conquest by fashioning a continuation of narrowly Anglo-Scandinavian traditions.² And focusing on the early modern period's interest in the pre-Conquest era, John Niles and Rebecca Brackmann independently emphasise the specifically English motivations and means for crafting a sense of Anglo-Saxon England.³ Indeed, Allen Frantzen described a 'desire for origins' that animated the work of early modern critics like Matthew Parker and motivated an inwardly focused antiquarian project in which, for modern scholars, Scandinavia's formative role is often only ancillary.⁴ While such approaches illuminate the role of English texts and ideas in the post-medieval re-creation of the Middle Ages, they also largely bypass the Nordic world's

material and conceptual contributions to this re-creation. When medieval Scandinavia has figured in the memorialisation of the English Middle Ages, the emphasis typically has been on literary connections, especially on English writings composed since the late-eighteenth century.⁵

Within this familiar critical context, the present book seeks to do something much less familiar. It concerns how English writers of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries remembered Scandinavia, especially Iceland and Norway; how by remembering Scandinavia and its people they furthered contemporary sentiments not simply about that region but about the emerging global role of Great Britain; and how they often did so by selectively collapsing the contemporary world and the Middle Ages, providing memories of both in the process. More than simply a literary issue, I will argue, the construction of an Anglo-Scandinavian memory served as an organising principle for cultural politics, providing ways to read past and present alike as testaments to British exceptionalism. Put another way, much of what English critics of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries remembered about medieval English geography, history, religion, and literature, they remembered by means of Iceland, Norway, and, to lesser extents, Denmark and Sweden. And these memories, in turn, figure in something even broader, for they play a foundational (if under-appreciated) role in the fashioning of the United Kingdom, which accounts for the historical framework I follow: post-medieval and prior to what Reinhart Koselleck and others have characterised as the nineteenth-century emergence of a new kind of memory, one that turned away from understanding history as foremost an instructor of moral and political lessons.⁶

My topic, then, is essentially how Anglo-Scandinavian memories functioned between Robert Fabyan's early-sixteenth-century *Chronicles* and the Victorian British Empire. With a timeframe as well as a topic as broad as these, I want to turn now to several specific contexts that underwrite my selectivity and thesis. Specifically, I want to develop some relevant historical medieval connections between Britain and Scandinavia; the ways in which medieval and modern commentators have represented these connections; and, within the frame of historical imagination and memory studies in general, my own approaches and objectives, as well as the scope and structure of this book.

The medieval Middle Ages

Some time around the year 1500 BCE, Indo-European peoples moved into what is now Germany and north-west Europe. Between the years 1000 and 500 BCE, during the Northern Bronze Age, subgroups of these peoples continued moving north and began to inhabit modern-day Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, where they evidently intermingled with indigenous peoples. According to the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon historian Bede, other large subgroups – the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes – began to arrive in Britain in the fifth century CE, coming specifically from areas that are now in north-west Germany and southern Denmark. All of which means that in a significantly qualified way the English and Nordic peoples were originally the same, although even an assertion as broad and vague as this can only be conjectural. Physical and documentary evidence may tell us with certainty some things about medieval Scandinavia and Britain, for instance, but such certainty is not possible for the prehistorical period, for which the material remains are far more limited. Since the earliest extant written accounts of the area are by first- and second-century Roman historians, in fact, we have very little first-hand information from any pre-medieval groups.

While Continental emigrants to Britain initially maintained intermittent contact with their counterparts in both western and northern Europe,⁷ by the seventh century they largely had remade their new homeland, fashioning seven politically distinct kingdoms and driving away or assimilating with the indigenous Celtic peoples as well as the remnants of the Roman occupation that had begun in the first century. At this same time, following their long northern separation from the rest of what we know as the Germanic peoples, the Nordic groups had developed their own social, cultural, and technological organisations to such an extent that by the eighth century, shortly after Bede's death in 735, they could organise trading missions and raiding activities that transformed the entire European political landscape. The British Isles, even though they had been settled by descendants of shared Germanic ancestors, were no exception. In 793, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,

terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine

immediately followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 *January* the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne by looting and slaughter.⁸

In addition to raids like this, direct if none the less limited interactions among Britain and the Nordic regions continued throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, and there is evidence of mercantile activity between Britain and Iceland in particular. Within Britain itself, scattered Nordic place-names and the influence of the early Nordic language (Old Norse) on English suggest extensive contact between the Anglo-Saxon and Norse peoples that eventually went far beyond looting and slaughter. Towns like Thirsk and Whitby dot the landscape of central and northern England in particular, for instance, while common words like 'sky', 'eggs', and even 'they' – all borrowed from Old Norse – attest to the intimacy and stability of the relations between these two groups from the Germanic family. Around 886 King Alfred the Great and the Danish Viking Guthrum agreed to a treaty that defined a large part of the English Midlands as being subject not to English but to Danish law and thereby furthered developing Anglo-Scandinavian social connections. This stability certainly did not last: first the Anglo-Saxons and then the Norse used military force to assert political supremacy. But the presence of various Nordic peoples in the Danelaw did influence Great Britain's languages and social practices to such an extent that at times in the tenth and eleventh centuries distinctions among the Norse and English peoples are not easily drawn.

According to the thirteenth-century *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu* (The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue), the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon king Ethelred understood Old Norse well enough to comprehend its use in skaldic poetry, a distinctively Norse and sometimes gratuitously obscure verse form.⁹ The continued presence of Norse colonies in Britain certainly makes this possible, but even more provocatively, despite the fact that the Norse and English long had been separated from their common Germanic roots, there is reason to believe that Old Norse and Old English may have been close enough in grammatical structure to allow for mutual intelligibility among speakers of both languages. Since at the very least the languages shared a great deal of lexicon, word-formation, and word-order, some late medieval developments in English grammar could reflect the impact of non-native speakers attempting to approximate the grammar of a closely related language.¹⁰

But even if this were the case, a distinct Scandinavian language persisted in England. Ascending to the English throne in 1016, the Danish Viking Cnut the Great ruled until 1035, during which time his court emerged as one of the leading centres for the production of skaldic verse. In a different vein, the earliest versions of some of the Eddic poems found in the Codex Regius (a late thirteenth-century manuscript containing mythological and heroic poems), which utilise an alliterative metre different from the one used in skaldic verse, may have been composed not in Norway or Iceland but in the Hebrides, Orkneys, and Shetlands.¹¹ Even the Norman Conquest did not completely erase the presence of Scandinavian languages in Great Britain. One persisted in the old Danelaw into at least the twelfth century, and, in a form called Norn, several centuries longer in the Shetland and Orkney islands.¹²

Even so, following the Conquest English-Scandinavian interactions became increasingly attenuated. Later medieval English missionaries certainly brought English books to Iceland, where England was sometimes regarded as a centre of learning. Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis* clearly underlies one Icelandic homily,¹³ and Kari Ellen Gade has cited Ælfric's *Grammar* as a potential source for Olaf Thordarson's mid-thirteenth-century *Málskrúðsfræði* (or the *Third Grammatical Treatise*).¹⁴ Other traces of written Old English, such as the Anglo-Saxon graph <f>, arrived in Iceland via Norway.¹⁵ But even these sporadic literary contacts seem to have declined as the Middle Ages advanced. Only four extant Icelandic manuscripts – all late and all deriving from a common source – contain translations of Middle English sources,¹⁶ and there are few indications of direct, late-medieval literary connections between Iceland and Britain beyond this. Thus, H. M. Smyser accepts at face-value a claim in the thirteenth-century *Landres Þáttr* (The Story of Landres) that when Bjarni Erlingsson was in Scotland he had the work translated from a Middle English original,¹⁷ while Rory McTurk has argued that Chaucer's *House of Fame* is an analogue of Snorri's *Edda* and his *Wife of Bath's Tale of Laxdæla saga* (The Saga of the People from Laxdale).¹⁸ Paul Beekman Taylor links as analogues the old man of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* with Odin and his Wife of Bath with Skadi.¹⁹

As evidence of sustained English-Icelandic literary connections, however, none of these parallels is overwhelming or maybe even probable. Similarities between Ælfric's works and Olaf's are generic in medieval grammatical traditions and at least potentially

the result of similarities in linguistic structure between Old English and Old Icelandic. Simply from the point of view of textual transmission, indeed, it would be remarkable if by the late-thirteenth century, when very few people (if any) in England were reading Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, Old English language and literature could have much impact on Norse text production. In the absence of an extant Middle English romance *Olive and Landres*, it is impossible to demonstrate that the Norse tale in *Landres Þáttr* is a translation of it, and the presence of an English romance in a late-thirteenth-century Scots court, in any case, is linguistically and politically improbable. For their part, the Chaucer parallels extend little beyond coincidence. Perhaps emblematic of these tenuous late medieval British–Nordic connections, the fifteenth-century *Libelle of English Policy* does mention Iceland in its account of England’s growing oceanic economy, but the poem shows as much interest in and knowledge of the compass that aided travel there as in the markets themselves:

Of Yseland to wryte is lytill nede
 Save of stokfische; yit for sothe in dede
 Out of Bristow and costis many one
 Men have practiced by nedle and by stone
 Thiderwardes wythine a lytel whylle
 Wythine xij. yeres, and wythoute parille,
 Gone and comen, as men were wonte of olde
 Of Scarborowgh, unto the costes colde.²⁰

Fifty years later, the Venetian John Cabot and (possibly) the Genoan Christopher Columbus would involve Icelandic ports in England’s westward expansion into the Americas. As with the exchange of books, however, throughout the later medieval period British economic and cultural interactions with Iceland never approached the breadth and consequentiality of those with (say) France, Holland, Italy, and Spain at this time. The very word ‘Iceland’ is a measure of this historical Atlantic disconnect. The earliest citation in the *Middle English Dictionary* is from Lazamon’s *Brut*, written in about 1200, where the island is linked with Gotland, Ireland, and the Orkneys. A century after this Robert of Gloucester’s *Chronicle* again mentions Iceland alongside Ireland, Scotland, and the Orkneys, rendering the island part of a formulaic expression for faraway places. As an English word, ‘Iceland’ cannot really be said to be common and specific until after the Middle Ages, with the first use of ‘Icelandic’ as a noun referring to

the language appearing only in 1698. This was nearly two centuries after Icelanders themselves had used 'Íslenzka' (Icelandic) in reference to the language they spoke.²¹

The Middle Ages imagines itself

My intention in the preceding pages has been only to sketch out the broadest contours of Anglo-Scandinavian contact during the Middle Ages. What interest me more are the responses to and the representations of this historical narrative. Already in the Middle Ages, in fact, what happened between Britain and Scandinavia became in part what some medieval writers believed, or simply wanted, to have happened. To the writers of the Icelandic sagas, for instance, England often signified less a geographical place or an economic zone than a literary device, a trope, that is crucial to developments in plot and character. For Icelanders like Gunnlaug Ormstunga and Egil Skallagrímsson, visits to Britain offered social opportunities to prove themselves and advance their standing at home. Indeed, going abroad to the British Isles or Continental Scandinavia for these purposes occurs so frequently in the family sagas that it takes on a kind of formulaic cast. As re-created by writers working three and four centuries after the fact, these opportunities imagine connections between the Norse and the English in ways that enforce, and therefore in part depend on, a work's larger rhetorical objectives. And so the author of *Gunnlaugs saga*, composing at a time when Iceland was yielding its independence to Norway, describes a commonality with tenth-century England, itself on the eve of the Norman Conquest: 'The language in England was then one and the same as that in Norway and Denmark, but when William the Bastard conquered England, there was a change of language; from then onwards, French was current in England, since he was of French extraction.'²² Britain and Iceland share a language, then, just as they share the status of lands destined to be taken over by others. Conversely, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (The Saga of Egil Bald-Grim's Son) uses Britain as only one more European site where its eponymous hero can pursue his outsized but distinctly Norse ambitions. It is in England that Egil both fights on behalf of the English king Ethelstan against a force that includes a Norse contingent and also at York confronts his chief foe, the Norwegian king Erik Bloodaxe. An English town, then, serves as a venue for one of the Viking Age's greatest warriors to save his head by composing one of the Age's greatest artistic

works – a lengthy skaldic poem (in the form known as a ‘drápa’) entitled *Hofuðlausn* (Head-ransom).

Ultimately, saga events like these reveal more about the Nordic region itself than about Britain, even if the latter is imagined as a distinctly different land inhabited by distinctly different people. A similar distinction is drawn between the two areas in the *Prose Edda*, the early thirteenth-century mythological handbook written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, who might also be the author of *Egils saga*. Towards the end of his preface, after explaining that the names of the Norse gods derive from those of a people who emigrated from Asia to Scandinavia, Snorri relates how these same people spread themselves and their language throughout northern Europe, though he recognises that Britain had at least one other language as well.²³ While the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* stresses the convergence of Britain and Scandinavia, Snorri’s account, as an etiological myth of the northern peoples, expressly severs it. In either case, crucially, the Norse writers imagine Britain less as an actual historical place than as a trope to further their respective literary designs.

For their parts, early medieval English writers say relatively little about Anglo-Saxons visiting Scandinavia, and the region certainly has less imaginative force in Anglo-Saxon literature than Britain has in its medieval Norse counterpart. Although the Old English poems *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* use encounters with the Norse as opportunities to foreground fortitude and heroism, such few moments do not constitute the kind of reputation-enhancing type-scene that Norse visits to Britain do in the sagas; and they of course show heroes fighting at home in Britain and not abroad in Iceland or Norway. Anglo-Saxon sources similarly say little about trade with Nordic countries, the one significant exception being an account of a Norwegian chieftain and merchant named Ohthere (Old Norse Óttarr) that is inserted into the ninth-century Old English translation of Orosius’s *Historiae adversus Paganos*. Nor do English accounts dwell from a specifically English point of view on the linguistic and cultural consequences of the Norse presence. If any trend runs through the Anglo-Saxon period, it is that English writers highlight the disruptions this presence caused. Already in the tenth century, indeed, the chronicle of ealdorman Ethelweard emphasised the Vikings’ immorality, thereby echoing accounts in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and presaging the memories of some post-Conquest historians.

Beowulf, written in English and set entirely in Denmark and Sweden, has a peculiar though not incompatible significance in this sometimes pallid Anglo-Saxon response to contemporary Scandinavia. As much as the poem necessarily reflects something of the Anglo-Norse world from which the sole manuscript (from about the year 1000) survives – and the poem sometimes has been seen as the product of a Scandinavian community in England – the imaginative qualities that *Beowulf* associates with Scandinavia presume to evoke some equally imagined pre-migration moment rather than the Anglo-Saxon present. More importantly, by focusing on pre-Christian traditions and mythic events as well as historical kings, *Beowulf* renders Denmark a rhetorical device and perhaps mythic construct rather than a specific location and culture contemporaneous with the writing of the manuscript. It treats contemporary Denmark, that is, in metaphorical ways analogous to those the sagas use for Britain, and among extant Old English poetry it alone does so.

The last and most ambitious Viking raid in England, led by Norway's Harald Hardrada, took place shortly before William of Normandy's Conquest. Harald's attempt for his own conquest failed, however, and after 1066, once the Norse had ceased to represent a threat on the British political landscape, their influence on memory and literary imagining waned. English writers transferred these roles first to the Norman invaders and then to the Continental French, with the Hundred Years War replacing Viking raids as the defining political and narrative concern of the later Middle Ages. Within these changed cultural contexts, representations of the Norse presence in Britain inevitably changed as well. Rather than the violent and immoral threat they had been in Ethelweard's *Chronicle*, the Vikings of Robert of Gloucester's thirteenth-century chronicle sometimes come across as trustworthy allies. Meeting Edmund Ironside, for example, Cnut offers a kind of companionate kingship of England and Norway:

Ware uore ich desiri mest þin grace & þin loue
 Pat þou of alle min londes me be felawe & per
 & ich mot ek of engelond be þi parciner
 Vor zif we to gadere beþ & al clene of one rede
 Norþwey & ech oþer lond & ech prince vs wole drede
 Deruore ich biseche þe haue half mi lond mid me.

[For which I most seek, of your grace and your love, that you be a companion and equal with me in all my lands; and I may also be

your associate over England. For if we together are pure and of one mind, Norway, other lands, and every ruler will fear us. Therefore I beseech you to have half my land with me.]

Certainly, there is historical justification for Cnut to appear as the consummate Christian ruler, who

... louede englissemen & engelond þer to
 & muche louede holi chirche & susteinede al so
 & restorede abbeis þat destrued were biuore
 & chirchen let vp arere þat were arst as uorlore.²⁴

[loved Englishmen and England, and much loved holy church, and also financed and restored abbeys that had been destroyed, and raised up churches that previously had been lost.]

At the same time, this emphasis represents a significant shift in medieval English historiographic sentiments about the Norse.

This historical recuperation of the Norse as, quite literally, even Christians is stronger still in *Havelok the Dane*, composed about the same time as Robert's *Chronicle* in England's eastern Midlands, part of the Danelaw and so an area heavily settled by the descendants of Norwegians and Danes. Its very form and history are significant in this regard. As a romance in rhymed octosyllabic couplets, *Havelok* aligns itself not with the alliterative, heroic poetry of both the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic pasts but with French (and emergent English) traditions. Its story of a Danish champion, further, is fundamentally French, first appearing in Geoffrey Gaimar's mid-twelfth-century *L'Estoire des Engleis* (History of the English), and told again in the anonymous Anglo-Norman *Lai de Haveloc* (Lay of Haveloc) of about 1200. The poem's hero, of course, is Danish – in fact the son of the Danish king, Birkabeyn. But an early description of Brikabeyn's court indicates how little the poem, like its metrical form, evokes anything specifically Nordic:

He hauede mani knict and sueyn.
 He was fayr man and wicth:
 Of bodi he was þe beste knicth
 Þat euere micte leden uth here,
 Or stede on-ride or handlen spere.²⁵

[He had many a knight and servant; he was a fair and brave man; in his body he was the best knight who ever could lead forth an army, or ride a steed or use a spear.]

This is a court that could be located anywhere in western Europe but perhaps especially in the France or the England of romances like the thirteenth-century *King Horn* and fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo*. Any notion of Denmark as a distinctively Scandinavian place is further erased by the poem's plot. It tells of how Havelok, driven from Denmark by an unscrupulous regent, goes to England, where he prevails in English athletic contests and marries Goldeboru, the dead English king's daughter who herself has been cheated by a dishonest adviser. When Havelok ascends to the thrones of both Denmark and England, he becomes a symbol of the immersion of historical Nordic identity in Britain. In this version, even the French sources' one genuine trace of Nordic history – Havelok's alias as Curant, derived (ultimately) from Olaf kvaran of York, the tenth-century son of Sigtrygg – is nowhere to be found.²⁶ As Thorlac Turville-Petre has said, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century accounts may rehearse how the Vikings 'killed, looted and pillaged', but they do not offer a 'more pedestrian account of how they settled a large area, farmed and traded, intermarried and became "us", the English'.²⁷ Instead, historical memory of the Norse seems to have become a kind of gradual forgetting.

By the beginning of the early modern period, this immersion of Norse identity became even deeper; specifically Scandinavian legends well may have been cultivated in the East Midlands in particular, but if so they have left few traces.²⁸ With Britain's evolving interest in foreign enterprises and Denmark's and Sweden's increasing focus on internal and Continental concerns, British historical imagination no longer framed any Nordic region as the destructive force found in Anglo-Saxon England or even as the comparable chivalric land it is in *Havelok*. Instead, seeing Norway and Iceland in particular from the vantage of an emergent global power, British writers begin to distance contemporary Scandinavia from Britain by describing much of the region as one of candle-eating, fish-drying, dirty, and crude people. To Andrew Boorde, writing in 1542, Icelanders are 'beastly creatures vnmanered and vntaughte. They haue no houses but yet doth lye in caues altogether lyke swine.' Norwegians are merely 'rewde'.²⁹

Historical imagination

By no means do such skewed representations and memories invalidate the substantive connections between Britain and Scandinavia throughout the medieval and pre-medieval periods,

or the explanatory usefulness of these connections. The notion of a Continental Germanic period would indeed account for the presence of similar linguistic and cultural traditions in northern and north-western Europe as the consequences of migrations into those areas by people who originally shared those same traditions. Further, Britain and Scandinavia subsequently shared moments of potent cultural upheaval and transformation: not only the expansion of the Vikings but also the coming of Christianity and the growth of international trade in the early modern period. Moments like these brought Britain and much of Scandinavia into close economic and social contact with one another, forging a dynamic by which one region's historical experience was to an extent dependent on the other's. All of this could figure (and has figured) in any straightforward historical narrative about the Scandinavian or English Middle Ages and their aftermath.

As the philosopher R. G. Collingwood long ago observed, however, 'History is not a spectacle. The events of history do not "pass in review" before the historian ... He has to re-create them in his own mind, re-enacting for himself so much of the experience of the men who took part in them as he wishes to understand.'³⁰ Historiography is therefore an act of memory, and as such (according to Paul Ricœur, more recently) responsive to the simple yet crucial questions 'who is remembering' and 'what is being remembered'.³¹ Historians of the Middle Ages, whether medieval or modern, have to decide both upon which persons, events, or ideas should figure in the stories they tell and also upon, in effect, the stories themselves. What constancies might run through medieval social practices and ideas? What causes and effects might transform disparate events into meaningful and memorable narratives? How might these constancies and narratives set the medieval period apart from its modern counterpart yet also provide continuities with it? Which medieval experiences had enough contemporary value that early modern historians and ethnographers would wish to understand them? Or, more plainly, why should the present – any present – care about the past? These are the questions that motivate the present study.

A fundamental part of the book's argument is that, from the seventeenth century on, British writers' historical gaze included and even focused on Scandinavia, which as Protestant and monarchical constituted a politically kindred spirit that contrasted with France, Italy, and Spain. Further, in their gods, myths, and narratives, the Nordic lands provided cultural history of a kind and depth that the

English record does not preserve. Along with the so-called Celtic fringe and overseas colonisation, Scandinavia – medieval and modern alike – thereby became one of the external reference points for the forging of a contemporary British nation. Later writers like William Morris and J. R. R. Tolkien could re-create medieval England by retelling Norse stories, then, precisely because already in the seventeenth century the British historical memory, as fashioned by scholars such as Robert Sheringham, Daniel Langhorne, and Aylett Sammes, had come to encompass the Nordic region. British medieval mythology, customs, history, ethnicity, language, literature – the memories of all of these took shape, in the early modern period, by means of Nordic materials.

At stake in these memories was not just the British past, however. British heritage was at issue as well. In Pierre Nora's formulation,

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.³²

Memory's opposition to history may be a kind of epistemological necessity: if there is to be something known and testable, which the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke established as the modern historiographic emphasis on showing the past 'exactly as it happened',³³ there must also be some cultural or intellectual investment that renders the past worth knowing.³⁴ Whether designated cultural memory or heritage, this approach to the past is avowedly invested, seeking the significance of that truth as well as the truth itself. If history is (conventionally) the putatively disinterested search for what happened, cultural memory and heritage are the impulses that provide a reason to search in the first place. They are the products of creatively working with and thinking about the past, and in this regard they can use places, ethnography, character, and language as malleable ways to construct not just a past but a meaningful one. History, simply put, might identify the details of a battle, while heritage would marshal a parade in its honour, and this dynamic means that the latter

always relies on distinguishing historical periods: the past moment being remembered as distinct from whatever moment in which the remembering occurs. Kathleen Davis has argued that such chronological distinctions inevitably have social as well as cultural implications. Her interest is in how the category “feudal” – despite its inaccuracies, contradictions, and anachronisms – persists today as a temporal marker and a lever of power’.³⁵ Mine is in the equally powerful and politically fraught categories ‘the north’ and ‘the English Middle Ages’.

My concentration on the conjunctions of northern memories and the English Middle Ages thus necessarily diverges in several ways from all early modern responses to the medieval period, as well as from the modern critical responses I discussed at the outset. This perspective positions literature less as the cause of modern Anglo-Scandinavian interests than as the recurrence of the same cultural concerns that animated early modern politics, science, and natural history. Indeed, nineteenth-century interest in the Vikings and Nordic past, while expressed in increasingly popular formats, was not at all a new development but an extension of earlier multilingual, diverse, and sometimes ephemeral traditions (such as travel writing and ethnography) in the production of cultural memories. As British visitors and thinkers encountered the Scandinavian ‘present’ in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, I will argue, they similarly found evidence for the British past. Rather than a source study that traces the genealogy of cultural ideas, political contacts, or literary influences, then, this book is above all a theoretical inquiry into the persistence, independent imitation, and reproduction of Nordic tropes for the imagining of Britain and its medieval past.

This last point, on my methods, requires additional comment. Discussing how cultural memories are formed and function, Jan Assmann has suggested that every ‘culture formulates something that might be called a connective structure. It has a binding effect that works on two levels – social and temporal. It binds people together by providing a “symbolic universe” ... a common area of experience, expectation, and action whose connecting force provides them with trust and with orientation.’ Cultural memory, says Assmann, is ‘the handing down of meaning’, which can be located in all manner of social stories, traditions, and rituals.³⁶ To a significant degree, then, the connective structure of a cultural memory like the Anglo-Scandinavian Middle Ages (as it might be called) arises through repetition, which may or may not be at

the conscious level. This is precisely the reason why, throughout the period I examine, disparate writers from disparate social circumstances – without necessarily any direct knowledge of one another’s works – can replicate and so circulate a persistent group of images, ideas, topics, words, and activities that relate at once to medieval Britain and the modern Scandinavian world. I mean in particular representations of customs, clothing, language, ethnicity, natural phenomena, and so forth.

Easy to reproduce, enduring, and abundant, these tropes proved prolific as ways of framing English discussions of Scandinavia. And collectively, the replication of such references circulated a larger set of ideas about the past, Scandinavia, and Britain. According to these ideas, the English and Nordic peoples originally constituted the same group of people and therefore still shared fundamental personal traits of greater consequence than any historical interactions they may have had. Since the Middle Ages and despite a shared ethnicity and character, however, the peoples and their lands were understood to have diverged markedly, with Britain becoming an emergent global power and Scandinavia remaining an essentially premodern location. In modern-day Norway and Iceland in particular, by this reasoning, Britons could re-visit their own medieval past, and by so doing both affirm the superiority of the British present and (by implication) provide evidence for the integrity and transcendence of the United Kingdom. The cultural utility of this kind of memory, in turn, fostered a welcoming reception for the tropes I discuss and so also for their continued replication.

These ideas, I emphasise, lurk in the background, behind the focus of much of my discussion, which is the circulation of often idle British comments on the Nordic landscape, its people, and their habits. I am not suggesting the presence of something subversive or even nefarious, such as the notion that a writer like Mary Wollstonecraft was actively engaged in empire-building. But neither do I view British commentary on Scandinavia as a reflection of simply random and inconsequential curiosity, nor even as an evolving appreciation of Scandinavia as a beautiful, regulated place in the collective European imagination.³⁷ I see the Anglo-Scandinavian Middle Ages as having greater import than the former view and less innocence than the latter. In effect, my argument focuses on a cultural meme of great consequence, one whose cumulative impact was to further the invention of the English Middle Ages as well as of Great Britain itself.³⁸

An approach like this confronts two overarching challenges. First, in working outside the prevailing source-study model, the argument by design moves back and forth across four centuries of texts, often juxtaposing works written in several different languages and separated by decades and even centuries. Hickeys, Wollstonecraft, and Morris can all appear together. By doing this I certainly do not mean to imply absolute coherence and consistency within the works of any one writer, much less among everything that was written in either Britain or Scandinavia at this time; regional responses to and within Scandinavia could remain distinctive, for instance, even as they furthered more general, national attitudes towards Anglo-Nordic connections. Nor do I mean to suggest that whatever was written about history or language was produced as part of some broadly based and well-organised political plan – as if disparate writers from different regions and eras engaged in a concentrated, almost anthropomorphic exchange between Britain and the Nordic regions. Throughout the early modern era, in fact, neither Britain nor Scandinavian could be regarded as a monolithic region, the one divided from the other by a simplistic binary. Indeed, both regions formed cultural memories independently of one another; imperial ambitions, Anglo-Celtic relations, and industrialisation, for instance, all played their own significant roles in fashioning the United Kingdom. Further, some of what I trace in Anglo-Scandinavian relations reproduces a larger pan-European retrospection that defined the present, the Middle Ages, and antiquity as part of nationalising projects.³⁹

But I am primarily curious about how texts, with or without any direct connections to one another, reproduce shared tropes and outlooks and about how this reproduction could cumulatively further larger cultural ideas of the Anglo-Scandinavian Middle Ages. It is partly to uncover these generative practices, in fact, that I concentrate on the actions and writings of individuals and not large social movements like Romanticism or nationalism. And it is to capture the diverse, disconnected, and yet coherent manifestations of what I have called a cultural meme that I purposely move back and forth across the centuries. If genealogy demonstrates the development of specific, connected issues, the methods I follow here offer a way to approach the collective impact of such issues. I certainly do not entirely abandon source criticism: I situate Hickeys's arguments in relation to those of early modern linguistics, for example, and Wollstonecraft's concerns in relation to the Romantic emphasis on the sublime. But genealogy is only one, and not necessarily the

best, way to capture how culture evolves. What I pursue here offers another, perhaps better sense of how ideas accumulate across time.

The second challenge, theoretical as well as practical, is what to call the regions that interest the writers I consider. The distinctions we moderns make do not neatly coincide with those made by our early modern predecessors or, often, our predecessors in the nineteenth century. What they typically call 'Scandinavian' or 'northern' we might be inclined to specify as 'Swedish', 'Finnish', 'Norwegian', 'Danish', and 'Icelandic'. As Chapter 2 suggests, in earlier eras 'Scandinavia' itself might embrace regions in central and eastern Europe. An additional complication is that Anglophone ethnographers and critics sometimes based their arguments about Scandinavia in general on evidence taken from a narrow range of landscapes and texts. They may have perceived all of Scandinavia, then, while seeing only Norwegian mountains or reading only Icelandic sagas. And Scandinavian writers could be just as non-discriminating as their Anglophone counterparts. Snorri was claimed (by various writers) to have passed on specifically Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish traditions; Olaus Rudbeck, we shall see, planted Yggdrasil in Uppsala. If 'Scandinavian' and 'Nordic' complicate modern perceptions, then they also capture historical ones. Sometimes I draw attention to these differences, and sometimes I talk specifically about individual national ideas, but often I retain 'Scandinavia' or 'Nordic' because of their historical force.

Equally challenging is what to call the homeland of the Anglophones I consider. Most of them lived in England proper, but they wrote during the formation of Great Britain and the United Kingdom. While this formation may not have been foremost in their minds, their writings still contributed and responded to it. Here is an area, then, where genealogy certainly is at issue, since seventeenth-century views of Britain differ from and lead to nineteenth-century ones. 'England' evokes neither the historical political reality nor the developing cultural commitment to Great Britain with its colonial and eventually imperial aspirations. Yet 'Britain' and especially 'British' inevitably suggest native Britons and the Celtic areas of the United Kingdom. Much of the time I use 'English' to reflect the language and historical perceptions and 'Britain' to refer to a historical place, although I also sometimes address this issue head-on.

Yet another terminological comment concerns 'Anglo-Saxon'. Both the word and the concept have increasingly been criticised

for nationalistic and racist undertones that prevent scholarship of the early Middle Ages from being truly inclusive. But replacing 'Anglo-Saxon' in a study like this presents challenges. For one thing, it is a term freely used by many of the critics I talk about, including Samuel Laing, Frederic Metcalfe, George Hickeys, and the Dane Nikolaj Grundtvig (Hickeys in Latin and Grundtvig in Danish). It is in fact during the period I consider that 'Anglo-Saxon' originates, with the earliest citation of the noun or adjective in the *OED* being to an English work of 1602; this development is in part the subject of Niles's *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*. Here, as I noted earlier, I am concerned not (as is Niles) with English uses of the English past but with English uses of the Nordic past. As with 'Scandinavian', then, as much as 'Anglo-Saxon' may complicate modern perceptions, it captures historical ones. The other challenge to replacing the compound is that I never found a usable alternative: 'early English' is vague and, in some circumstances, flat-out wrong, and 'Old English' to me is a linguistic term that in any case could produce oddities like 'Old English England'. So whenever I could not find a reasonable alternative, I have kept the term, and always so when it figures in a quotation or the title of a work.

In pursuing these arguments, I follow four topics, which function (to a large extent) as variations on a theme: natural history, ethnography, moral assessments, and literature. As my discussion already has suggested, my focus is broadly historical and not rigidly chronological. I do consider the impact of specific publications and discoveries, and I do attend to nuances in how individuals of even the same era thought about the same topics. But much of my interest focuses on how ideas and tropes expressed by seventeenth-century writers like Sheringham and Langhorne persist among eighteenth-century writers like Thomas Percy and nineteenth-century ones like Thomas Carlyle. I am interested, then, in how the often disconnected replication of such tropes advanced broader attitudes, whether popular or academic, towards history and culture, and to this end I identify the consequential commonalities of what is said and in what it contributes to memories of both the Middle Ages and the modern world. It is for this reason that I rely on works from several languages, representing a range of disciplines that we might now differentiate as science, history, mythology, fiction, linguistics, politics, and memoir.

Partly to emphasise the book's topical rather than strictly chronological shape, *Northern Memories and the English Middle Ages*

begins with the nineteenth-century British travellers to Iceland and Norway who came to find – and who did find – a medieval landscape that they described for Britain at large. Discussion then turns back in time to the large cultural ideas that were furthered by these acts of geographic and political discovery. Specifically, I look at early modern ethnic studies (typically written in Latin) that developed presumed connections among the English and Nordic peoples. The next chapter extends these ethnographic arguments into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when English commentators denigrated modern Scandinavians and in so doing helped to affirm their cultural status and also to fashion ideas that helped sustain the United Kingdom. These are the arguments that promoted the influence of medieval Nordic literature on more recent British literature, which figures in Chapter 5. The final chapter situates Nordic inspiration for an English Middle Ages within the larger context of the contingencies of memory. In referring to ‘Nordic inspiration’ and ‘an English Middle Ages’, in general and without definite articles, I mean to emphasise the notion that other kinds of inspiration, including other kinds of Nordic inspiration, were and are possible, just as are other views of the English Middle Ages.

Notes

- 1 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, ‘Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics’, in Erll and Rigney (eds), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 2.
- 2 Elaine Treharne, *Living through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 3 John D. Niles, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering, and Renewing the Past* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Rebecca Brackmann, *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-Saxon England: Laurence Nowell, William Lambarde, and the Study of Old English* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012).
- 4 For accounts of the broad, cultural context, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Timothy Graham (ed.), *The Recovery of Old English: Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000); and Angus Edmund Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

- 5 See Chapter 5 for the relevant criticism.
- 6 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), and *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner and Others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 7 See, for example, Matthew Townend, *Antiquity of Diction in Old English and Old Norse Poetry*, E. J. Quiggin Memorial Lecture (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, 2015); and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr, 'Late medieval and early modern opinions on the affinity between English and Frisian: The growth of a commonplace', *Folia Linguistica Historica* 9 (1989), 167–91.
- 8 Michael Swanton (ed. and trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 55/57.
- 9 Magnús Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 3–4.
- 10 Sarah Grey Thomason and Terrence Kaufman, *Language Contact, Creolization and Genetic Linguistics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 263–331; and Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).
- 11 See Guðbrandur Vigúfsson and F. York Powell (ed. and trans.), *Corpus Poeticum Boreale: The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century*, 2 vols. (1883; rpt New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), vol. 1, pp. lxxi–lxxiii. John McKinnell has suggested that both *Vǫlundarkviða* (The Lay of Volund) and *Þrymskviða* (The Lay of Thrym) show English influence and may have been composed in northern England. See 'Myth as therapy: The usefulness of Þrymskviða', *Medium Ævum* 69 (2000), 1–20; and 'Eddic poetry in Anglo-Scandinavian northern England', in James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch, and David N. Parsons (eds), *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), pp. 327–44. Also see Ursula Dronke (ed.), *The Poetic Edda, Volume II, The Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 276–80.
- 12 Einar Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages: An Introduction to Their History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 180–244; David N. Parsons, 'How long did the Scandinavian language survive in England? Again', in James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch, and David N. Parsons (eds), *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), pp. 299–312. On a post-medieval Norse language in the outer islands, see Michael Barnes, 'The death of Norn', in Heinrich Beck (ed.), *Germanische Rest- und Trümmersprachen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 21–43; 'Reflections on the structure and the demise of Orkney and Shetland Norn', in

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- 13 On *De Falsis Diis* see John C. Pope (ed.), *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, 2 vols, EETS o.s. 259, 260 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967 and 1968), vol. 2, pp. 669–70; Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (eds), *Hauksbók, Udgiven efter de Arnarnagnænske Håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675 4^o*, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1892–96), vol. 1, pp. 156–64; Arnold Taylor, ‘*Hauksbók* and Ælfric’s *De Falsis Diis*’, *Leeds Studies in English* 3 (1969), 101–9; and John Frankis, *From Old English to Old Norse: A Study of Old English Texts Translated into Old Norse with an Edition of the English and Norse Versions of Ælfric’s De Falsis Diis* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2016). On the introduction of books by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, see Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, pp. 9–10; and Geraldine Barnes, ‘The medieval anglophile: England and its rulers in Old Norse history and saga’, *Parergon* 10 (1992), 11–25.
 - 14 Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Ælfric in Iceland’, in Judy Quinn, Tarrin Wills, and Kate Heslop (eds), *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 321–39.
 - 15 Haraldur Bernharðsson, ‘Scribal culture in thirteenth-century Iceland: The introduction of Anglo-Saxon “f” in Icelandic script’, *ǼGEP* 117 (2018), 279–314.
 - 16 Peter A. Jorgensen, ‘The Icelandic translations from Middle English’, in Evelyn Scherabon Firchow, Kaaren Grimstad, Nils Hasselmo, and Wayne A. O’Neil (eds), *Studies for Einar Haugen Presented by Friends and Colleagues* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 305–20.
 - 17 H. M. Smyser, ‘The Middle English and Old Norse story of Olive’, *PMLA* 56 (1941), 69–84.
 - 18 McTurk, *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
 - 19 Paul Beekman Taylor, *Sharing Story: Medieval Norse–English Literary Relationships* (New York: AMS Press, 1998), pp. 233–44.
 - 20 Sir George Warner (ed.), *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye: A Poem on the Use of Sea-power 1436* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), lines 798–805.
 - 21 *OED*, s.v. *Icelandic*, adj. and n., and *MED*, s.v. *Islond*, n.; Allan Karker, ‘The disintegration of the Danish tongue’, in Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (eds), *Sjöttú Ritgerðir Helgaðar Jacobi*

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- 23 Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987), p. 5.
- 24 Robert of Gloucester, *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, ed. William Aldis Wright, Rolls Series 86, 2 vols (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), lines 6307–12, 6506–9.
- 25 *Havelok*, ed. G.V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), lines 343–7.
- 26 *Havelok*, ed. Smithers, pp. lv–lvi.
- 27 Thorlac Turville-Petre, ‘Representations of the Danelaw in Middle English literature’, in James Graham-Campbell, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch, and David N. Parsons (eds), *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), p. 345.
- 28 Eleanor Parker, ‘Siward the Dragon-slayer: Mythmaking in Anglo-Scandinavian England’, *Neophilologus* 98 (2014), 481–493; and Richard Cole, ‘British perspectives’, in J. Glauser, P. Hermann, and S. A. Mitchell (eds), *Handbook of Pre-modern, Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, 2 vols (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), vol. 1, pp. 891–8.
- 29 Andrew Boorde, *The fyrst boke of the introduction of knowledge: The whych dothe teache a man to speake parte of all maner of languages, and to knowe the vsage and fashion of al maner of countreys* (London: Copland, 1555 [1542]), sig. Div r. Also see Ethel Seaton, *Literary Relations of England and Scandinavia in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).
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- 31 See Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 32 Pierre Nora, ‘Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire’, *Representations* 26 (1989), 8.
- 33 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 316.
- 34 For additional discussion of this distinction, see Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 58–62.
- 35 Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 23.
- 36 Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 2 and 6.

- 37 For this latter argument, see Karen Oslund, *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).
- 38 On memes see Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 39 Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).