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ODDELEK ZA ANGLISTIKO IN AMERIKANISTIKO

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**Literary and Cinematic Portrayal of Religion in Works Set
in the Anglo-Saxon England during the Time of Alfred the
Great**

**Literarna in filmska upodobitev religije v delih umeščeni v
anglosaško Anglijo za časa kralja Alfreda Velikega**

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Abstract

Religion during the Anglo-Saxon England is often portrayed through the eyes of the Christian society, which consequently results in subjective description of Vikings and their beliefs in connection to their raids and invasions of the island. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how religion of the Anglo-Saxons and their invaders is presented in literature and cinematic works, and to determine the importance and purpose of religion in such works. This work will focus on Christianity and paganism during the life of Alfred the Great, and will seek parallels between the religions in terms of how religion is expressed by narrative and characters, to what extent it is presented and what kind of connotations the descriptions have or imply. The research for the thesis included overview of several history books and articles to set the historical background, which is in the main part of the thesis analysed in terms of religion with five novels from Cornwell's *The Saxon Stories* and television series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*. The results of close reading of the religious passages and observing movie segments show, that religion plays an important role in all analysed works of art, and cannot be omitted without significantly decreasing the depth and authenticity of the story. In literature, *The Saxon Stories* provided a detailed description and inclusion of Christianity, and presented paganism to a lower degree. This was opposite for the television series *Vikings*, which follows the life of the Vikings and portrays their religious traditions in greater detail than Cornwell's novels. One of the most important figures for the thesis is Alfred the Great. Not only does the thesis focus on the religious state during his life, but also his contributions to Christianity in England are described in all analysed works alike, and correspond well with true historical facts. The thesis also provides a description of several Viking characters, who are important representatives for paganism and steer away from the common trend, which describes Norsemen as godless, uncultured and violent figures. There are many literary works that are set in the Anglo-Saxon England, which are not limited to the life of Alfred the Great. Those works could be analysed in the same manner and compared to this thesis to find differences in portrayal of religion in terms of style, scope and manner.

Keywords: religion, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, paganism, Christianity, Alfred the Great

Povzetek

Religija med obdobjem anglosaške Anglije je v mnogih primerih predstavljena z vidika krščanstva, kar posledično pomeni subjektivni prikaz Vikingov in njihovih prepričanj, v povezavi z njihovimi vpadi na otok in končno invazijo. Namen tega dela je ugotavljanje načina prikaza religije Anglosasov in Vikingov v literarnih in kinematografskih delih, ter določiti pomembnost in namen religije v tovrstnih delih. Magistrska naloga se bo osredotočala na krščanstvo in poganstvo za časa življenja Alfreda Velikega, in bo iskala povezave med religijama v naraciji, karakterjih in ugotavljala v kakšni meri je religija predstavljena, ter analizirala vse možne konotacije, ki jih ti opisi nosijo ali nakazujejo. Raziskovanje za izdelavo tega dela je obsegalo pregled več zgodovinskih knjig, člankov in drugih del, ki so bila potrebna za vzpostavitev zgodovinskega ozadja, ki je v osrednjem delu te naloge povezan s petimi Cornwellovimi romani iz zbirke *The Saxon Stories* in s televizijskima serijama *The Last Kingdom* in *Vikings (Vikingi)*. Rezultati natančnega branja odstavkov povezanih z religijo in pozornega pregleda različnih filmskih segmentov kažejo, da religija igra pomembno vlogo v vseh analiziranih delih. Prezir verskih tem v tovrstnih delih bi v veliki meri vplival na globino in avtentičnost tovrstnih del. V analiziranih delih iz zbirke *The Saxon Stories* je krščanstvo v veliki meri bolj podrobno opisano od poganstva. Pri televizijski nanizanki *Vikings* se je to izkazalo za ravno obratno, saj serija sledi življenju Vikingov, kar posledično prinese bolj podrobne uprizoritve njihovih verskih tradicij. Ena bolj pomembnih figur za magistrsko delo je Alfred Veliki. Poleg tega, da je obdobje, ki je pomembno za to delo omejeno na čas njegovega življenja, so v vseh analiziranih delih bogati opisi in uprizoritve njegovih dosežkov na področju krščanstva, ki so v veliki meri predstavljeni v skladu z zgodovinskimi dejstvi. Magistrska naloga poleg drugih krščanskih figur navede tudi več Vikingov, ki so pomembni predstavniki poganstva, in s svojimi karakteristikami težijo stran od splošnega prepričanja, ki jih označi zgolj za brezbožne, nekulturne in nasilne. Obstaja več literarnih del, ki so umeščene v anglosaško Anglijo in niso omejene z obdobjem kralja Alfreda Velikega. Za nadaljnje raziskovanje bi tovrstna dela lahko bila analizirana z istega vidika kot ta magistrska naloga, s katero bi lahko nadaljnje ugotovitve primerjali na področju prikaza religije v zvezi s stilom, obsegom in načinom.

Ključne besede: religija, Anglosasi, Vikingi, krščanstvo, poganstvo, Alfred Veliki

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Introduction

The period of the Anglo-Saxon England was a period that was fluctuating between war and peace. Wars between the Anglo-Saxons and their Norse foes sparked a religious clash, which to England brought political, religious and social instability. The clash between Christianity and paganism, which was the result of the Viking raids, will be the focal point of this thesis. The Anglo-Saxon period was long, and lasted from about the middle of the fifth century to the year 1066, when William the Conqueror was crowned king in England. This paper will focus on the period of Alfred the Great, his accomplishments in the field of religion and the state of Christianity during the Viking invasion. The thesis will also discuss the Viking religion and its description and involvement in literary and cinematic works. Authors and producers are often drawn to the topic of Viking invasion of the Anglo-Saxon England, which is proven by the quantity of literary and cinematic works on the topic. The historical part of the thesis will be based on Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, which is one of the richest description of Alfred the Great and his achievements and private life. The second most important source for historical background will be *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* translated by James Ingram and J.A. Giles. This chronicle offers a detailed timeframe of the most notable events in the Anglo-Saxon period. Among other articles by various historians, I will also consult William Fitzhugh's work *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*. Historical facts about the Anglo-Saxon England are often divided into several theories and a lot is still unknown. There are numerous discrepancies among theories in exactness of the dates, various royal lineages and other information. The historical part of the thesis will simplify the vivid history of the Anglo-Saxons and present important periods, rulers and situations, which are crucial for the understanding of the rest of the thesis. The historical part of the thesis will aim to be the background information in accordance to which the research questions that compare literary portrayal to historical facts will be answered.

For my analytical part of the thesis, I will mainly work with *The Saxon Stories* by Bernard Cornwell. These works provide a uniform story of Alfred the Great under the pressure of the Viking attacks and Christianity in jeopardy. The works that will be analysed in detail are *The Last Kingdom*, *The Pale Horseman*, *Lords of the North* and *Death of Kings*. The works will be analysed with the form of a close reading of the relevant passages, which will be loosely connected to the rest of the plot in order to retain coherence. The novels from The Saxon Stories will be compared

to the television series *The Last Kingdom* and *Vikings* in connection with their portrayal of religion and religious themes. Television series will be discussed from the point of view of the presentation of religion and will not deal with the plot of the series, since it is mainly irrelevant for the analysis. Claims and suggestions on the portrayal of religion in the series will be supported with relevant quotes and movie scenes.

The analysis of the literary and cinematic works will aim to determine the role and importance of religion in literature and other works of art. A substantial part of the analysis will deal with Alfred the Great and his importance in novels and cinematic depictions, and the theme of religion between and after his coronation.

The research for the thesis included gathering enough history articles and other literature containing relevant historical information for a good understanding of the Anglo-Saxon period. The focus of the research was on historical background that led to the reign of Alfred the Great, whose reforms and contributions in the field of religion will be analysed separately from the general historical background. This will be followed by the analysis of the relevant novels from *The Saxon Stories*, which will be analysed with a close reading technique in order to extract relevant passages connected to the theme of religion and connect them to the real historical events and relevant characters. The thesis will continue with chapters about religious language, symbolism and rituals in the novels, and the relevancy of religion in works set in the period. This will be followed by a comparison between the portrayal of religion in the novels and television series. The thesis concludes with an article about the impact of Alfred the Great on modern television and literature, describing other works featuring his character and Tolkien's inspiration in the Anglo-Saxon period and Alfred the Great.

Historical Background of Anglo-Saxon England

Anglo-Saxon England was one of the most interesting eras in the history of England. It is a birthplace of many stories, myths and legends, and is a rich source of inspiration for many literary and cinematic works. The interest for the Anglo-Saxon period has been revived and popularized in 21st century with Bernard Cornwell's book series *The Saxon Stories*, which deals with the period when the Anglo-Saxon England was being raided by the Vikings. The Anglo-Saxon era as a whole, however, is a much broader term and does not begin with the Viking raids. The Anglo-Saxons were people that were a part of Germanic tribes, who migrated to Britain from continental Europe. The period started when the Roman rule in Britain ended. After the Romans lost control of the island, the Anglo-Saxon period began to rise, as more intense migrations to England started to take place. The invasion of the Saxons and the accompanying tribes, such as Jutes and Angles was according to Bede done in three phases. The first phase began when the Romano-British leaders sought help for defending themselves from the Picts, who were raiding the Eastern coast of England. In return, the Saxons were granted land. Bede continues with the second phase, which was migration with settlement and concludes with the last phase – establishing themselves as superiors. Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* leans on Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* ("On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain"), and their interpretations of the Saxons vary greatly. The differences will be discussed in the next article of this chapter. There are many theories of whether the Anglo-Saxons overtook England with violence and even genocide, or just by simple migration and blending with the Britons (Rowley, *The Old English Version of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica* 73, 92). The most commonly adopted theory, however, is that the Anglo-Saxons slowly invaded the Eastern shore of England and worked their way across the continent, driving Britons west. Strong evidence for this is the last appeal by Britons, titled "The Groans of the Britons", which was documented by Gildas. A strong theory suggests that the appeal was made after the Picts and Saxons joined forces in invading and raiding of England.

The next substantial event about the Britons and the Saxons mentioned in Gildas' book is the legendary Battle of Badon, where King Arthur supposedly led the resistance of the Britons, who severely defeated the Anglo-Saxons. According to Gildas' writings, the battle was fought sometime between the second half of the 5th century and early 6th century. Little is known about the battle itself and where and when it took place. The battle is also mentioned in Bede's *Historia*

ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, but was also just an interpretation of Gildas' writing. The battle supposedly brought a period of peace, which lasted for 30 years.

Anglo-Saxons through the series of events and invasions conquered England and the larger kingdoms started forming from smaller ones. England was gradually divided into seven main kingdoms, collectively known as The Heptarchy. It consisted of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex, Sussex, Essex and Kent.

During this period, there were many different aspects of conversion to Christianity. The main Christianisation took place in the late 6th and early 7th century and was mainly performed by the missionaries from Rome and Ireland. At that time one of the most powerful kings in England was Æthelberht of Kent, who accepted Christianity by marrying Bertha, the daughter of the king of Paris. Because of this marriage, he allowed the clergy to come to Canterbury. He was baptised by Augustine in 601AD, who then began his mission of spreading Christianity. According to historians, it is hard to determine how many people actually adopted the religion as their own, since the monks who practiced conversion most likely considered a kingdom or a territory converted once the king has been baptized.

Due to the fact that the North was under the influence of the Irish monks, who taught Celtic Christianity, there was a difference in religious practices between the North and the rest of the kingdoms. In 662, the king of Northumbria gathered a council to discuss and adopt the Roman practices. More on the topic of religion of the Anglo-Saxon England will be discussed in the following articles.

The most important period of the Anglo-Saxon England for this thesis is the time of the Viking invasion. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the first place to be raided by the Vikings was the isle of Lindisfarne in 793 (51). Decades later, in the second half of the 9th century, the Danes stopped with the raids and started invading on a larger scale.

King Egbert, who was trying to conquer Mercia, ruled Wessex prior to the invasion of the Norsemen. He was, however, unable to hold the Mercians under his rule. His son Æthelwulf succeeded him after his death. Æthelwulf fought the Vikings with his son Æthelbald in the Battle of Aclea, where they decisively defeated the Norsemen. According to Asser, the battle was fought in 853, when Burgred requested aid from Wessex against the Vikings. Asser writes,

After a lengthy battle, which was fought with much bravery on both sides, the most part of the heathen horde was utterly destroyed and slain, so that we never heard of their being so smitten, either before or since, in any region, in one day; and the Christians gained an honorable victory, and kept possession of the battle-field. (*Life of King Alfred* 20).

Wessex and Mercia succeeded in repelling the attack of the Vikings, and kept Mercia in Anglo-Saxon control until 872. Soon after the battle, Æthelwulf went to Rome on a pilgrimage. His son Æthelbald took the opportunity and tried to overthrow his father's throne. After Æthelwulf returned from Rome, the residents of Wessex rejoiced and hoped that he would banish Æthelbald with his accomplices. He refused to take such actions and instead married Judith, who was the daughter of King Charles, and made her queen. After his death, his son Æthelbald married Judith, his stepmother, and ascended to the throne. With this action, he enraged the church, since he contradicted the basic principles of Christianity. Asser is very critical towards the marriage as he writes, "his son Æthelbald, contrary to God's prohibition and the dignity of a Christian, contrary also to the custom of all the heathen, ascended his father's bed, and married Judith, daughter of Charles, King of the Franks" (*Life of Alfred* 6). Æthelbald's rule brought no major differences to the state of the Viking invasion, because the Viking attacks were scarce and did not present a major threat yet. His brother Æthelbert, who succeeded him after his death, was already ruling the sub-kingdom of Kent, which he inherited from his eldest brother Æthelstan. He annexed Kent and Wessex and became king. Much as the majority of his brothers, his rule is poorly documented and is assumed to not have any significant role in the war with the Vikings. Asser, however, contrary to his brother Æthelbald describes him as a peaceful, honourable and loving ruler. Following his death in 665, and the coronation of his younger brother Æthelred, a significant Viking army invaded England.

The army, which was named The Great Heathen Army, started to invade kingdoms one by one. There are many theories and legends about the arrival of the invaders and the reason for the invasion. One of the theories is the legend of Ragnar Lodbrok, who was according to Norse Sagas captured by king Ælle during one of his raids, and executed by being thrown in a snake pit. This would drive his sons Ubbe, Ivar the Boneless and Halfdan to gather The Great Heathen Army and invade England as revenge. There are some discrepancies about the names of the sons and their roles in the invasion. According to Norse Sagas, Ragnar had four sons, called Ivar the Boneless,

Hvitserk, Sigurd snake-In-the-eye and Björn Ironsight. All names are mentioned in several historical documents, which does not disprove either theory, but in this period only Halfdan, Ivar the Boneless and Ubbe are documented to have led The Great Heathen Army against the Heptarchy. Asser does not mention many names of the Danish war chiefs, which is why there are many variations of who led certain battles for the Vikings. According to archaeologist and anthropologist William Fitzhugh, the purpose of the raids became more economic and political (*Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* 5). This disproves the theory and the legend, that The Great Heathen Army was formed solely for the revenge of Ragnar Lodbrok. They were in search of fertile land and establishing trading posts with the surrounding countries.

The first kingdom to fall was Northumbria, after the Vikings attacked York twice in 866 and 867. Both kings, Ælle and Osberht were killed in the battle. Asser, a bishop who wrote a biography of Alfred the Great writes: “In that battle fell almost all the Northumbrian troops, and both the kings were slain; the remainder, who escaped, made peace with the heathen (*Life of King Alfred* 16-17). The next kingdoms to fall were East Anglia with the death of king Edmund, and Mercia. In 868 king Burgred of Mercia requested military help from Æthelred, who with his brother Alfred joined forces and led the army to Nottingham, where instead of the battle, Burgred bribed the Vikings into truce. In 874, the Vikings returned and forced King Burgred of Mercia to flee to Rome. The Danes appointed a new king in Mercia – Ceolwulf II, who had to swear an oath of loyalty to the Vikings (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 59). Soon the only kingdom that stood between the Danes and the whole England was Wessex, under the reign of Æthelred. The first major threat imposed to Wessex happened in 871 with the Battle of Reading, where the Danes were under the command of Halfdan Ragnarsson. The Wessex forces took heavy losses and were forced to retreat, leaving the Danes free to advance on Wessex. After the defeat, Alfred and Æthelred once again gathered armies and faced the Vikings in the Battle of Ashdown, which is one of the most famous battles of the period. Alfred and Æthelred again led the armies against the Viking outpost in Reading, and were yet again defeated. The Viking army drove them out and pursued them to the field of Ashdown, where Alfred and Æthelred split their armies against the Danes. According to the historical documents, Æthelred refused to advance on the incoming Viking forces until his prayer was complete, which forced Alfred to advance by himself. He managed to repel the Vikings in a vigorous battle, and after securing the victory, Æthelred pursued with his army to drive them back. The battle took so many casualties that the Kingdom of Wessex was vulnerable for a longer period.

Æthelred suffered two more defeats in the Battle of Basing and Battle of Marton, after which the Danes returned to their winter dwelling in London. After Æthelred's death in 871, his brother Alfred became king due to his sons being too young to succeed him (Mark, "Alfred the Great" 2018). This marks the period of religious and political reforms critical for this thesis. Asser writes that Alfred reigned against his will for the whole month, since he did not believe that he alone could face The Great Heathen Army, despite the help from God, in whom he put all his faith (39). The first months of Alfred's reign were tough, since he lost the Battle of Wilton shortly after the death of his brother. This extinguished all hopes of him being able to drive the Vikings out of England. He was forced to offer truce, which the Vikings accepted. "... The Saxons made peace with the heathen, on condition that they should take their departure; and this they did" (*Life of King Alfred*, 24). Under the new leadership of Guthrum, the Vikings attacked again in 876. Alfred fought them at Wareham but the attack was unsuccessful and he was again forced to offer them peace. Guthrum took the offer but broke his word by killing the hostages, and advanced to Devon. There Alfred blocked their fleet and with the help of cliffs and a heavy storm, the Vikings were forced to submit. Two years later, the Vikings returned with an unexpected attack on the royal stronghold in Chippenham, where Alfred was staying for Christmas. They failed to kill Alfred who with a small group of soldiers escaped to Somerset, where he established a fort in Athelney. From there he organized attacks and rebellions against the Vikings and in May of 878 launched a large attack in the Battle of Edington, where he drove the Danes back to his previous fort in Chippenham, which was prior to the attack emptied of food and supplies. Alfred with a siege starved the Danes and forced them into retreat. Guthrum was forced to convert to Christianity as one of the Alfred's terms. He was baptised with around 30 of his commanders and Alfred became a "sponsor in his baptism" (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 60). Guthrum was christened Æthelstan. "After his baptism he remained twelve days with the king, who, together with all his companions, gave him many rich gifts" (*Life of King Alfred* 30). Asser titles this agreement the Treaty of Wedmore, and historians commonly adopt the term. Alfred annexed western Mercia and left Guthrum with Eastern Mercia and East Anglia, which were incorporated as the kingdom of Danelaw. Despite the treaty with Guthrum, Alfred still had to deal with the Vikings on a smaller scale, but major battles momentarily stopped. Alfred eventually retook London and until the death of Guthrum in 890, had no problems with the Danes. Guthrum's death brought forward a number of war chiefs who wanted

to take his position. A series of attacks and invasions followed up until the 895, when the Vikings recognized the defeat and disbanded or returned to their homeland.

Alfred's success with the final raids is to be attributed to his reconstruction of the army. He noticed the Vikings usually had the advantage due to their planning and selective manner of fighting, which is why he placed garrisons across the country and formed a fleet to be active as scouts. With this reform, he was able to attack and surround from the nearest point to the threat. Alfred also tried to establish the navy after witnessing the power of the Vikings in naval battles.

Alfred made many reforms during his reign. Besides the naval reform, he reorganized law, education and religion. The latter will be discussed in greater detail in the following articles.

Alfred derived many of his laws from the Bible – more accurately, he leaned on the Christian teachings and constructed a series of laws that reflected the God's will. He compared his ability to issue laws to Moses, when he was given the Ten Commandments. Alfred was a firm believer that his laws are written by God's will to lead his people in the spirit of Christianity (Lee, "King Alfred the Great and Our Common Law"). He leaned on the laws of Ine of Wessex, and incorporated the already adopted laws of Mercia and Kent (Whitelock, "Alfred"). According to the historian Mary P. Richards, the laws included "all manner of societal concerns including theft, physical violence, homicide, respect for the king and his property, respect for the church and its property, marriage, and the obligations and worth of the various ranks of society" (*The Companion to Alfred the Great* 282). Alfred was also trying to establish a successful judicial system, so the prosecutions would be fair to the defendants. In this respect, Asser compares him to Solomon. He also mentions Alfred's demands that the judges and organs of judicial system must be literate in order to be able to pass judgement on others.

Another big reform by Alfred was the establishment of schools, which at first were meant mostly for royal children. The subject dealt mostly with the learning of English and Latin, which was mostly taught by bishops whom Alfred hired for this cause. One of the hired bishops was also Asser from Wales, who wrote the biography on Alfred, which is one of the leading historical documents that in detail describe Alfred's life. Education was later available for all people of England, who were able to apply. Alfred contributed to the cause himself with the translations of at least four works: *Pastoral Care*, by Gregory the Great, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, St. Augustine's *Soliloquies* and the first fifty psalms of the *Psalter* (Whitelock, "Alfred").

Alfred died in 899 due to an unknown illness likely connected to digestion. After his death, he was succeeded by his son Edward. Because of his piousness and honourability, the later medieval writers supposedly assigned him the title The Great. This was likely encouraged by Asser's biography, which was favourable to Alfred in all respects.

The State of Religion before Alfred the Great

Before Christianisation, the Anglo-Saxons worshipped pagan gods, just like the Vikings, whom the later generations of Anglo-Saxon marked as heathens. This is not surprising, since both parties belong to the Germanic tribes. The similarity in the names of the gods is great, for example Woden, the god of war for Saxons, was Odin for the Vikings. The same goes for Tyr – Tiw and Thor – Thunar (*Lorenz, Rune3master: Into the Depths* 15). Paganism in England remained embedded until the baptism of Æthelberht of Kent, who was baptized because of marriage. His baptism alone, however, was just the catalyst for the Christianity to spread across the island. Upon his marriage, he agreed that the Pope could send bishops to England to build a monastery in Canterbury, which paved the way for the men of God to start converting the pagans. Bishop Augustine led the Christianisation of Kent. The objective of this mission, which is also referred to as Augustinian mission or Gregorian mission was to baptize the rulers of kingdoms, in hopes that the whole population would adopt the religion (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 28-29). The truth was, however, that religion was by the kings considered as a noble, luxurious thing. They did not force the rest of the population in Christianity, to give a false feeling of freedom to the people – to choose whichever religion they want. This is the reason why the process of Conversion was slow. The bishops were granted to rebuild the old Roman churches and to build more monasteries in order to successfully convert the island.

The Roman priests and bishops were advancing from the South, whereas from the North came monks from Ireland, who practiced Celtic Christianity or Insular Christianity. Many Britons who were driven away by the Anglo-Saxons looked to them, which led to two different versions of Christian practices in England. According to Bede, the meeting gathered by the King Osiwu between the Roman Church and the Celtic Church determined, that the kingdoms of England would adopt the Roman Christianity. The reasons for this were mostly practical, since the religious

practices had different dates for Easter, which divided the kingdoms in their religious practices. Bede emphasised the Easter controversy in his work *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Sharon M. Rowley, the translator and interpreter of his work writes, “The symbolism of Easter remains deeply important to the representation of Christian truth and unity in the OEHE. This is clearly demonstrated by the repeated appeals to the unity of Easter practices and bitter rejection of the Britons” (*The Old English Version of Bede's 'Historia Ecclesiastica'* 91). After the adoption of the Roman Church, the religious practices would remain mostly the same until the reforms of Alfred the Great.

Religion during the Reign of Alfred the Great

Alfred’s reforms in education are closely linked to religion. Despite the fact that Alfred did not change the religious practices as they were, he contributed to more efficient learning about the religion and made it easier for the common people to follow sermons by elevating literacy across England. Since he was a firm believer that the Viking invasion was God’s wrath due to neglect of religion and moral decline in England, he saw the solution from further problems with the heathen army in keeping the nation as humble and pious as possible. As it was previously mentioned, Alfred hired foreign bishops to teach in schools and monasteries. He was careful enough that the hired bishops were not corrupt, and were pure and devout Christians. This would ensure the best possible education and religious teachings to the people. Among other works, Alfred himself translated *Pastoral Care*, by Gregory the Great, which is a list of responsibilities and guidelines on ethics for the clergy. With this translation he achieved, that the less educated clergy who could not read Latin, was able to educate people in English. Consequently, the English people found it easier to follow the teachings. He also funded the building of churches and monasteries, and rebuilding those which were destroyed during the Viking attacks. According to Asser, he gave the fourth of his provisions “to the neighbouring monasteries in all Wessex and Mercia, and also during some years, in turn, to the churches and servants of God dwelling in Wales, Cornwall, Gaul, Brittany, Northumbria, and sometimes, too, in Ireland” (*Life of King Alfred* 60).

One of Alfred’s great accomplishments is the Christianisation of the Danes. Once Guthrum was christened Æthelstan during his baptism, Alfred eliminated, or at least constricted the violent

attacks from the Vikings. It is unlikely that the first Vikings to be baptised fully accepted Christianity, and the assimilation was probably gradual.

The State of Religion after the Death of Alfred the Great

The most notable reform in the field of religion was the English Benedictine Reform. The goal of the reform was to eliminate all secular monks, replace them only with monastic monks and live according to the Rule of Saint Benedict. The movement started in continental Europe and was adopted by King Edgar in England. The reform revived the monastic life and education in England and established many monasteries and churches, which served as centres of learning. Two of the most important figures for the execution of the movement were bishop Æthelwold of Winchester and the Archbishop of York, Oswald of Worcester. The former strongly disapproved of the secular clergy and was a supporter for their expulsion. “Æthelwold could also be an implacable and ruthless opponent, as many former secular clerks and landowners knew to their cost. However, one must be careful to judge Æthelwold by the standards of his own time, not by the timeless standards of Sainthood” (*Bishop Aethelwold: His Career and Influence* 44).

Despite his strong opinions, he was revered as an intellectual, who greatly contributed to the rise of culture and art, and to establishing a strong network of religious and educational establishments.

After the death of King Edgar, whom Æthelwold mentored for the most of his life, people who lost their property due to building new monasteries tried to regain them. The power of the clergy grew weaker as the movement slowed down. New raids and skirmishes with the Norsemen caused the monasteries to limit their prior success. The Church was reformed again after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

The Importance of Religion in Works Set in the Anglo-Saxon Era

The Anglo-Saxon period was a time when religion was for most people a big part of everyday life. This was especially true after the Christianisation of England, because most of the island was in religious unity. The church also ensured that the important positions in the kingdom were supervised and led by monks, which is reflected in the literature as well:

Wessex, I discovered, was very devoted to the law, and all the men of law are priests, every last one of them, which means that the law is the church, and when Mildrith's father died the law had decreed that he owed the church a huge sum, quite beyond his ability to pay, and Alfred, who had the power to lift the debt, refused to do so. (*The Last Kingdom* 172)

It is not surprising, that religion is a constant in every work that this thesis analyses, and rightly so. It was an enormous influence on people's lives and the clergy took the raids as a sign of God's wrath. The Vikings raided monasteries because The Church was wealthy, monasteries were filled with silver, and this was exactly what happened at Lindisfarne. From literary point of view, the omission of religious topics seems almost inevitable, especially in novels discussed in this thesis. All major events that happened were either driven by religion, or explained through the medium of religion. Religion, at least in my opinion, provides a great means of explaining and describing different cultures and offers an insight in their beliefs. During that time, most of the people were religious in one way or another, and revealing their beliefs helps the reader determine their ambitions, opinions and causality of their actions, and compare them to what other characters believe in. In the case of the analysed books, this is very important, because the reader is urged to be the spectator, without identifying with the opinions of either the Vikings or Christians. Both of the sides are very subjective towards one another, but only the reader, in my experience, has the insight in each other's religion to this extent, that they do not become judgmental towards either side. Vikings cannot be perceived merely as savages, because they are religious, and they do honour their gods. The Christians see them as godless heathens, because they in general do not follow the ways of Christianity. The reader is able to remain impartial despite their own beliefs, hence, it is important to include and to some extent explain the preferred religion of the characters.

As it was briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, religion was at the time also very connected to politics. Like Beocca in *The Last Kingdom*, monks and bishops were often the right hands of the kings and most likely advised them towards actions, which were either in accordance with the Christian teachings or in favour of The Church. The inclusion and explanation of the religious status of the period is thus essential for the reader. This makes the reader aware of the different religious aspects and the extent of influence of the religion on various political and social affairs.

Another point, that I would like to make on the subject, is that the religious themes in the works serve also the educational purpose. This is especially true for the analysed works in this thesis, which are very historically correct in connection to religion, with the exception of a few general exaggerations, because Cornwell often derived his information from Asser's biography of Alfred, which is very subjective. Many readers, in my opinion, are more familiar with Christianity than with Norse paganism and mythology, which makes the correct description of their religious traditions and culture valuable and educational for the reader. With the information such as the names and descriptions of gods, celebrations, and rituals, the reader is encouraged to research them, thus expanding their knowledge.

The Inevitable Clash of Religions

This chapter of the thesis will deal with the religious differences with which both of the parties had to deal with when they encountered each other. Two completely different cultures met in unenviable circumstances, which produced several conflicts. The first part of the chapter will discuss the differences from the general and historical point of view, with some examples from the novels, with a rough timeline of the events that are significant for the discussion. The following chapters will focus on the examples from literary and cinematic works only. Both parts will be explained through a historical timeline, and the examples from all analysed works will be provided, to paint a picture of how the religious clash was portrayed.

Vikings raided England with no religious motive. Archaeologist and historian David M. Willson claims, that:

Until the early 830s, raids were carried out with apparently only one motive in mind – the attainment of wealth. The Scandinavians went where the treasure was – to monasteries in the British Isles and to trading emporia in England and France. (85)

When the raiding of the monasteries began, the native inhabitants were frightened when the Vikings were killing the monks. They as Christians viewed them as heathen monsters, who were sent to England as a punishment from God. They prayed and repented to no avail as the Vikings continued to burn the villages and monasteries. It was the Christians first, who perceived and explained the events through the eyes of religion, because in my opinion, there was no other explanation for eradicating villages and monasteries instead of just robbing them. The clash of religions was inevitable from the very beginning of the Viking invasion. There were two cultures, who were not prepared for what was to come, due to social, religious and personal differences between them. The Vikings at first brought only war bands, the purpose of which was killing and pillaging. When the Anglo-Saxons confronted them, from the Christian view it seemed as justice, because the Anglo-Saxons were not the ones who started the bloodshed, and whomever they killed, was a warrior. On the other hand, there were Vikings, who killed everyone they chose to kill, which involved women, children and the clergy. In the eyes of the Christians, they committed almost all of the deadly sins. When the Vikings began to invade for the purpose of gaining land for settlements, Christians would take any measures available to prevent them from doing so to avoid living next to the land of the heathens. The difference between the two religions and their moral and social norms is so vast, that it would be, in my opinion, difficult for them to live in harmony. The Christians had their God and the Vikings had theirs. The first basic difference between the religions deals with polytheism and monotheism. In *The Last Kingdom*, there are several instances, where the Vikings taunt the Christians because of the number of gods both parties worship, and their strength. The conversations in the series and novels often end with “But we’re winning, which means our gods are beating your one god” (*The Last Kingdom* 79). There are also two different sets of principles involved, when it comes to the two religions. Christianity is a religion that teaches peace, although in that time, sins that would be otherwise anti-Christian were forgiven, if they were committed in the name of God. “I shall lie, of course,” Alfred said. Ælswith blinked at him, but the bishop mumbled that the lie would be for God and so forgivable” (*The Last Kingdom* 118). The Vikings also worshipped Gods, which demanded tribute

in the form of bloodshed. “I worship the real gods,' I told him, 'and I am a particular servant of Hoder, and Hoder likes blood and I have given him none in many days” (*The Pale Horseman* 37). These differences would in my opinion cause problems if the cultures were to live together, without anyone changing their beliefs. After the decisive battle at Edington, Guthrum’s army submitted to Alfred and Guthrum accepted the baptism in return for peace and land. Even if his will to be christened was merely a political move, it was a start to gradually convert the again divided England into a kingdom under one God. The battles between Alfred and the Danes did not completely cease after the treaty, but the number and intensity were on a much lower scale. In the terms of dramatic structure, Guthrum’s baptism was the climax of the religious clash, which was followed by the reappraisal, as the rebelling Danes and Guthrum’s successors again, targeted Wessex, and finally the resolution, which was the gradual conversion of Danelaw and the complete Christianization of England.

The Clash of the Religions in the Associated Works

Main Characters of the Associated Works and Their Attitude towards Religion

Because the historical background is so complex, this thesis will deal with the characters and their beliefs separately from the analysis of the depiction of religion in literary and cinematic works. This chapter will be dedicated to the characters who may or may not have been historical figures. Characters who are featured in several works are most likely historical figures or legends, and will be compared based on their religious beliefs in those works. This chapter will also compare different fictional characters, who share similar traits. For easier comprehension, the comparisons between Anglo-Saxon characters and Viking characters will be done separately. Any similarities between individual Viking and Anglo-Saxon characters will also be discussed.

Anglo Saxon Characters and Their Attitude towards Religion

Alfred the Great

The character of Alfred the Great appears in all of the analysed works in this thesis. Since he is a major historical figure, his portrayal in literary and cinematic works is very similar. Bernard Cornwell does not give a lot of information given about his childhood in his book *The Last Kingdom*. In television series *Vikings*, however, Alfred as a child is portrayed as a very intelligent individual, who knows a number of biblical verses by heart. Later in the novels and movie series, Alfred is portrayed as the bishop Asser described him – a cunning, noble, and honest and a devout Christian. Since Asser’s book is one of the best sources and descriptions of Alfred’s life it is no wonder that Cornwell used it to base the character in accordance with his description. In *The Saxon Stories* and its cinematic adaptation, Alfred is often seen praying and asking God for help. *The Saxon Stories* by Cornwell, however, offers an insight in Alfred’s dark secret, when Uhtred of Bebbanburg caught him asking God for forgiveness, for committing adultery with a maid. This is the only thing that separates him from the absolute Christian in the analysed works. “Every man must have remembered that Alfred, before piety caught him in its clammy grip, had been notorious for the women he had pursued” (*The Pale Horseman* 15).

Beocca

Beocca is a priest and advisor to Alfred the Great in Cornwell’s *The Saxon Stories*. When Alfred was still young, Beocca was teaching Uhtred to read and write. After the Danes kidnapped Uhtred and Alfred became king, Beocca became Alfred’s advisor. Beocca is in Cornwell’s books portrayed as even more religious and innocent as Alfred is. He epitomizes the true Christian values, which are especially brought out by his exaggerated innocence and naivety. His attitude could be compared with a father figure, because whenever Uhtred purposely acts or talks against the Christian norm, Beocca is instantly hurt as if he was disappointed in his own child. Uhtred often takes advantage of his piety and innocence because it amuses him when he mocks Christian values in front of him. Beocca uses these opportunities to lecture Uhtred about the faith. “You must have faith. Miracles make believeasy, which is why you should never pray for one. Much better to find God through faith than through miracles” (*The Last Kingdom* 162). Beocca’s passion for God and

his good nature are well presented in the television series as well, but there are not notable discrepancies between the characters.

Uhtred

Uhtred of Bebanburg is the main character in *The Saxon Stories*. His way of viewing religion is especially fascinating, since he is divided between Christianity and paganism even from he was just a child. In *The Last Kingdom*, he is fascinated by the old Anglo-Saxon gods and is constantly asking questions about Woden and his connection to their banner. He reflects on the stories of Woden that the blacksmith of his hometown told him, and compares them to the Christian practices and behaviour of the Christians: “Christians, it seemed to me, were forever weeping and I did not think Woden’s worshippers cried much” (*The Last Kingdom* 9). His doubts about his Christian faith grew even stronger, when he was captured by Ragnar the Fearless, and raised as his son. Living with the Danes, Uhtred was learning about the Viking religion, and as the years went by, he became very fond of their gods. For a child, this is understandable, since nobody was forcing him to worship and pray to the gods, and being a pagan required almost no ethics and behavioural norms, which appealed to him. The Danes taught him about their gods based on logic, which to him was easier to comprehend than believing in miracles. He believed that the reason their gods are superior is that they are beating the Christian God in a battle in Valhalla. Uhtred was very fond of violence, and so were the pagan gods. It was a pleasure for him to serve them, instead of praying and singing gospel songs to appease the Christian God. Uhtred describes their beliefs:

The Danes reckon their dead warriors are carried to Valhalla, the corpse hall of Odin, where they spend their days fighting and their nights feasting and swiving, and I dare not tell the priests that this seems a far better way to endure the afterlife than singing to the sound of golden harps. (*The Last Kingdom* 75)

After Uhtred’s Viking family was slaughtered in revenge, he returned to Wessex and served under Alfred. During this period, the Viking influence on him is obvious, as he starts to be scornful and disrespectful to Beocca and Alfred, and openly contradicts the Christian norms and praises paganism, even if he has to lie for it.

Athelstan

Despite the fact that Athelstan is a fictional character only from the television series *Vikings*, many parallels can be drawn between him and Uhtred. Athelstan was a monk from Lindisfarne, who was captured and taken to Kattegat in Norway as a slave. At first, he was treated poorly as a slave, and he held on to his faith. As time went by and his status remained unchanged, his belief in God started to crumble, due to his unrequited prayers. During his time in Norway, Athelstan was often forced to lie that he was not a Christian anymore, and that he adopted paganism. He was taken on a Viking pilgrimage unbeknownst to him, that he will be the sacrifice to the gods. On that pilgrimage, he like the Doubting Thomas symbolically denied his faith three times. Upon realizing the fact that he was going to be slaughtered, he fled. The Vikings yet again spared his life and he spent several years living with them, mostly peacefully. After he lost his hope of ever returning to England, he seemingly truly converted to paganism and continued his life as a Viking. He joined a raid of England, where he during pillaging received a vision of crucifixion. Soon after his vision, his raiding party was ambushed and Athelstan was tortured and crucified. Before his death, however, King Ecbert orders to spare his life because he sees potential in him. Ecbert and Athelstan quickly bond over translating and writing pagan literature. After a while, Ragnar Lothbrok returned with another raiding party and made a deal with Ecbert to stop raiding if he grants them land. Ecbert agrees to the terms and Athelstan decides to leave with them. One evening, during his prayers, he receives another vision, in which he dies. Moments later, a Viking, who all along doubted that Athelstan converted to paganism, enters the room and kills him. It is worth mentioning, that during his raid of England, Athelstan broke his celibacy with Judith of Northumbria, who was a wife of king Ecbert's son Æthelwulf. Their son would later become King Alfred the Great. Athelstan, just like Uhtred struggled to choose between the religion of their captives and religion of their ancestors. Athelstan, however at the end of his life found his true and only God.

Brida

Brida is one of the strongest female characters in *The Saxon Stories*. She was just as Uhtred captured by Ragnar the Fearless and assimilated into their family. She was captured during a raid, where the Vikings burnt down her village. Brida's attitude to religion is unlike any other characters

in the novels. She rarely shows any interest in religion, and only once in *The Last Kingdom* shares her fondness for the old Saxon religion. She is a brave warrior, who enjoys fighting side by side with Uhtred and exploring new places. Her character can be described as careless and free. With the exception of Uhtred, she rarely shows interest in conversations and besides a few cynical remarks towards the speakers, does not partake in major conversations. According to the leading Vikings during her living with them, she would become a sorceress. Brida never bothered with the future assigned to her. She became the partner of Ragnar Ragnarsson, with whom she sails and raids.

Viking Characters and Their Attitude towards Religion

Ragnar Lothbrok

Ragnar Lothbrok is one of the major characters in the television series *Vikings*. His name is mentioned in Cornwell's *The Last Kingdom* as well, where he is recognized as the father of Ivar the Boneless. There are some reports that he was in fact a real historical figure, and there is a possibility that the time of his placement in the series is to some extent correct, but nothing has been proven. Ragnar's faith in this cinematic adaption fluctuates as well and he too is divided between Christianity and paganism. Ragnar was a devout pagan just like the rest of the Vikings. He was often participating in rituals and praying to Odin for aid. One day their attack on Northumbria went wrong, and king Ælla captured Ragnar and his group of warriors, along with his brother Rollo. One of the conditions for their release was that one of the Vikings be baptised. Rollo agreed, but Ragnar was furious because he betrayed the religion of his people. When Athelstan was living with them in Kattegat, Ragnar eventually came around and started asking questions about Christianity. He and Athelstan would often have talks about both religions. After Floki killed Athelstan, Ragnar transferred his body to a secret location, buried him, and placed a cross on his grave. "I always believed that death is a fate far better than life, for you will be reunited with lost loved ones.

But we will never meet again, my friend. I have a feeling that your God might object to me visiting you in Heaven" (Fimmel, "Born Again" 00:42:20-00:45:19). This part of his speech shows, that he no longer hated Christians after Athelstan died. Ragnar is soon after that harassed by the feeling that his end is near. He gathers an army and leads the attack on Paris, where after negotiating with

the king, badly wounded asks for baptism. After his baptism, he escapes and kills the bishop who baptized him, which would suggest that he accepted christening as a tribute to Athelstan, so he might be able to visit him in heaven.

Ivar the Boneless

Ivar the Boneless was a real historical figure, who is mentioned in *The Last Kingdom*, as well as in Vikings. Both depictions of the characters have many similarities as far as their persona is concerned. They are both presented as angry, scornful towards Christians and aggressive fighters. Both depictions present them as devout pagans, who take pride in mocking the Christian religion and seeding their wrath on the clergy. They share the trait of arguing about religion with them instead of instantly killing them. “There are many gods,” Ivar snapped back, ‘many! Everyone knows that’” (*The Last Kingdom* 79). As much as they are presented ruthless, they are also intelligent and capable of successful manoeuver warfare. Although they are firm believers in their gods, they are not willing to take any chances with the Christian God, which proves that they do not disprove of him, but merely think he is weak. “Ivar insisted that the bishop’s twin sons be held as hostages in case the Christian god changed his mind about the Danes” (*The Last Kingdom* 46). Both characterizations of Ivar the Boneless are strong indicators that he will not be converted at any cost.

Guthrum

Despite Guthrum being one of the central figures for the Christianisation of the Vikings, there is very little information or dialogue with him in the novels, which would allow an insight of his own beliefs. Even Asser in his extensive biography of Alfred the Great stops mentioning him after baptism. It is most likely, that his baptism was not of his own volition, and that would not be baptized, had he not been forced to do so, in order to secure land in England. The novels are very brief in the description of his baptism. When he is mentioned in the novels, he is described as a pagan king who lived up to the expectations of Alfred.

Lagertha

Lagertha is just like Brida a strong female character in series *Vikings*. Despite her being a woman in those times, which would make the status she achieved in the story historically improbable, she is a very important character for the development of the story. The departed wife of Ragnar Lothbrok, is unlike Brida a very religious and spiritual person and often resorts to ritual killings in order to appease the gods. She often visits The Seer, who is an oracle in Kattegat, who is foretelling her future, which is always bleak. To change her fate, she resorts to sacrifice and other religious practices, but nothing ever changes at the oracle. Lagertha has one of the strongest faiths of all characters, especially the Vikings. She does not abandon her religion despite the fact that no prayer to Odin and Freyja helped her improve her future. She is also not willing to trade her beliefs for love, because even the death of Ragnar Lodbrok did not inspire her to be baptised for the same reason as Ragnar. “Who knows, Ragnar, what the gods have in store for us. But this, I can never imagine. If you have gone to Heaven, then we will never meet again” (Winnick, “The Dead” 00:20:00-00:20:19).

The Seer, Floki and Storri

These three characters will be described together, as they share a number of traits. The Seer and Floki are the characters from the series *Vikings* and Storri from the novel *The Last Kingdom*. All three are closely connected to their gods, since they all possess the power to speak to them, each in their own manner. The Seer is able to see the future of people, and predict the outcome of battles and represents the closest thing people would have to god on Earth. He is the most spiritual and religious person of all characters, due to the fact that he sees and hears gods’ will and intentions. Floki, on the other hand, is a very religious individual, who lives for the gods. He has visions, according to which he makes decisions about his life. One of such visions led to him murdering Athelstan, because Floki is a firm believer that all other religions are poisonous to his. Storri is a fortune-teller from the novel *The Last Kingdom*, who predicts the outcome of wars using rune sticks. His most loyal believer was Ubba, who made his every major decision based on his predictions. With the exception of Floki, these characters are both minor, but crucial to the description of the religious state of individuals, who followed them.

The Saxon Stories

This chapter will deal with some of the books from *The Saxon Stories*, which will be analyzed separately. The analysis will maintain the historical timeline of events in connection to religion during the time of King Alfred the Great. Because *The Last Kingdom* and *The Pale Horseman* are the first novels of the series and deal with the majority of Alfred's achievements as a king, they will be analysed in greater detail than the rest. These books introduce the clash of the religions, which is consequently better described than in the rest of the novels, where due to the short time periods in the novels, the religious status remains more or less the same. The analysis of the books that follow *The Last Kingdom* and *The Pale Horseman* will be done in order to cover the story of Alfred the Great, and the question of religion until his death, and to tell the complete tale of his life from religious perspective. *Lords of the North* and *Death of Kings* will follow the analysis.

The Last Kingdom

The Last Kingdom is the first book of the series, and begins with the arrival of the Viking raid party came to Northumbria. When the news of their arrival reaches Bebbanburg, the home of Uhtred, the immediate response from his father is "the devil has opened his bowels" (Cornwell 7), which is the first religious reference in the book regarding the Vikings. The story starts long after the first raid of Lindisfarne, so the Viking attacks were nothing new for the characters in the story. Uhtred's stepmother, crossing herself, responds to the news with "God and all his Saints preserve us" (Cornwell 7), which shows that they were aware of what that could mean if the situation was to escalate. It is also evident, that the first reaction of common people was not to try to defend with a battle, but to pray and ask God for help with the threat. After the Vikings decapitate Uhtred's brother during a scout mission, the consensus was to help king Ælla and Osbert reclaim Eoferwic, which was captured by the Danish army. When they are preparing and riding towards the battlefield, Uhtred's interests in religion start to unravel, when he starts asking his father about his ancestry and their pagan Gods, upon seeing the wolf's head on his father's banner. The father was not happy about his son's inquiry about Woden, but did acknowledge the fact that Uhtred is right.

“‘I just heard it,’ I said, hoping I would get away with the evasion without being hit, ‘and I know we are descended from Woden.’ ‘We are,’ my father acknowledged, ‘but we have a new God now’” (Cornwell 13-14).

It is difficult to say for certain, what his father’s opinion about religion was, based on his answer, but the fact that Uhtred was afraid of being hit shows, that blasphemy and talking about other gods was punishable – at least within the family. Riding to the battle, Uhtred would often talk to a priest Beocca, who was trying to teach him if Uhtred was to become king. In Beocca’s opinion, “a king should be able to read and write” (Cornwell 16), which shows that the clergy was educated and eager to teach. There is another instance, that shows the knowledge of the priests, when Uhtred talks about religion, and mistakes Heaven for Valhalla. Beocca patiently explains his error, and continues with: “‘I can see we must teach you a proper catechism when this is done,’ the priest said sternly” (Cornwell 18). They, however, refused to fight in battles, since this was still against the etiquette of a monk. They, just like Beocca at Eoferwic, stood nearby and prayed to God for aid. During the battle for Eoferwic, comes a turning point for Uhtred, which finally pushes him over the edge about whether he believes or worships the Christian God. When he thought the war was won by his father, he was sure: “We had won, God had given us victory...” (Cornwell 20), but the reality came soon as the Anglo-Saxons were immediately ambushed and slaughtered by the Vikings.

The first dialogue about religion of the Vikings comes after the battle, when Ravn talks to the kidnapped Uhtred about Odin, which was the beginning of his transformation from a confused Christian to a devout pagan. There he also learns about the rituals and the Danish superstitions, as Ravn explains to him the importance of runesticks and auguries, which are used to predict fate of the inquirer. At this point, there is a noticeable contrast between the conversations about religion between Uhtred and his father or Beocca, and between Uhtred and Ravn. When Uhtred was inquiring about religion among his own people and family, he was given reproachful answers and scornful attitude, whereas the Vikings at this point did not care about the Christian boy asking questions about their religion, and patiently and kindly answered the questions. When Uhtred was captured by Ragnar and made to live in their household, there was no pressure made on him to convert to paganism, as it was the case when he returned back to Wessex. “We’ll make a Dane of you yet” (Cornwell 26) was the pleased response from his captor, when he saw him wearing the

Thor's hammer. Uhtred as well, noticed the difference between the religions and their attitude towards life, as he narrates:

The hammer was the sign of Thor, who was a Danish god almost as important as Odin, as they called Woden, and sometimes I wondered if Thor was the more important god, but no one seemed to know or even care very much. There were no priests among the Danes, which I liked, because priests were forever telling us not to do things or trying to teach us to read or demanding that we pray, and life without them was much more pleasant. (Cornwell 26)

The previous article about the importance of religion in these works discussed the clergy being put on high positions, which is what in *The Last Kingdom* is the next event relevant for the discussion. Uhtred is being ransomed back to the English at the court of King Egbert, where he sees the Archbishop Wulfhere, who pledged allegiance to the Danes. This is the first instance of a corrupt member of the clergy in the book. Beside him, as a contrast between devout and a hypocrite, was Beocca, who prayed for Uhtred's safety during the negotiations.

Uhtred was bought by Ragnar, and slowly assimilated into their society. During his stay with the Danes, the Vikings were again presented as the more tolerant religion, which, in my opinion comes as a surprise, due to the fact that in the novel, are numerous scenes of very explicit violence from their part, and the Christians' descriptions of them are not flattering. Their tolerance is shown when Ragnar and Uhtred are having a conversation about the Anglo-Saxons, who still lived nearby. "Ragnar took care not to disturb their lives. The local priest was allowed to live and give services in his church that was a wooden shed decorated with a cross" (Cornwell 30). If the power was significantly on the side of the Anglo-Saxons, they would, in my opinion, eradicate the pagans, let alone left them in peace to perform their rituals. Ragnar's motives for peace are a combination of disinterest in the religious life of a Christian, and carefulness. He explains to Uhtred that "you can't live somewhere, if the people don't want you to be there. You either slaughter them all or learn to live with them" (Cornwall 30). It becomes evident that during Uhtred's stay with the Danes, he started to become more familiar with their religion and culture. Some observations he makes can be analysed and compared with the Christian tradition. He notices, that there were many gods and goddesses, some of which were particular to their household (Cornwell 31), which can be compared to the Christian saints which are to this day popular in some households as their

patron saints. His opinions of Christianity stronger and more open while he lives as a Dane, and often compares Christianity with paganism, the former of which, he does not miss. He enjoys the idea that he does not have to endure the traditional Christian way of worshipping, through reading and attending sermons, which, for a child, is in my opinion applicable to this day. Further in the story another incident happens, which might not be in close connection with religion, but it can be perceived as such through the eyes of Christian moral values. During child's play between Uhtred, his bully Sven and Uhtred's sister Thyra from the Viking family, Sven pins Thyra to the tree and starts undressing her. Uhtred intervenes and drives him away with the sword, and tells Ragnar the story. Ragnar goes for revenge and blinds Sven in one eye. This cannot be directly associated with Christian moral norms, since revenge and anger are among the cardinal sins, but so is lust, which Ragnar punishes by his own hand. The difference between Christianity and Norse paganism in this example is that the Christians are depending on God to give the final judgement on their enemies and themselves, whereas the Vikings settle justice personally, and depend on gods to judge only their actions. This is evident in many events in the book, such as the Christians praying and depending mostly on God, instead of rebelling and remove the threat themselves, like the Vikings. Uhtred spends a lot of time thinking about religion, and often draws parallels between what he is experiencing with the Danes and what he experienced with the English. His religious stream of consciousness is present throughout the novel, as he finds out that the religion of the Vikings is so different from his old one that he struggles to understand what exactly paganism requires and what are the religious norms, besides fighting and dying in battle. Uhtred started to see the bigger picture, after he attended some of their holidays and rituals. He says "after the Yule feast I discovered something new about the Danes and their gods" (Cornwell 39), as he proceeds to vividly describe the bloody sacrifices and rituals, which would, in my opinion, frighten any ten year old child, who is not used to it. There is, in my opinion, a sense of awe in his mind after he describes the rituals, when he says:

I thought of the blades held over the pit of blood, I thought of the god stirring in his corpse hall to send a blessing on these men, and I knew that all England would fall unless it found a magic as strong as the sorcery of these strong men. I was only ten years old, but on that night I knew what I would become. (Cornwell 40-41)

The second part of the novel describes battles between the Vikings, Mercia and Wessex. At the beginning of the second part, the second interaction between the Vikings and the English clergy is presented, when the Vikings come Gegnesburh in Mercia. The Mercian defences flee the scene, and the only people standing between the town and the Danes were three monks, who kneeled before Ragnar and prayed. He urged Uhtred to be his translator as he inquired about the food and treasure. When the first monk lied about the lack of food, he was killed on the spot and so was the second one. The third one was asked about the treasure, to which he replied: “We are a poor church, with little treasure” (Cornwell 44). He was killed as well, and Uhtred tells that there was a lot of buried silver found after the interrogation of another monk. There are two possible theories for the death of the monks; either they died protecting the earthly valuables, or they did it out of care for the people, to insure the town stays wealthy. The novel, however, suggests the former, as there are several other instances where the clerical greed is put under the spotlight. Christianity is up to this point, with the exception of the very pious Beocca, presented in a very negative way, beginning with the hypocrisy and treason of own beliefs by Archbishop Wulfhere. When the raid of Gegnesburh was over, Ragnar found a carved figurine of an angel in the monastery and just like Uhtred when he was kidnapped, started asking about Christianity. Uhtred explained everything he knew, and left Ragnar semi-impressed by the elements of resurrection and the trinity of one God, but unlike Uhtred, he was too proud and faithful in his own religion, that he was not convinced to the extend Uhtred was. He justifies the claims that the Christian God is not a god worth worshipping, by asking a simple question: “The Christian god is losing. Otherwise, why would we be here? Why would we be winning?” (Cornwell 45). Uhtred labelled his logic as unassailable (Cornwell 45), which even further strengthened his desire for being one of the pagans, but deep down something still bothered him, since from the beginning he saw Ragnar kill the monks, he was riddled with subconscious guilt, as he felt that God was watching him sin and was preparing a dreadful punishment (Cornwell 45). The next notable event from the religious perspective is the introduction of king Æthelred, who marched his army to support Burghred against the Vikings. Before the battle, the Mercians’ tactic is described as a dozen of monks who are trying to pray the Vikings out of their country, carrying banners of saints and holy water (Cornwall 47). This tactic compared to the Viking war cries and uplifting chants in preparation for war is completely different and shows the difference between the beliefs of Christians and Vikings. This difference however does not necessarily include the difference between the strength of their faith, because the Norse

gods did not fail their worshippers, so the Vikings had every reason to keep their faith strong, whereas the Christian God was failing, and yet they were summoning his aid on the battlefield. Vikings, however, were not completely detached from their gods and superstitions before the battle, as Ubba was religiously looking for signs in runesticks at this battle, to help him determine the right time for the attack and what will be the likely outcome. This is also the battle, where Alfred is introduced as a character for the first time in the novel. He is praying in his tent as Uhtred is sneaking behind it, listening to his crying and asking God for forgiveness for his sins. Alfred is repenting for committing adultery, which is among the cardinal sins. One of the most important characters in terms of spreading and strengthening Christianity in England is at the very beginning of his entry to the story presented as a sinner and a coward. “Spare me, God, spare me. I am a sinner” (Cornwell 51), are the first Alfred’s lines in the novel. His attitude towards God and the Christian norms could be questioned at this time, because he gives the impression that he is asking for forgiveness and survival of the battle because he is afraid to die, and not out of piety. Beside him was Beocca, who represents everything good in Christian faith, and helps him recover from his dread with Christian teachings:

“‘God sees your remorse,’ Beocca said, ‘and he will lift you up. Welcome the temptation, lord,’ he went on urgently, ‘welcome it, resist it, and give thanks to God when you succeed. And God will reward you, lord, he will reward you.’” (Cornwell 52)

The battle did not happen and instead, they opted for truce. Both parties gathered in the middle of the battlefield to discuss the terms, after which the English surrendered Mercia. The next major event for Uhtred was meeting Brida, who was a girl, who did not talk much about religion, but she does share her opinion about it to Uhtred, when they are waiting for the Vikings to kill the priests in Bebbanburg, when she sees him refusing to participate in the killing.

“‘You think the Christian god is watching us.’ ‘No,’ I said, wondering how she knew that I had been thinking about that very question. ‘He was never our god,’ she said fiercely. ‘We worshipped Woden and Thor and Eostre and all the other gods and goddesses, and then the Christians came and we forgot our gods, and now the Danes have come to lead us back to them.’”(Cornwell 86)

This is the only occasion when Brida shares her beliefs in the novels, and the fact that she says this soon after the introduction of her character suggests that she was always in favour of the old Saxon gods, and never fully accepted Christianity.

The religious theme continues with the Vikings tracking down King Edmund, who hid in a monastery. The Vikings wanted his allegiance, but during the negotiations, they were distracted by a painting of Saint Sebastian, who was penetrated with at least a score of arrows (Cornwell 77). They again, as opposed to the Christians, took interest in the foreign religious story about Saint Sebastian, who lived after being shot several times, due to his strong faith in God. It was Ivar the Boneless, who was particularly interested in the story, and passionate to witness a miracle of God rescuing people from certain death. After King Edmund demands that the Vikings be baptized in return for his allegiance, Ivar demands that he demonstrates the power of God, by recreating the miracle of Saint Sebastian. They stripped him naked and shot arrows at him until his death, on account of which he was later declared a martyr. This shows another instance, where the Vikings are careful not to anger the wrong god. They have to make sure that they are fighting for the stronger god, unlike Christians, who believe in their God, despite the fact that they are on the verge of defeat.

The Viking went on raiding, pillaging and killing, especially monasteries and nunneries, with an open hatred to Christians. “We arrived, they screamed, the young ones were raped [the nuns], and then they died. But not all of them, despite the famous tales” (Cornwell 83).

Upon arrival to Bebbanburg, the story introduces a widowed blacksmith Ealdwulf, who is a minor character, in the novel, but holds significance in connections to his beliefs. He, like Brida, is a follower of the old Saxon gods, despite living in a Christian society. He joins the Danes and Uhtred by his own initiative, which shows that he was willing to leave his life among the Christians behind and start his new, openly pagan life, despite his dislike for the Danes. “‘They might worship the right gods,’ Ealdwulf said grudgingly, ‘but I’d still like to see them gone’” (Cornwell 89). The novel continues with the Vikings preparing for winter and for attack on Wessex, which is the next event that is of significance for analysing the religious aspect. The battle begins at Reading, where the Viking forces are met with the Anglo-Saxon army, which is led by Alfred and Æthelred. Uhtred scornfully guesses, that Alfred was probably praying during the course of the battle, and after the Danes convincingly defeat the Anglo-Saxons, he sees him riding away surrounded by priests.

Uhtred, who narrates the story, during the lengthy description of the battle writes: “Good Lord deliver us” (Cornwell 105) in a single line, before continuing to describe the bloody aftermath of the battle. This line from the Christian prayer can be understood that Uhtred saw remorse, or acknowledged the horrors of war, because this was his first major battle in which he participated. It shows that the religious teachings from his early childhood are hard to erase from the subconscious mind, and that intense experiences bring them to the surface. After the battle Uhtred found out, that among the dead Anglo-Saxons was his uncle Æthelwulf, whom Ragnar had killed. Ragnar then proceeds to put a sword in Æthelwulf’s hands as a sign of bravery during the battle, so “that the gods could take the Mercian’s soul to the great hall where brave warriors feast with Odin” (Cornwell 106). This is the only example in the novel, where one side honours the dead opponents and performs a religious ritual in order to send them to afterlife. There were no such actions from the opposite side described in the book, which again represents the Vikings as the moral victors of the story.

The battle continues in Ashdown where the Anglo-Saxons make their stand against the Viking army that pursued them. This battle is of great importance from the religious point of view, because this is the first major battle the Anglo-Saxons win in the novel, and all the glory for the victory is assigned to God. When Alfred and his brother divided the armies and attacked separately, Uhtred again recalls the priests calling on their God to give the West Saxon swords strength, and that day Odin was sleeping and the Christian God was awake (Cornwell 110). Uhtred continues to explain, that the Englishmen long after the battle give credit to God for the victory, because the war leaders were praying before the battle (Cornwell 110), which shows how little recognition the soldiers who fought at Ashdown received, when everything was attributed to God, in comparison to the Vikings, who glorified their soldiers as well as their gods. “There were no angels with fiery swords present, despite what the priests now say. At least I saw none” (Cornwell 111). The battle took the life of Alfred’s brother Æthelred, which meant that Alfred would be coronated king. Uhtred’s opinion about his coronation is unfavourable, since he thinks that Alfred had powerful friends among nobles and the clergy, and that the fact that he went to Rome where the pope was eager to have him as king was just a legend, with which he won over their support (Cornwell 111). He contradicts the popular belief, which was documented in the biography of Alfred by Asser, who writes:

King Æthelwulf sent his above-named son Alfred to Rome, with an honourable escort both of nobles and commoners. Pope Leo at that time presided over the apostolic see, and he anointed as king the aforesaid child Alfred in the town, and, adopting him as his son, confirmed him. (Asser 5)

This suggests that there was a dispute about Alfred being coronated instead of Æthelred's son, who was fourteen years old. Alfred's first act as king was to propose a conference on a neutral land, where he would propose a treaty with the Danes. During the negotiations, which according to Uhtred lasted for a week, a brave and pious leader replaces the impression of Alfred as a sinner and a hypocrite from the very beginning. Uhtred describes him yelling at the Danes despite them causing mayhem and chaos. "“What we want,’ he explained again and again, ‘is peace. You need it, and it is my duty to give it to my country. So you will leave my country’” (Cornwell 114). The role of the priests was to document the conversations, which shows their eagerness to obtain the documentation for either practical use or to document history. It was the documentation of such events that was crucial for history to be known to the future generations, even today. In the novel, the representatives of the church are shown as men of intellect and culture, the two virtues, in which the Vikings were described as lacking. This was proven during these negotiations, where Alfred stood firmly but patiently, while the Vikings yelled and disputed. Uhtred describes, that during the negotiations, Alfred would stop the process in order to go to church to pray twice a day. How that man prayed! (Cornwell 114) recalls Uhtred, describing Alfred's piety, which was the start of his reign under the name of God. The story continues, with the kidnapping of Uhtred and Brida by the Anglo-Saxons, who were still under the impression that they were with the Danes involuntarily. Here the innocence and naivety of the pious monk Beocca really come to perspective, for he still believes the lies of Uhtred, despite the fact that he fought against the Anglo-Saxons with pleasure, and that he mocked Christianity in front of him. Beocca overlooked Uhtred's behaviour and compared his living with Danes with martyrdom. Alfred's wife Ælswith asked Brida about her origins, to which she falsely presented herself as a bastard child of King Edmund, who was killed like Saint Sebastian by Ivar the Boneless. This puts Ælswith in a dilemma, because she now saw Brida as tainted by sin (Cornwell 116), and thus not pure in the eyes of God. This shows the strength of prejudice of the Christians in the novel, because Brida was condemned the moment she was conceived. In their eyes, she had to be locked in a nunnery for life (Cornwell 116). Alfred knew that Uhtred's wish was to be a soldier, and when the topic of the conversation

was focused on his future, Ælswith was eager to send him to an abbot who would teach him to read and write. To Alfred's interjection about Uhtred's real wishes, she replied with: "“what use is a soldier who cannot read God's word?”" (Cornwell 117), which is a repetitive reasoning for reading and learning in the novel. Education and learning were in the novel closely connected with religion, and so Uhtred was sent to Abbot Hewald for education and Brida to a nunnery. They escaped the escort, however, and returned to the Danes. During their stay religious themes are mostly nonexistent, with the exception of Uhtred's lengthy comparison between Yule and Christmas, which will be discussed in a separate article of this thesis. The major event of the story follows, as Sven and Kjartan come in the middle of the night, while Brida and Uhtred are in the forest making charcoal, and burn the house of Ragnar. They performed this act of revenge called hall-burning because Ragnar blinded Sven and later refused to employ Kjartan as his shipmaster. Uhtred and Brida helplessly watched as their Danish family was killed. They sift through the debris and find gold coins, with the word Allah, which is the first reference of Islam in the book, meaning that the owner of the coins was familiar with the culture. Islam, however, is of no significance for the rest of the novel. At this time, Uhtred decides to join Alfred, because his Danish family was dead, and he felt pride as an Englishman at Ashdown (Cornwell 129).

The second part of the novel is about the battles between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, in which Uhtred now fights for the English. As far as religion is concerned, this part too, is heavily concentrated on Christianity, and the insight in the Viking culture is rare. Uhtred was gone for a while before joining Alfred. He stayed with his relatives in Mercia helping with keeping the Welsh at bay, until Alfred sent a monk to ask him for help with the Danes. When Uhtred comes back to Wessex, Alfred's religious reforms are starting to appear in the novel, because he is building a church bigger than his own hall. Upon arrival at the court, Uhtred describes it with the words: "In one room there were a dozen monks copying books, their pens scratching busily, and there were three chapels, one of them beside a courtyard that was full of flowers" (Cornwell 137). This description shows how the culture and religious life flourished under the reign of Alfred. Uhtred at the king's court discusses war tactics with Alfred, who is writing during the conversation, proving his knowledge and eagerness to encourage education. During this time, Uhtred had several conversations with Beocca about religion and his future. In one of the conversations, Beocca gives a biblical reference to Methuselah when he wishes him a long life, after making several points about the importance of Uhtred's being a devout Christian, in order to beat the Danes.

As it was mentioned in the historical background of Alfred's reforms, he created a navy, and the following events that happen are related to the very beginning of it, when he puts Uhtred in charge of a ship. The ships are named using biblical references, in order to honor the God with its soldiers. Uhtred's ship was named Heahengel, which translates to Archangel. Other ships were named in a similar fashion, for example, Ceruphin, and Cristenlic, which translate to Cherub and Christian, and the Evangelista. The ships contained priests as well as the soldiers, which was adopted by their practices from battles on land. The priests would pray and the soldiers would fight, as it was customary. It soon becomes evident that Alfred's wish to have literacy also among the soldiers, or at least the leaders is justified, because during the first naval battles, the English required archers, which could be obtained by writing a letter to him. The idea of writing him, however, was dismissed, when Uhtred proposed a different solution. His navy won several battles across the sea, and in one instance, they managed to obtain a Danish prisoner, who, according to Uhtred, was probably hanged or beheaded, for Alfred did not extend Christian mercy to pagan pirates (Cornwell 148).

When Uhtred returned from his voyages, he was urged to marry to a poor woman called Mildrith, who was in Alfred's mind the perfect woman to try to turn Uhtred to a devout Christian. Upon Uhtred's refusal to marry, Alfred promised him that he would make him commander of the entire fleet, to which he finally agreed. With this agreement, the novel begins its last event, which is the war between Wessex and the Danish army. The English thought that it was coming from three different sides. Guthrum was waiting in Werham, and Ubba and Halfdan were coming from the North. They soon learn that by "God's intervention", according to Beocca (Cornwell 175), Halfdan was killed in Ireland and so the only armies Wessex has to face are Ubba's and Guthrum's. Alfred sends for Uhtred, who leaves his pregnant wife behind, in order to discuss naval war tactics. After the conversation about war, the topic touches Uhtred's marriage and his debt to the church, which was mentioned in a previous chapter. Despite Uhtred being one of the most important commanders, Alfred refused to acquit him of debt, saying: "'The debt, Uhtred,' he said reprovingly, 'is to the church, so you must welcome it. Besides, you're young, you have time to pay. The Lord, remember, loves a cheerful giver'" (Cornwell 177). This saying was Alfred's motto in the book, and he is described to have followed it throughout his reign, as he was giving money for every cause he saw suitable. Asser includes the passage about this in his biography of Alfred, which suggests that Cornwell derived this from his biography. Asser writes:

the third portion [of money] was assigned to foreigners who came to him out of every nation far and near ; whether they asked money of him or not, he cheerfully gave to each with wonderful munificence according to their respective worthiness, exemplifying what is written, ' God loveth a cheerful giver.' (Asser 59-60)

Shortly after the conversation with Uhtred, Alfred and Guthrum met in the vicinity of Werham to negotiate for peace, because no army was in a position to want a battle, due to the terrain and the number of soldiers the armies had. They agreed that the Vikings could peacefully spend the winter in Werham, under the condition that Alfred supplied them with food. Both parties had to provide hostages to enforce the treaty, among one of which was Uhtred. Alfred also insisted that Guthrum swears with the hand on Christian relics, among which were a ring of Mary Magdalene and the feather of the dove from Noah's ark, and on the bone of Guthrum's dead mother. This signifies the sanctity and importance the Christians in the novel gave to the relics.

Uhtred was again with the Danes but quickly escaped, because he wanted to return to his wife and child, whom he learned have been taken away in hiding, after the Danes broke the truce. Uhtred orders a departure of the whole fighting fleet to try to find his wife, whom he was sure was taken to Defnascir by Odda. They sail away in a big storm, where they see the whole Danish fleet struggling with the waves. Uhtred describes the stormy sea as "the devil's playground" (Cornwell 185), which is interesting, because he rarely uses Christian metaphors. As Uhtred's fleet was watching the majority of the Danish ships be destroyed by the waves and the cliffs, a priest on his ship, Willibald, asks Uhtred to pray to the Norse god of the sea Njord, while he prayed to the Christian God for a safe trip. This shows how life-threatening situations affected some people, even priests, who are willing to give every god a chance in order to survive. The storm eventually calmed down, and Uhtred's fleet was able to dock on the beach, but his wife was not where he anticipated. He ordered his fleet to march north, to meet the army Ubba was leading there, and hope that Mildrith was there. During his trip, he again has a stream of consciousness about religion and Alfred. He admits that he is driven by pride, which Christianity considers a sin, but he does not regret it and even finds it appropriate as a warrior. His mind then wandered to Alfred, whom he also believes to be proud, by justifying his claims: "Alfred preached humility, he even pretended to it, loving to appear in church with bare feet and prostrating himself before the altar, but he never possessed true humility. He was proud, and men feared him because of it" (Cornwell 191).

Arriving at the Cynuit Hill, Uhtred learned that his wife and soon are safe in a town called Cridianton, and the last battle of the novel was beginning. The priests again participated in this battle, but this time some of them, like Willibald, fought alongside warriors, putting aside the sixth commandment in order to do everything in their power to win. Their mentality changed from the previous battles, where they would stand at a safe distance and pray. Uhtred went with priests and Odda to meet Ubba before the battle, to discuss possible terms. During their conversation, Uhtred uses religion as leverage to try and force Ubba, who was a very religious and superstitious man, to surrender. Uhtred explains the deaths of the Danish fleet by saying that Njord took the lives of the Danes, implying that his own gods have stranded him. He lies to him about performing the ritual with the runesticks, and telling him that the gods have chosen the victory for Uhtred. Ubba and Storri, who was the oracle of the Vikings, religiously used the ritual with the runesticks to predict the outcomes of battles. After the intense conversations, Ubba rejected all possibilities for truce, so the fighting began. Before Uhtred went to execute his tactics, which later proved to be essential for the victory of the English, Willibald the priest gave him one last blessing: “God go with you, whichever god it is” (Cornwell 201). This again shows how much tolerance did some of the Christian priests and secular people gain towards the religion of a friend. The amount of religious prejudice significantly drops in the last few chapters. Uhtred chose his god, and at the last stages of the battle thanked Odin for giving them victory (Cornwell 206). When Uhtred kills Ubba, Odda orders his body to be dismembered. This shows that the Christians were not prepared to show the same curtesy Ragnar showed to Æthelwulf, when he respected his bravery and tried to send him to the Viking version of Heaven. Uhtred protested to the dismemberment and allowed him to be buried with a mound over his grave, which would ensure sending him to Valhalla. The novel concludes with Uhtred reminiscing about his life and past experiences, without the religious note involved.

The Pale Horseman

The story continues in Exanceaster, where Alfred is waiting for negotiations for peace with Guthrum, whom he besieged while Uhtred was fighting Ubba. Uhtred recalls seeing him in a makeshift Church, while a bishop was conducting service (Cornwell 9). Alfred refuses to work on Sundays, despite the fact that there is an army of Danes nearby behind the walls. This and the fact that he has a dedicated spot in a camp during a war to call his church show that his priorities always

lie with worshipping God. This mentality proves with the other members who were praying with Alfred, when Uhtred learns from Beocca that Odda had taken credit for killing Ubba. Beocca tries to calm him with the words: “this is a time for prayer, not for quarrels” (Cornwall 10), because people were praying to thank God for Ubba’s death. Uhtred just like the warriors who fought at Ashdown in *The Last Kingdom*, received no praise at that moment, despite the fact that he was the one who killed him. Uhtred interrupted the service by drawing a sword at Odda, for which he was sent to Alfred’s quarters, who were described as his private chapel (Cornwell 11), which suggests that Alfred had many places sacred to him, where he worshipped. Alfred’s cousin Wulfhere told him that he was acquitted of his rash behavior and explained to him why Odda is more suitable to receive credit for killing Ubba:

Odda the Younger will become one of the richest men in Wessex, and he'll lead more troops and pay more priests than you can ever hope to do, so men won't want to offend him, will they? They'll pretend to believe him, to keep him generous. And the king already believes him, and why shouldn't he? Odda arrived here with Ubba Lothbrokson's banner and war axe. He dropped them at Alfred's feet, then knelt and gave the praise to God, and promised to build a church and monastery at Cynuit (Cornwell 12)

This illustrates that the priorities of the Church lie with the financial support of the clergy and their establishments, despite the fact that it would be morally wrong to do so, if it meant covering the truth in order to gain it. It seems that the Church is going against the basic principles of morality, which it is so eager to teach to the realm. Uhtred realizes that in order to gain Alfred’s trust, one has to flatter his piety and assign everything to God (Cornwell 12). Uhtred is forced to put on a penitent robe and repent for his actions in front of Alfred. This was the first time that this practice of humiliation was described in the series. He was urged to grovel between two columns of men and kneel at the altar, before kissing the cloth, in order to be forgiven by God and Alfred. During the narration of the event, Uhtred grudgingly describes Alfred as a man who loved his god, loved the church and passionately believed that the survival of Wessex lay in obedience to the church and so he would protect the church as fiercely as he would fight for his country (Cornwell 14). It is evident, that Alfred was the first king who dedicated himself and his kingdom to religion to that extent. He closely connected the church and politics, which he saw most important for keeping the peace. His religious side, however, brought enemies upon him, and one of them was Æthelwold,

who was Alfred's nephew and a rightful heir to the throne before him. When Uhtred's penance was over, Æthelwold asked Wulfhere to teach him how to fight, because "Wessex needs a king who can fight, instead of pray" (Cornwell 16). This can mean either that Æthelwold was dissatisfied with Alfred's way of ruling, or he was just bitter because Alfred was chosen to be the king over him. Uhtred's description of him would suggest the latter, because according to him, he was "much better looking than Alfred, but foolish, flippant and usually drunk" (Cornwell 11). Similar were the thoughts of Uhtred, who was so humiliated that he was thinking about the time where he would be rejoined by Ragnar's forces, attack Alfred's army and make him wear the same robe he made him wear, before killing him.

After a while, Uhtred at Exanceaster notices a large crowd by the church. There was a Dane tied to the gates, and three Frisian soldiers were yelling, "Come and fight the heathen! Three pennies to make the bastard bleed! Be a good Christian! Hurt a pagan!" (Cornwell 19). This event is an example of using religion for personal gratification, because to be a good Christian was to be pious and merciful, not selling violence under the pretence of honouring one's faith by acting on it. Uhtred saved the Dane, who was called Haesten, by lying to the Frisians that the king ordered all prisoners to be taken to him. He then proceeded to take Haesten himself, to which Frisians protested but Uhtred rode off before them, and freed Haesten once they were safe. He still dreamt of revenge on Alfred and waited for his cue to join back with the Danes. This came soon, because chaplain Willibald came to his house to deliver the news, that Alfred and Guthrum had negotiated for peace, and Guthrum was to leave Exanceaster, which Willibald again thought was an act of God. Uhtred scornfully protested, because he was tired of the reoccurring notion that God was responsible for everything good that happened to Wessex. At this point Willibald mentions, that Guthrum has been interested in the Christian religion, which gave them hope that the Danes would start to adopt Christianity. Willibald is sure that when that happens there will be a permanent peace (Cornwell 23). This demonstrates that the consensus was that the only way to have peace is by converting the Danes to Christianity. He then proceeds to call it "Christian peace" (Cornwell 23), which then solidifies this statement, that if there is ever going to be peace, it will be brought by Christianity. At this point in the novel, Alfred was seriously considering baptizing Guthrum, which was the first such thought produced in the story, and Guthrum was in his mind starting to realize the power of the Christian God (Cornwell 24). Uhtred also learned that Guthrum offered hostages as a token of peace, among which was Ragnar, whom Uhtred planned to join after the treaty. With

his plans now ruined, he refuses to join Wessex, because he does not feel welcome due to religious differences. Everywhere he goes, people are crossing themselves in front of him because they recognize his paganism. His wish is to live with the Danes, but whenever he brings that up to his wife Mildrith, they get into a fight about the religion of their child. Mildrith strongly opposes paganism, because she is a devout Christian, but Uhtred's patriarchal pride comes to the surface when he points out: "'He's my son too,' I said, 'and he will worship the gods I worship'" (Cornwell 25).

After the treaty, Uhtred describes Exanceaster as a city that came to life, where "psalms were being sung in all the churches and Alfred, to mark his victory, was sending gifts to every monastery and nunnery" (Cornwell 25). This indicates that Alfred was living up to his piety and was celebrating victories by funding holy establishments and the clergy, which annoyed Uhtred and Æthelwold, who now talked about betraying Alfred. They were not the only ones that were unhappy about Alfred's way of ruling. Wulfhere was also displeased with the significance the people of Wessex were giving to religion. He complains: "'They've been re-consecrating the bishop's church,' he grumbled. Hours upon damned hours! Nothing but chanting and prayers, hours of prayers just to get the taint of the Danes out of the place'" (Cornwell 26). Alfred's opponents grow in numbers from the beginning he started to negotiate with the Danes instead of fighting them, and relying on prayer to make them see the strength of the Christian God and convert. They do not believe that God has sent peace, and are fully expecting Guthrum to attack again. Uhtred asks Wulfhere to send greetings to Ragnar and Brida, who were Alfred's hostages, and he was their keeper.

After the peace had settled in, Uhtred saw a ship sailing towards the shore near his home, who was coming for the abandoned ship, which Uhtred used to command, the Heahengel. Leofric, who was a commander of the ship, explained to him, that the orders came from the new commander of the fleet state that the new number of ships must be 12, and Heahengel was missing to complete the fleet. The reason for the specific name lies in the gospel, and Leofric explains to Uhtred that the reason for this is because, it says in the gospel book that Christ sent out his disciples two by two, and that's how we have to go, two ships together, all holy, and if we've only got eleven then that means we've only got ten" (Cornwell 30). This is the second time the fleet has been organized based on the biblical references. The first time was in *The Last Kingdom*, where Alfred assigned names, which were of Christian significance. Uhtred tells Leofric that in Wales there is supposedly

a new Danish leader by the name of Svein, and expresses his desire to sail there and plunder, despite the fact that Alfred might kill him for doing so, especially because they also planned a raid on the Britons, who were Christian. He suggests disguising Leofric's ship with a dragon's head, obtained at the place of the shipwreck of Guthrum's fleet, to which Leofric agrees. Uhtred renames Leofric's ship Judgement Day to Fyrdraca, which translates to fire-dragon, which in a way symbolizes Uhtred's transition from an Englishman to a Viking, which he desired for a long time. He says the prayers to the pagan gods and sails out.

The voyage is described without any particular religious references, which might have something to do with the fact that there were no priests on board, because they were mostly the ones that encouraged religious dialogue. This claim is supported by the fact that the first major religious theme starts with the encounter of a priest, whom Uhtred recognizes as a member of the clergy by spotting a crucifix around his neck. Uhtred often notices the religious necklaces on people when introducing them to the story. During the first lines of conversations with him, he proudly asserts religious dominance over him, stating that he hates Christians (Cornwell 36). When the priest asks them for help recapturing a fort of their king, Uhtred abruptly answers with, I worship the real gods, and I am a particular servant of Hoder, and Hoder likes blood and I have given him none in many days (Cornwell 37). Here Uhtred proclaims himself as a follower of Hoder, which can be explained through some theorizing and symbolism. Hoder, or Höðr, in Norse, was a blind son of Odin, who, according to the first version of the legend, killed his own brother when Loki tricked him by making an arrow from mistletoe, which was the only thing to which Baldur, his brother, was vulnerable. Hoder was blamed for the incident despite him being tricked (Yorkson 16). Hoder is a god of darkness, and is thought to represent the wrongly accused. The second version states that he is portrayed as a protagonist, and he kills his brother on purpose. There are some parallels between him and Uhtred that can be drawn – Uhtred was like Hoder persuaded by the Danes to start killing his brothers – the Anglo-Saxons. This holds true with the second version of the legend as well, if it is presupposed that Uhtred chose to switch sides solely by his own initiative. Uhtred often feels like he is wrongly accused, for example, when Odda took credit for killing Ubba, and Uhtred had to grovel for taking a stand during religious service.

When the fleet agrees to listen to the king Peredur's offer for helping him with his enemies, they are taken to his home, where Uhtred again notices a Christian church decorated with a cross

(Cornwell 38). Uhtred ordered his fleet to act like the Vikings and hide the jewellery that would reveal their true beliefs. Another important character is introduced here – Asser, who is a monk serving at the hand of Peredur. As it was customary for Uhtred, he was insulting to Asser as well, imitating the Danes with whom he grew up:

“‘You Christians,’ I said, ‘believe that at death you go to heaven. Isn't that right?’

‘What of it?’

‘You must surely welcome such a fate?’ I asked. ‘To be near your god?’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘I don't threaten vermin.’” I said, enjoying myself. (Cornwell 39)

The conversation between Asser and Uhtred illustrates how much Uhtred resembled the Danes that were described in *The Last Kingdom*. The extent of his mockery of Christianity grows rapidly. In *The Last Kingdom* Uhtred kept his opinions regarding Christianity to himself, but now, filled with pride of a Viking, does not hold back. The book continues to introduce Peredur's Celtic wife Iseult. When she approaches the assembly, Asser makes the sign of the cross and spits, in order to drive away the evil (Cornwell 39), which hints that she as well, is not Christian. Asser disapprovingly comments that she is one of the three wives of Peredur. This illustrates how much the Britons differed religiously from the Anglo-Saxons and remained unaffected by Alfred's religious reforms. Asser, however, retains his Christian piety, based on his reaction to Iseult and his undercurrents of judgement of the king's polygamy, despite his strong opinions of Iseult whom he thinks, “they should have strangled her with her own birth-cord. She is a pagan bitch, a devil's thing, evil” (Cornwell 41). This register is not used for dialogues among the members of the Wessex church, which he compares to Britons:

“‘In Northumbria,’ he said severely, ‘the Danes have corrupted the Saxons so that they think of themselves as Danes.’ ‘Worse,’ he went on, ‘they have extinguished the light of Christ. The West Saxons are Christians,’ he said, ‘and it is our duty to support them, not because of a love for them, but because of our fellow love for Christ.’” (Cornwell 42)

Asser wants to help Alfred despite the past differences and fights between Anglo-Saxons and the Britons, because he believes that God intervened when Guthrum's fleet was destroyed in the storm, and that Ubba died by God's hand. This shows the power religion has in the novel. It is able to bring people together solely based on belief. Uhtred despises the story of God's intervention, and

blames the priests who were sent as messengers to the Britons, for the religious reasoning for their victory. He is astonished at the fact that “religion makes strange bedfellows” (Cornwell 43).

When Uhtred’s fleet was preparing to fight the enemies of Peredur, who turned out to be Danes, Asser figures out that the fleet was Anglo-Saxon and not Danish. The real Danish army came to Uhtred to talk terms, while Asser tried to convert them to Christianity. The leader of the Danish army, Svein, secretly made a deal with Uhtred to double cross Peredur that led to the slaughter of the Britons. The fact that the fleet agreed to slaughter the Christians is surprising, due to the fact that it was described as having several devout Christians on it, but there is an instance, where a soldier of the fleet rebels at the orders of Uhtred, when he refuses to kill Asser, who was running for his life. The soldiers did not lose their moral compass to that extent that they would kill members of the church. They were, however, greedy, which makes them sinners in a slightly milder way. After the treason was complete, Uhtred sailed away, taking Iseult with him as his mistress. He was not satisfied with the amount of plunder he received, so he ordered to sail north to try to intercept one of the Danish ships, which were coming from Ireland to fight Alfred. They ran into a Danish ship, which they successfully claimed and found so much treasure that Uhtred decided to sail back to his wife with enough plunder to pay off the debt to the church, and bribe noblemen into following him.

Uhtred starts narrating the story of Svein, who after their departure went to Cyunit to raid the monastery and the church, which was being built to commemorate the victory over Ubba. He explains the gruesome details of how they burned monks and raped women, who were at the building site. The builders of the church were monks, who were mostly novices, which illustrates how the church distributed work. The least experienced were put to the hardest manual labour, which is a practice still used today in many fields of work. This event leads the story back to Alfred, because he thought that the killing was done to on Guthrum’s orders and that he had broken peace. After Guthrum’s explanation and proof of his innocence, Alfred demanded that “the Danish chieftain was to be damned through all eternity, his men were to burn in the fires of hell and his children, and his children's children, were all to bear the mark of Cain” (Cornwell 61-62).

The mark of Cain is another biblical reference, which leads to the first killer on Earth. Alfred was for the first time in both novels ordering damnation against somebody, which, in my opinion, he thought was worse than physical punishment.

When Uhtred returned to his home, there was nothing different about how people perceived God and what they attributed to the divine. His wife was disappointed due to neglect and Uhtred's devout paganism and Iseult, who lived with them under the pretence that she was kidnapped for ransom. She is very unique as far as religious point of view is concerned, because she is described as a prophet. Her ability is dreaming the future, which she explains is like "eavesdropping on the gods" (Cornwell 64). She believes that everything has its own deity, even the inanimate things. This is a new religious concept introduced to the story, because the idea is closer to pantheism than to paganism or Christianity. This philosophy and her supposed abilities to see into the future was the reason why Asser labelled her as a witch. She foretells Uhtred a bright and victorious future.

In autumn Uhtred is summoned to the court on All Saint's Day, to pay off the debt to the Church, which he received after marrying Mildrith, and to be tried for murdering a man. A day before his trial, there is an incident at the doors of the bishop, who would be the judge in Uhtred's hearing. Uhtred wanted to enter, but a priest forbade him because the bishop was at the prayer. Uhtred blackmails the priest with information about the bishop being a customer of a prostitute. Not wanting anyone to hear Uhtred's claims, he let him in, which meant that the priest knew he was telling the truth. This event shows that the priests glorified and made allowances to their bishops, despite the fact that some of them were living against the moral norms of Christianity, and abused their status and position in society for their own interests, which often involved material wealth. The story confirms that, as Uhtred is able to bribe the bishop into discharging his debt to the church and even acquitting him of a senseless murder, by giving him an Irish silver plate he stole on his raid to the Britons and a bag of gold. He follows his intentions by saying: "There are good priests. Beocca is one and Willibald another, but I have discovered in my long life that most churchmen preach the merits of poverty while they lust after wealth. They love money and the church attracts money like a candle brings moths" (Cornwell 68).

Uhtred acknowledges that Beocca and Willibald are devout Christians who would not let sin into their lives, for which he praises them, despite the fact that he openly hates Christianity and the clergy.

The English lived in peace, and in winter, Alfred summoned Uhtred. The meetings called Witan were always held on the day after Christmas, which is the Saint Stephen's Day, but this time, Uhtred had to attend it on the twelfth day of Christmas. Witan or Witangemot was a counsel

gathered to discuss various systems in the Anglo-Saxon England. The discussions were about law and judicial systems and other administrative institutions. It was comprised of noblemen with relevant influence and high-ranking clergy members, such as bishops and archbishops, which once again illustrates the high influence of the church on the management of the kingdom. This is also reflected in the novel, because the first man that greeted him at the gates was priest Beocca, who was promoted to a royal chaplain and the confidant to the king (Cornwell 72). Uhtred compares Alfred's court to a monastery rather than to a royal hall while describing the gathering:

There were also more than a hundred men there, though only forty or fifty comprised the Witanagemot, and those thegns and senior churchmen were on chairs and benches set in a half circle in front of the dais where Alfred sat with two priests and with Ælswith, his wife, who was pregnant. Behind them, draped with a red cloth, was an altar on which stood thick candles and a heavy silver cross. (Cornwell 73)

This gives another insight to which extent Alfred went to incorporate religion into his system. By this point, Alfred in the novel does not take any decisions without the presence of ecclesiastical figures or their consultation on the matter. He is also always described as having a church-like ambience with the room fully equipped to be able to hold a religious service at any given time, which in my opinion, symbolizes the presence of God, who must be present at any important decision-making process or event.

Uhtred was being brought to the court to be trialed for treason against Alfred, when he joined Svein and attacked the Britons. Alfred came to know this because Asser, the priest they met in the court of king Peredur, fled to Wessex and informed him of Uhtred's attack. The trial is described to have been led only by the clergy. All primary positions were occupied by Archbishops, bishops and priests, who tried to condemn Uhtred with enough charges to be sentenced to death. Among the charges was also the attack on Cyunit at Ashdown, which Uhtred did not commit, but was accused of for the interest of Odda and the Church, who would, after his execution, get the land he possessed. The clergy in charge of the hearing was so eager to have him killed, that they refused to take oaths from Uhtred's crewmembers and Haesten on account that he was a Dane, which would negate his truthfulness. Their eagerness can be deduced from the following passage:

Erkenwald turned to the king. “‘Lord king,’ he said, ‘he must die.’ ‘And his land and property must be forfeited!’ Bishop Alewold shouted in such excitement that a whirl of his spittle landed and hissed in the nearest brazier. ‘Forfeited to the church!’” (Cornwell 78).

Alfred then took the sentencing in his own hands by allowing trial by combat, the winner of which was considered to be talking the truth. This can be understood as putting the judgement in God’s hands, because God would ensure the righteous outcome of the battle. With this decision, he diminishes the hastiness of the clergy to sentence Uhtred to death and give Uhtred’s property to the church, and puts his faith in God. The main accusations came from Steapa, who was Odda’s most capable warrior and close friend, which made him a biased prosecutor, and he offered to fight Uhtred in order to resolve the issue. Alfred, however, summoned Uhtred for a talk before the battle, to find a way to avoid bloodshed on a religious holiday. Alfred firmly believed that Asser’s accusations were true in its entirety and Uhtred challenges this by offering Iseult’s testimony, which would prove his innocence, to which Asser replied:

“‘A shadow queen,’ Asser hissed, ‘a pagan! A sorceress’ He looked at Alfred. ‘She is evil, lord,’ he said, ‘a witch! Maleficos non patieris vivere!’

‘Thou shalt not permit a witch to live,’ Alfred translated for my benefit. ‘That is God’s commandment, Uhtred, from the holy scriptures.’”

This dialogue presents the first biblical reference in Latin, which presents Asser in a more traditional way than other members of the clergy, who rarely quote passages from the Bible, and when they do, they are in English. Alfred’s quick translation emphasizes his knowledge of Latin and the related reference, which again shows him as an intellectual and a devout Christian. Alfred offered life to Uhtred, and in return, Uhtred would have to pay the debt to the church again, because Alfred believed that the first time he paid it using the valuables he stole from the Britons. Uhtred refuses on account of his hatred towards Alfred. The fight began and Uhtred again placed his faith in Thor. The fight was long but Uhtred technically won, because when it was time to deliver the fatal blow, Guthrum’s army came to attack Wessex. The duel was cut short because the panic prevailed and the Danish army advanced on them. As it is pointed out by Uhtred in the novel, Alfred’s prayers had not been realized (Cornwell 88), and despite him being guilty, God has not killed Uhtred. During the attack, everybody scattered, but Alfred Leofric and Uhtred found each other. Walking around the swamps Alfred noticed that there were no churches there, which led to

his surprise: “‘we know so little of our own kingdom,’ he said in wonderment. ‘I thought there were churches everywhere’” (Cornwell 104). This, in my opinion, was a strange thing to notice while on the run as Wessex is being taken by the Vikings. The statement, however, reflects Alfred’s piety and his vision of Christian Wessex, which would soon be filled with churches, if Wessex were to be retaken by the English. Alfred and Uhtred had a conversation about Uhtred’s honesty and innocence with his crimes, Alfred confessed: “when this is all over, and when God returns Wessex to the West Saxons, I shall do the same. I shall put on the penitent's robe and submit myself to God” (Cornwell 105). The choice of words in this statement is indicating that Alfred does not doubt in God to rid Wessex of the Danes. By saying “when” instead of “if”, he removes all doubt in the matter, despite the fact that Wessex was being ransacked by a large horde as he was uttering these words. After admitting his mistakes, Alfred appointed Uhtred as the defender of his family, and made him swear his allegiance on the crucifix, so God could honour and bless the oath. People rowing longboats on the marshes, whom Uhtred calls marsh people, led the party away from the Danes.

Alfred and his family were hiding in the swamps in the company of several members of the clergy, Uhtred and a couple of soldiers. Uhtred found out that the priests brought silver with them while they were on the run, so he takes the opportunity to offer it to marsh people in return for helping with food, shelter, information, and similar commodities. When he does that, he narrates that, “Bishop Alewold immediately ran to Alfred and complained that I had stolen from the church” (Cornwell 107). The greed of the clergy is again very harshly described in the novels, and Uhtred, despite being a pagan who hates Christianity, always points out the hypocrisy in their greed.

Alfred’s son Edward was ill, and he was getting more ill by the day, which Alfred interpreted as the punishment from God because his Christian realm was falling apart. The bishops tried to console him using comparisons between him and Isaac, whom God spared when Abraham was ordered to kill him. Uhtred offered Iseult’s help in trying to cure Edward, which caused an uprising among the members of the clergy who argued: “‘if God will not cure Edward,’ the bishop said, ‘do you think he will let a witch succeed?’” (Cornwell 108). They urged them to wait until the next day, which was Saint Agnes’s Day who was known to perform miracles, and would heal Edward. All their prayers failed the next day, which urged Alfred’s wife Ælswith to ask Iseult for help, despite the bishops’ disapproval. Ælswith was a very pious woman who despised other

religions, which comes to show that even to the most devout Christians, family came first and all religious prejudice was put aside. With the clergymen still objecting, Alfred begged Iseult for help, despite the fact that she told him the price would be the death of another child somewhere in the world. “One lives? Another must die” (Cornwell 111). Because of Alfred’s piety, Uhtred is not sure whether he realized what he agreed to, but Alfred, in my opinion, understood the consequences of his request and just like his wife, put the life of his child before his morality. After a detailed description of Iseult’s pagan ritual, Edward was cured. Despite the fact that it was obvious that Iseult cured him, Alfred strongly believed that God had finally intervened and cured his son. Uhtred takes it upon himself that finds a place to build a fort, which he decides would be built in a settlement in a place called Athelney. He tricks the leader of the occupied village to build a fort and a bridge by offering him Iseult as a reward, who kills him on the spot when the works are finished and the villagers, freed of their oppressors, join to fight for Alfred.

This marks the beginning of one of the most important battles of Alfred’s reign. The battle, which would start the conversion of the Danes over the next decades. Uhtred’s battle tactic was based on the story of Moses’s parting of the red sea, which he remembered from his childhood. He would use the tide around the marshes to drown and strand the Danes. With Iseult’s saving of Edward, this marks the second instance in this novel when religious teachings and practices from somebody else’s beliefs were used to ensure the outcome in favour of Wessex. The opinions from secular people was changing. With Alfred and Ælswith resorting to pagan medicine and father Willibald in *The Last Kingdom* welcoming Uhtred’s prayers to Njord, the mind-set of the few followers of a specific religion cannot be generalized for all followers of the same religion anymore. The opposite happened with some of the clergy members. One particular example showing this happened, when Uhtred refused to kill every one of the stranded Danes. Beocca, who was up until this point the least corrupt and most pious priest, became vengeful:

“‘Why kill stranded men?’ ‘Because they are pagans,’ Beocca said, ‘because they are loathed by God and by men, and because they are Danes.’ And only a few weeks ago,’ I said, ‘you believed they would become Christians and all our swords would be beaten into and points to plough fields.’ Beocca shrugged that off. (Cornwell 132)

Beocca had recently become the royal chaplain and the right hand to the king, which might have to do with the fact that he changed his mindset. There is little talk about small priests being corrupt

in the novels. Beocca was introduced as a pious priest and a teacher, and with his power came vengeance and neglecting the true Christian morality. Most of the corrupt members of the clergy in the novel are of higher ranks, which would suggest the pattern. In my opinion, the possibility that Beocca, just like Macbeth, became corrupt cannot be excluded.

During their stay in Athelney, Uhtred's pagan mistress Iseult started to take interest in reading, and he appointed nun called Hild, who was with them since they fled from Cippanhamm. Iseult learns to read, but the nun had a much bigger effect on her than Uhtred imagined. Hild through the medium of education converted Iseult into Christianity, and come Easter, she was baptized. Uhtred reflects on her baptism by narrating:

In truth, I thought, Iseult had been battered into Christianity. For weeks she had endured the rancour of Alfred's churchmen, had been accused of witchcraft and of being the devil's instrument, and it had worn her down. Then came Hild with her gentler Christianity, and Pyrlig who spoke of God in Iseult's tongue, and Iseult had been persuaded. That meant I was the only pagan left in the swamp. (Cornwell 180)

This illustrates the importance of manner in which religion is being presented and taught. Hild was caring and patient, and did not judge her based on her previous beliefs.

Prior to these events, Alfred rode to Cippanhamm to spy on the Danes, who took the city from him. Uhtred followed him and found him beaten up. There was also Steapa in the town, who was taken prisoner after the Vikings attacked. He brought both back to Athelney, where Alfred started to write letters to all his possible allies to join him in his fight for Wessex.

Alfred's army grew bigger and bigger, and it was time to prepare for the attack to retake Wessex. Alfred was still concerned about Uhtred's paganism, and sent father Pyrlig, who was a former Welsh warrior, to try one last time to try to spark the faith in God in him. Pyrlig explained to him how much importance it is to Alfred, that his army is pure with belief in Christ: "If they win then Christ is defeated. This isn't just a war over land, it's a war about God. And Alfred, poor man, is Christ's servant so he will do all he can for his master, and that means trying to turn you into a pious example of Christian humility" (Cornwell 192). Uhtred lied to Pyrlig and denied his paganism in order to instill hope in Alfred. The novel labels this a religious war as well, because if

Wessex was taken by the Danes, Christianity would be over for the whole England. The land, in my opinion, was of secondary importance to Alfred. In his mind, this was a crusade to spread and defend the word of God. After gathering the army and completing all preparations for the battle, Alfred selected the day for the attack – The Feast of Saint John the Apostle. This was not surprising, because for every event that happened, Alfred pointed out the Saint of that particular day and explained the story of said Saint from the bible, and as battle was about to begin, he like he has done before every battle, asked the bishop for a prayer. Alfred’s war cries differed severely from the Vikings’. He encouraged men with the assurance that God is on their side. He yelled: “God is with us! He is on our side! Heaven watches over us! The holy saints pray for us! The angels guard us! God is with us!” (Cornwell 209). The battle is very descriptive in the novel, but from religious perspective, there is little more than priests praying and asking God for help. The battle was long and the Anglo-Saxons managed to besiege Guthrum’s fort. The casualties among the English were high and Iseult was dead as well. She died protecting the nun who taught her to read and inspired her to become Christian. She converted to Christianity soon before her death and her new God has won the war. She was a positive character who was never presented in a negative way, so her death as a Christian can be, in my opinion, explained as her deliverance. The novel ends with Alfred’s army kneeling and thanking God for victory.

Viking’s Conversion in *Lords of the North*

To avoid the repetitive analysis due to the fact that the theme of religion does not change in the following novels, this article will deal with the most notable events in *Lords of the North*.

Following the last battle in *The Pale Horseman*, Uhtred narrates that Alfred sent messengers across the realm to spread the news of victory. The problem arose when the priest in charge for delivering the message credited Saint Cuthbert for victory at Edington. It is not clear whether Alfred really had a dream in which Saint Cuthbert told him how to lead his men to victory, but the story caused a series of events that led to bloodshed. The news were especially strongly received by Northumbrians, because Saint Cuthbert was their most revered saint. “Cuthbert was Northumbria’s idol, the holiest Christian ever to live in the land, and there was not one pious Saxon household that did not pray to him daily” (Cornwell 11). Northumbria was at the time under the rule of Ivarr,

who was the son of Ivar the Boneless, and the general belief that God has sent Cuthbert to drive the Danes out of England sparked an uprising in Northumbria. This shows the strength of religion has on the Northumbrians. Ivarr was known for his eagerness to wage wars, but the news reduced the fear in the English minds to the point where they were eager to replicate what Alfred did in Wessex. “The flames were fed by Father Hrothweard’s preaching. He bellowed that God, Saint Cuthbert, and an army of angels were coming to drive the Danes from Northumbria and my arrival only encouraged the insanity” (Cornwell11). Based on Uhtred’s narration, he finally got recognition for being a good soldier, but he was still shadowed by God’s intervention. The novel introduces Guthred, who is one of the kings of Northumbria. He was a slave prior to wars in England and ascended to the throne. Uhtred explains that the relics and the power they symbolize fascinate Guthred and the Danes:

Most did not understand why a group of monks would carry a corpse, a dead king’s head, and a jeweled book all over Northumbria, but they did understand that those things were sacred and they were impressed by that. Sacred things have power. They are a pathway from our world to the vaster worlds beyond, and even before Guthred arrived in Cair Ligualid some Danes had accepted baptism as a way of harnessing the power of the relics for themselves. (Cornwell 40)

Despite the fact that the novels are very religiously oriented, this is the first time the baptisms of the Danes are mentioned. What is more, the novel only briefly mentions the baptism of Guthrum, despite it being one of the most famous events during the life of Alfred the Great. “We had heard little news of Wessex, except that it was at peace. Guthrum, of course, had been defeated and had accepted baptism as part of the peace treaty he made with Alfred. He had taken the baptismal name of Æthelstan, which meant “noble stone”” (Cornwell 66). Instead, the novel focuses on Guthred, who is the focal point of the novel, and his baptism which is described in great detail:

“Guthred looked as though he enjoyed the whole ceremony, and Abbot Eadred was so moved that he took Saint Cuthbert’s garnet-studded cross from the dead man’s hands and hung it about the new king’s neck. He did not leave it there for long, but returned it to the corpse after Guthred had been presented to his ragged people in Cair Ligualid’s ruins.” (Cornwell 40)

This illustrates how the Anglo-Saxon clergymen changed the opinion of the Vikings after they were baptized. They gave Guthred the honour to wear Saint's clothes and to be in the presence of priceless relics. They praised God for the miracle of conversion and Guthred appreciated it. He was not pushed to the idea of conversion. He expressed the desire to be baptized in order to thank the Anglo-Saxons for releasing him from his status as a slave. The story continues with Uhtred training an army consisting of both Danes and Anglo-Saxons for the possible attack from Ivarr, who was still fighting Scots in the north. Uhtred lead his army north to intercept Ivarr, but the Anglo-Saxon army soon learned that the Scots defeated him, leaving him wounded. Guthrum decides to spare Ivarr's life on account of an oath, and starts showing the resemblance to Alfred and his piety. "It was right", he said, "that a king should be generous", and in showing mercy to Ivarr he believed he was binding the man to him for ever. "It's what Alfred would have done," he told me" (Cornwell 74). This marks the beginning of introducing a baptized Danish character, who shows Christian traits and is willing to follow Alfred's manner of ruling. For the novel series, this is a major event as far as religion is concerned, as Guthred becomes the first Viking to become a true Christian king. Uhtred is sold to slavery by Guthred, who exchanged him for the army of Uhtred's uncle, who tried to kill him from the start of the book series. Uhtred was a rower on a ship, but soon enough Alfred sent a ship with Anglo-Saxons and his trusted Danish hostages to save him. The power of religion again illustrates that the Anglo-Saxons started to trust the Danes as soon as their leaders converted to Christianity and turned on other Danes as well. Guthrum, for example, was keeping his promise of peace and abiding by Christian way of life. Ragnar after saving Uhtred informs him that, "Guthrum's making no trouble and he's building churches and monasteries" (Cornwell 113). He goes on to describe him as "as pious as Alfred" (Cornwell 113). Guthrum and Guthred's conversions changed the view on religion from *The Last Kingdom* and *The Pale Horseman*, where all Vikings were described as evil heathens, who cannot be trusted. Christianity has taken the leading role and paganism is mentioned to a much smaller degree from this point onward, with the exception of Uhtred and his personal worship. When Uhtred returned to Wessex, he had a conversation with Alfred about Guthred's intentions regarding his reign and the manner of leading a nation with mixed religions. Guthred faced dissatisfaction of his Danish subjects, when he tried to persuade them to pay taxes for the church. Alfred surprisingly disagreed with this by saying: "It is foolishness, when he decrees that every man, whether pagan or Christian, must donate his tithe to the church" (Cornwell 137). This proves that Alfred understood the

situation with the Danes and knew that paganism will not be eradicated for a long time. He accepted that the Christians and pagans have to live together in Northumbria. He further explains:

“God approves a cheerful giver, but when a land is half pagan and half Christian you do not encourage unity by offending the more powerful half. Guthred must be a Dane to the Danes and a Christian to the Christians. That is my advice to him” (Cornwell 138).

In this part of the novel, Alfred is portrayed as a wise king, who does not allow religious prejudice affect the turn of events. His mission for a fully Christian England he dreamt of was being executed with caution, and he realized it is going to take time. He continues his argument: “he is a Dane, and if we are to win the Danes to a knowledge and love of Christ then we need Danish kings who are Christians” (Cornwell 139). The only thing left to do was to defeat Ivarr and Kjartan and to submit their followers to Guthred. Kjartan was killed when Uhtred and Guthred marched an army in his fort in Dunholm and freed Guthred’s sister Gisela from his hands, who was hiding in a nunnery and taken to Dunholm.

Many major female characters in the first three novels are closely connected to nunneries. Uhtred’s wife Mildrith went to a nunnery after Uhtred’s way of life that defied Christian norms became too much for her.

There was also Hild from *The Pale Horseman*, who was a nun prior to the battle of Edington and became Uhtred’s mistress after the battle. Hild was responsible for Uhtred’s saving from slavery, since she promised Alfred to finance a new nunnery and to return to her service as a woman of God. The third was Gisela, who hid in a nunnery, which was regarded as a safe place for women. With the exception of Brida, most major female Anglo-Saxon characters are nuns at some point in the novels, and all pagan female characters are labelled as sorceresses.

Sorcery was something that both sides feared and tried to stay away from. Uhtred used this for his advantage when Ivarr’s and Guthred’s armies met. Guthred was accompanied by priests who were carrying the corpse of Saint Cuthbert, which Uhtred ordered to steal and hide by one of his followers. When Uhtred provoked and killed Ivarr before the battle began, he addressed Ivarr’s army and accused a priest of casting Christian spells on Guthrum and stealing his relics, which in the eyes of the army would justify his conversion to Christianity. He started his speech by sayin:

“I am no Christian! I have seen Christian sorcery! And the Christians worked their magic on King Guthred! Have none of you been victims of sorcerers? Have none of you known your cattle to die or your wives to be sick? You all know sorcery, and the Christian sorcerers can work great magic!” (Cornwell 207)

He offered the army the priest in order to become Guthred’s followers and they accepted. This final scene in the novel shows how religion and fear of the unknown powers of it can submit the whole army despite its supremacy. This is a good example how religion is used in the novels to lead and to control people by exploiting the awe in them. The novel concludes with Guthrum’s official reign and Uhtred’s reminiscence of the events.

Alfred’s Death in Death of Kings

Alfred’s death occurs in the novel *Death of Kings* and is the last event this thesis will deal with as far as analysing novels in terms of religious themes in the story is concerned. The theme of religion remains unchanged and no major differences occur from *Lords of the North*, which is why this article will deal with the last novel in which Alfred is still alive. The portrayal of religion in *Death of Kings* remains similar to the previous novels. However, there are notable events that present the background and the role of the church when Alfred was dying. Uhtred has been fighting with the Danes and fought some of his personal quests, but returned to Wessex when Alfred was on his deathbed. Alfred wanted to discuss his son and his successor Edward. He wanted to Uhtred to swear allegiance to him and to ensure he will be a king worthy of the crown. “He must be brave in battle, wise in council, just in judgement” (Cornwell 137). Alfred wanted Edward to become as good of a Christian as he was which would ensure the continuation of his plans. For this reason, he asked the clergy to steer him onto the right path. Alfred’s vision for a Christian Britain did not stop on his deathbed. He was relying on Uhtred to make alliances and annex as much of the territory as possible. Uhtred illustrates this in his thoughts:

Alfred wanted the church to be rich and its bishops to be powerful men because he relied on them to spread and enforce his laws and, if I helped spread Wessex’s grip northwards,

so those bishops and priests and monks and nuns would follow to impose their joyless rules. (Cornwell 109)

He wanted to leave his kingdom to Edward in the most favourable conditions possible, so that Edward's continuation of his work would not be as difficult as his was, when he had to break new ground. The clergy, however, took advantage of the situation, as Alfred has given them his blessing to help Edward with his rule. Uhtred learns from sources that the churchmen rule the kingdom even prior to Alfred's death, and Edward is "under the thumb of the clergy his mother, and the Witan" (Cornwell 124). This illustrates the power the church gained from the beginning of Alfred's rule. The first novel describes the clergy as pious teachers and merely advisors to the king. With Alfred's coronation, the church started to gain wealth and power, which is well presented in the stories. Lastly, with Alfred's dying, the church is using the inexperience of Alfred's son in their favour as they watch over Edward.

The novel also offers an insight in Alfred's laws, which are closely connected to Christianity and in nature resembles the Mosaic Law. Alfred did not differentiate between his kin and his common subject when it comes to the law. This is well illustrated when his daughter Æthelflaed is accused of adultery, when her husband Æthelred plots to divorce her by having one of his lords sleep with her. Alfred points out: "In my laws, Lord Uhtred, adultery is not just a sin, but a crime. I love Æthelflaed. She was always the liveliest of my children, but not the most obedient" (Cornwell 142). Crimes such as adultery were punishable and one of the ways to avoid or terminate the punishment was to serve the church or contribute to it. This is shown in Æthelflaed's case, when she is urged to finance and build a nunnery, in order to be welcomed back on Æthelred's court. Uhtred talks to Beocca about her situation, when Beocca explains:

"His wife [Æthelflaed] will be permitted to return to Mercia,' Beocca said, 'upon the understanding that she endows, indeed that she builds, a nunnery.' 'She's to be a nun?' I asked, angry. 'Endows and builds!' Beocca said. 'And she will be free to choose wherever she so wishes to endow and to build the nunnery.'" (Cornwell 184)

The church was taking advantage of the laws introduced by Alfred and used them to sell indulgences under pretence that they have to repent by giving back to the church. Uhtred summarizes the idea by saying, "So the Christians had swallowed the sin" (Cornwell 184).

Despite the fact that the clergymen were in the highest position since the beginning of the series, Edward was seen as less pious than Alfred was. This resulted in the fewer number of priests around him, which suggests that Edward was not as fascinated with their company as his father was, but he still gave them the same freedom as far as their involvement in politics and judicial system is concerned, as it was demonstrated with the case with Æthelflaed. The clergymen, however, were not only interested in their position in the kingdom, but were also concerned with spreading Christianity among the Danes, which is why they sent missionaries across their land to convert them.

Religion again played a big role for the outcome of the novel, because Uhtred was like in *The Lords of the North* determined to trick Christians and the Danes into war. Uhtred created the story of the visions of angels in a cave in Natangrafum, which then became a site of pilgrimage. Uhtred dressed three women in angel-like outfits, creating wings of goose feathers and illuminating them in a way to prevent recognition and create divine atmosphere. The angels would tell prophecies about Anglo-Saxons winning the war over the Danes and that Edward would rule over all England, which Anglo-Saxons believed. Edward, just like Alfred wanted peace with the Danes, but God's fake prophecies about the all-Christian England instilled confidence in the English and angered the Danes, who kept their part of the peace treaty:

“‘It seems there is an ancient tomb, lord,’ the priest explained, looking up at Edward, ‘a tomb in Mercia, and angels have appeared there to foretell the future. Britain will be Christian! You will rule from sea to sea, lord! There are angels! And they have brought the prophecy from heaven!’” (Cornwell 221)

This was the prophecy that led Anglo-Saxons to war. They fought the Danes with significantly lesser army but managed to kill enough of them to stop fighting. Wessex was for the time being free of Danish threat after the war, and Lundine was English. Edward concludes the novel in the spirit of Alfred – by thanking God for support. During his conversation with Uhtred, Edward says that, “the priests say that God’s providence dictated the war” (Cornwell 311). This shows that he has less religious confidence than Alfred had, because he does not just claim that God’s intervention had won the war. Uhtred nevertheless scolds his trust in God and priests by saying: “a king cannot wait on God’s providence. A king must make decisions,” to which Edward replies in the style of Alfred, “‘Mea culpa,’ he said quietly, then, ‘yet God was on our side’” (Cornwell

311). This last dialogue of the novel shows that Edward was on a good path to become a leader with similar priorities and beliefs as Alfred. His use of Latin proved his education, his piety was getting more pronounced, which was what Alfred wanted him to become, in order to continue his work.

Religious Language and Symbolism in the Novels from *The Saxon Stories*

The novels discussed in this thesis are dealing with the topic of religion on a large scale. Most of the scenes in the novels include at least one ecclesiastical figure, who is connecting religion to the plot of the story. Religion is more expressed when the scenes feature Anglo-Saxon characters, which makes these novels centred in favour of Christianity. On the other hand, there are also many instances described from the Vikings' point of view, where their religion is given the focal point of the story. The plot of the novels, however, is not the only indicator, that the novels are closely connected to religious themes. There is also religious language of the characters, along with several instances of symbolism and biblical references, to substantiate the already existing religious theme of the novels. This chapter will elaborate on such examples and determine how they add to the atmosphere of the books. Firstly, the focus will be on the language, which will be followed by symbolism.

Religious Language

Religious language is very frequent in the novels. Most of the Anglo-Saxon characters are using references to God and other religious figures in casual conversations. The most frequent religious elements as far as language is concerned, are religious expressions and phrases, such as, “thanks be to God, there is peace” (*The Pale Horseman* 22). There are a number of different versions of the said expressions, such as, “God be thanked” and “God be praised” (*The Last Kingdom* 52,136). There are two main categories of religious expressions in the novels. The first category uses God as the addressee. The expressions such as “God go with you”, “for God’s sake”, “fear of God”, are widely used in the novel, and help with differentiating Christians from pagans, when new characters are being introduced. In most cases, the religion of most characters is implied during their first dialogue or directly by description of another character. Uhtred’s stepmother Gytha, for

example, was introduced by saying, “God and his saints preserve us” (*The Last Kingdom* 7), while she was crossing herself. These expressions are nowadays common and used subconsciously, some of them even by atheists, but the characters in the novels are presented as if their usage of said expressions is genuine and is closely connected to the degree of their piety. The second category of religious expressions, however, are the expressions, which are addressed to the devil. These expressions, such as, “a devil’s thing”, “do the devil’s work”, “devil’s instrument” (*The Pale Horseman* 41, 134, 180), are mostly connected in reference to the pagans in a derogatory way. The implication regarding beliefs of the characters, who use said expressions, is the same than those of God. The only difference is that the characters who use the expressions related to the devil and witchcraft are usually portrayed as having a negative trait, and are usually of higher rank clergy. One of those was bishop Alewold, who was described as exceptionally greedy. The language of the higher clergy was also very strong, when it came to verbal attacks on people they considered heretics; “‘If God will not cure Edward,’ the bishop [Alewold] said, ‘do you think he will let a witch succeed?’” (*Pale Horseman* 108). This characteristic also often connects with members of the clergy, who are not entirely honest with the Christian morality. Another example is by monk Asser, who is not entirely truthful when he is testifying against Uhtred. He uses strong language to refer to Iseult: “‘They should have strangled her with her own birth-cord,’ he snarled. ‘She is a pagan bitch, a devil’s thing, evil’” (*The Pale Horseman* 41).

Another aspect of religious language deals with symbolism, the great majority of which is derived from biblical references. Symbolism is in the novels mainly used by members of the clergy and Alfred, who is presented as the most religious secular character. The use of biblical references is mainly used for two purposes. The first purpose is instilling hope in characters in struggle, by comparing them to saints, who have been known to endure similar struggles or worse, to create a contrast, to lessen the gravity of the situation characters find themselves in. One such example is given by Alfred. When his army was facing the battle of Edington with little hope of victory, Alfred tried to lift their spirits by saying: “‘John the Apostle was condemned to death!’ Alfred said, ‘he was condemned to be boiled in oil! Yet he survived the ordeal! He was plunged into the boiling oil and he lived! He came from the cauldron a stronger man! And we shall do the same’” (*The Pale Horseman* 202). Another instance of using biblical themes to console and instil hope was used by bishop Alewold, when he tried to comfort Alfred by saying that his son Edward would be healed with the help of Saint Agnes on her name day, due to the fact that she was known to

perform miracles. Such examples of biblical references were in my opinion helpful for the characters, because they believed them on account of the strength of their faith. They believed that the clergy was influenced by God, which gave them hope in times of need.

The second purpose for biblical reference was to educate or express knowledge in order to appear intellectually superior to the listener. Such instances of references were mainly used at random casual conversations between the characters. One such example is used by Beocca, who wishes Uhtred a long life by saying, "I pray you live as long as Methuselah" (*The Last Kingdom* 141). There are several occasions on which the priests have to explain their reference, or correct the secular characters when they are misunderstanding the meaning of them. For example, when Alfred's son Edward was dying, he understood it as God's punishment because of his past and his failure in defeating the Danes, he referenced the bible in the following dialogue: "'God sacrificed his own son,' Alfred said bleakly, 'and he commanded Abraham to kill Isaac.' 'He spared Isaac, the bishop said'" (*The Pale Horseman* 108). In this example, bishop Alewold either corrects Alfred in his misunderstanding of the bible, or tries to lift his spirits and hope by emphasizing the positive part of Abraham's story. Another similar instance happened, when Alfred ordered Svein to be cursed in all churches so even his grandchildren will have to bear the mark of Cain (*The Pale Horseman* 62). Uhtred did not understand the reference, so he asked a priest about Cain and his mark. He proceeds to summarize his answer: "he explained that Cain was the son of Adam and Eve and the first murderer, but he did not know what mark he had carried. He thought God would recognise it" (*The Pale Horseman* 62). This illustrates that members of the clergy were generally more educated in the field of religion, which is understandable, but in the novels, they often forgot that the general public was not.

The language of the Danes was in comparison to language of Anglo-Saxon's significantly less influenced by their religion. They did, however, use similar expressions for various emotions, such as, "the gods only know", "The gods help me" (*The Last Kingdom* 48,166), and "the gods don't do our bidding" (*The Pale Horseman* 49). There are no particular implications when it comes to Viking religious expressions like with the Anglo-Saxons. Their gods are not used in negative context to express enmity towards characters. They are not comparable with the Christian devil, which has negative implications. There is a similarity between the usage of biblical references by the Anglo-Saxons and references to Norse mythology, which are used by the Vikings. One such

instance would be when Uhtred was kidnapped by the Danes, and is being assimilated in their culture. During a conversation between him and Ravn, Uhtred was asked: “Have you heard of Odin? Then you should know that Odin sacrificed one of his own eyes so that he could obtain the gift of poetry” (*The Last Kingdom* 22). This can be compared to the stories of the saints, which would, according to previous division of their purpose, fall under the category of education. The balance between religious language of the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings is in accordance to Uhtred’s description of the religious life of the Vikings, when he says that, “Danes did not gather in a church as we had gathered every Sunday and every saint’s day in Bebbanburg, and just as there were no priests among the Danes, nor were there any relics or sacred books” (*The Last Kingdom* 31). The fact that the majority of religious language with the Anglo-Saxons was prompted or used by clergymen, which the Vikings did not have, makes it understandable that the Vikings used significantly less religious references in their speech.

Religious symbols

The Anglo-Saxon Christians give religious symbols a lot of importance. The most common symbol of Christianity in the novel are crucifixes, which are very often pointed out by Uhtred the moment he introduces a Christian character into the novel. Uhtred differentiates between people and their social class by determining the size and type of metal the crucifix is made out of, for example: “Ælswith was a small woman with mouse-brown hair, small eyes, a small mouth, and a very determined chin. She was wearing a blue dress that had angels embroidered in silver thread about its skirt and about the hem of its wide sleeves, and she wore a heavy crucifix of gold” (*The Last Kingdom* 115). Crucifixes are one of the most emphasised religious items in the novel, and Uhtred is given or offered one on several occasions. They are also a sign of piety and humility because, for example, Beocca, who was at first a very humble and honest priest, was described as having a wooden one (*The Last Kingdom* 17), rather than one made of precious metals, like some higher-ranking clergymen.

Other very common symbols are relics, which are possessions or remains of saints and other biblical figures. Alfred was one of the characters who was most fascinated by relics, which he often took with him. Some of the relics Alfred possessed were, “feather from the dove that Noah had released from the ark, a glove that had belonged to Saint Cedd, and, most sacred of all, a toe

ring that had belonged to Mary Magdalene” (*The Last Kingdom* 178). The importance of the relics in the novel is mainly to be used as a medium to which people would put one hand while making an oath. This way God was able to sanctify the oath and be witness to the pledge. One such instance happened with Guthrum, who was forced to swear on the above listed relics to respect the treaty for peace. In *The Last Kingdom*, the feather from the dove is also used for healing, which was unsuccessful with the method.

There are many similarities between Vikings and Christians regarding religious symbols. The Viking variant to the crucifix was Thor’s hammer, which was a religious pendant similar to the cross. This was one of Uhtred’s most valuable religious possessions, which he often squeezed in order to honour the gods or ask them for help. Thor’s hammer was worn by most of the Vikings, but Uhtred does not concentrate so much on who does wear it. “The Danes, indeed, seemed very casual about their gods, yet almost every one wore Thor’s hammer” (*The Last Kingdom* 26). Thor’s hammer had a similar effect than the crucifix or the relics, which the Danes did not possess. Danes would swear on the Thor’s hammer, which was shown when Uhtred describes his trial:

The Witan called out that I had the right to summon oath-makers and the newcomer must be heard, and so a priest brought the gospel book to Haesten. I waved the priest away. ‘He will swear on this,’ I said, and took out Thor's amulet. ‘He's not a Christian?’ Erkenwald demanded in astonishment. ‘He is a Dane,’ I said. (*The Pale Horseman* 77)

This illustrates that the importance the amulet had to Danes was comparable to the importance of relics to Alfred.

Holidays and Rituals

The novels describe and mention several holidays and rituals from both, the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons. Holidays and rituals, which are incorporated in the novels, are efficient in presenting the religions from a practical point of view. This article will list some of the most important examples and elaborate on them. First, the article will deal with the holidays and celebrations of the Anglo-Saxons, which will be followed by the ones of the Vikings, comparing the practices of the two. The novels from which the holidays and rituals will be analysed are *The Last Kingdom* and *The Pale Horseman*, because the thesis analyses these novels in greatest detail,

and since they are the introductory novels to the series, they include the most information about paganism and Christianity and their respective traditions and holidays.

Among the Christian holidays, the most attention is given to Christmas. Besides the traditional Christian values and celebration of the birth of Christ, Christmas time is of significant importance for the Anglo-Saxons in the novels. It was a time for important yearly events, such as Witangemot, which takes place the day after Christmas, on the Feast of Saint Stephen. The time of the yearly Witan can be, in my opinion, connected to the idea of Christmas. The same way as Christ was born, the laws and the political structure is re-evaluated, which leads to the rebirth of the kingdom. Christmas time in *The Pale Horseman* was also the start of major events, which would lead to battles crucial for the Anglo-Saxons and Alfred's kingdom of Wessex. It was during the time that Witan was held, when Guthrum's army attacked Cippanhamm and forced Alfred and his followers to retreat to the marshes of Somerset, where the famous fort of Athelney was erected and tipped the scale in favour of the English. The events started at Christmastime and gradually lead to the rebirth of England and restoration of peace.

Christmastime is mainly described by Uhtred. His fondness for paganism and dislike for the Christians makes the description very subjective. Nonetheless, they offer an insight to what the holiday meant to the English and especially Alfred. According to Uhtred, "if Alfred was anywhere close then you could be sure that we were required to fast, pray, and repent through the whole twelve days of Christmas" (*The Last Kingdom* 126). This additionally reinforces the argument that Alfred took religious life seriously. Uhtred uses the word "required", which points to the fact that the pious way of celebrating Christmas was expected by the king. Uhtred describes "chanting monks, droning priests, and savagely long sermons" (*The Last Kingdom* 125) to be a staple during Christmastime celebrations.

There are several other holidays mentioned and referenced besides Christmas. As it was mentioned in the previous article, clergymen and Alfred often pointed out name days of saints and connected them with important events in the novels. Alfred was reluctant to order attacks on name days of certain Saints. This is illustrated several times, when Alfred expresses his dislike in dishonouring the saints with bloodshed: "Saint Cedd's holy example teaches that we must be united, so I am loathe to shed Saxon blood on Saint Cedd's feast day" (*The Pale Horseman* 83). Such examples of Alfred's referencing name days are common and always happen before an important event. Alfred

seeks connections between the nature of the upcoming events and the saint with the patron saint of that specific day for example:

It was February now. There had been a spell of fine weather after the burning of Svein's fleet and I had thought we should travel then, but Alfred insisted on waiting until the eighth day of February, because that was the feast of Saint Cuthman, a Saxon saint from East Anglia, and Alfred reckoned that must be a propitious day. (*The Pale Horseman* 135)

Lastly, there are several instances in the novels, when mass and other ecclesiastical services were being held. Despite the fact that the services are not described in much detail, the services are mentioned very often. Alfred is presented as a king, who takes every opportunity to have a religious service. Uhtred describes him as a man who is always surrounded by clergymen and always ensures that there is a place to pray nearby. Prior to Alfred's being king in the novels, mass and other services were significantly less mentioned. The same applies for other religious events and references, which started to become more frequent and emphasized with Alfred's coronation.

As far as the Vikings' religious rituals and holidays are concerned, the novels provide a great deal of information on some of them. Just like Christmas, Danes celebrate a holiday named Yule, which resembles Christmas by importance and the general idea. In addition, they were celebrated almost simultaneously. According to the novels, "Yule is supposed to be a celebration and a consolation, a moment of warm brightness in the heart of winter, a time to eat because you know that the lean times are coming when food will be scarce and ice locks the land, and a time to be happy and get drunk and behave irresponsibly" (*The Last Kingdom* 126). Uhtred describes the course of the holiday in detail, providing information on the events that happen during celebrations. It is full of debauchery and games, but Uhtred points out, that "of course the Danes remembered their gods at that time, and sacrificed to them, but they also believed Odin, Thor, and the other gods were all feasting in Asgard and had no wish to spoil the feasts in Midgard, our world" (*The Last Kingdom* 126). The feast was connected to the gods and their provision of food for the winter. The holiday is like Christmas associated with important events, one of which was the marriage of Ragnar's daughter Thyra, which points to the fact that the purpose of the holiday was not exclusively dedicated to the gods, but could be used as an opportunity for other celebrations. This was not the fact with the Christians in the novels, who dedicated their celebrations only in honour of God. There is a significant difference between the manner of celebration Yule and Christmas. Uhtred

describes Christmas as a time of fasting and prayer, whereas Yule is described as an enormous feast. Vikings honour their gods by enjoyment, while Christians show humility and piety.

One of the most described rituals in the novels is the sacrifice to appease the gods before war. Uhtred recalls the Vikings walking in a formation, dressed in war clothing and chanting, while preparing to offer sacrifice to the gods. Among the sacrificial beings, there was a stallion, a ram, a dog, a goose, a bull, a boar, and an English prisoner (*The Last Kingdom* 40). This illustrates the importance of sacrifice to the Danes, because the quoted sacrifice in the novel took place during winter, when the food was scarce. Nevertheless, they sacrificed animals and a human being in order to ensure the favour of the gods. Sacrifice is not unheard of in Christianity and is most often connected to Abraham, who was on God's orders trying to sacrifice his own son. The reference to Abraham is also used in the novel, when Alfred tries to explain the dying of his son as God's sacrifice to his sins. There is, however, a difference between the religions in terms of practicing sacrifice. Christianity uses the idea for teaching dedication to God and faith, whereas the Danes actually practiced human sacrifice to honour the gods. The ceremony after the sacrifice of the animals and people is also described and explained:

All the corpses were taken from the pit and hung from tree branches. Their blood had been given to the creatures beneath the earth and now their flesh was given to the gods above, and then we filled in the pit, we danced on it to stamp down the earth, and the jars of ale and skins of mead were handed around and we drank beneath the hanging corpses. Odin, the terrible god, had been summoned because Ragnar and his people were going to war. (*The Last Kingdom* 40)

Yule and sacrifice are connected by the manner in which the events are carried out. Both start with slaughter and are followed by a celebration with excessive drinking. On the other hand, earthly pleasures are in Christianity frowned upon and related to satanic temptation, which again highlights the contrast between the religions. One of the most notable differences between them is the manner in which their followers ask for help from their gods. The English in the novel resort to praying and depriving themselves of pleasures to show humility and faith. They are offering themselves to God in order to receive approval and aid. The Vikings on the other hand, live by the opposite philosophy. Their prayers are barely mentioned in the novels, and their religious life with the exception of Yule and sacrificing is only vaguely described. This would suggest that Vikings

resort mainly on sacrificial ceremonies to ask for help or show affection and gratitude to the gods. They are offering other lives and do not deprive themselves of pleasure. On the contrary, they believe that the gods do not disapprove of earthly pleasures. “Alfred spends half his time rutting and the other half praying to his god to forgive him for rutting. How can a god disapprove of a good hump?” (Last Kingdom 37).

Religion in Television Series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*

Basing television series on prewritten novels is a common practice, with which movie producers try to capture the written story and put it on the screens. This often leads to heated debates between the passionate readers and movie buffs, because the storylines from novels and movies occasionally differ severely. This is to an extent true for *The Last Kingdom* series, which was based on Cornwell’s *The Saxon Stories*. This series is most of the time very closely connected to the literary works as far as the main plot is concerned, but there is a lack of details such as character developments, religious practices and side stories. This being said, *The Last Kingdom* is a very appropriate series to compare to the television series *Vikings*, which is mainly based on a fictitious story, as opposed to *The Last Kingdom*, which is historically significantly more correct. This chapter will compare the two series in relation to the discussed novels from *The Saxon Stories*, and analyse the similarities and differences between the portrayals of religion. The analysis will not be based on plot of the series, but will deal with relevant events and ideas that include the theme of religion. The analysis will begin with a presentation of the most relevant characters and continue with the analysis and comparison of the series. For disambiguation purposes, the Norsemen from *The Last Kingdom* will be referred to as Danes and Vikings will be used for the series *Vikings*.

The Last Kingdom presents the characters very similarly to the novels, but the religious content is lost to a degree, because Uhtred’s narration is lost with translating the story to the screen. Uhtred’s stream of consciousness in the novels offered a broad insight to the question of religion, whereas in the television series the spectator has to be more observant to notice the religious themes without Uhtred pointing them out. This applies for his observations, inner thoughts and obsessive spotting of crucifixes around people’s necks. Despite him being relatively subjective towards religion in the novels, he was honest and fair with some of his observations about the clergy. Religion is to a

degree also less emphasized and discussed in the series due to the fact, that the series covers all of the novels featuring Alfred the Great in three seasons, which greatly reduces the time for detailed depictions of religious events and characterisation based on religion, which is emphasized in the novels. Although there is still a general sense of religious theme as is presented in the novels, many events such as building churches, dialogues with biblical references and instances of prayer are reduced to a minimum and replaced by emphasizing relationships and gore. The overview of the Danish paganism suffers the most in the series, since Uhtred's living with the Danes is very shortly presented as opposed to the novel, where Cornwell dedicated almost half of the first novel to his childhood as a Dane. This greatly reduced the representation of the pagan religion since Uhtred was the one who in the novels presented it to the reader. There is, however, a constant, which remains relatively unchanged in this respect. The portrayal of Alfred and his piety is very close to the novels, as the series very often features him praying or serving God in different ways.

Television series *Vikings*, however, offers a vivid contrast to *The Saxon Stories* and its television adaptation. *Vikings* is inspired by the Icelandic sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok, which are literary works about the legend of Ragnar and his involvement in the raids and invasion of England. Since the sagas are not historically proven – or at least not in their entirety, the series is deriving only inspiration from the tales and does not try to replicate the sagas on screen. This offers a fictitious story mixed with real historical events, which is not limited by pre-existing literature. This enabled the writer and director of the series Michael Hirst to create a story, which unravels by its own pace and consequently focused on religion in greater detail than *The Last Kingdom*. As it is evident from the title of the series, the story is focused on the Vikings, which consequently provides a richer insight into pagan lifestyle and their way of worshipping the gods. The clash of religions is presented similarly to the Cornwell's novels, which is not unexpected since the religions were historically also clashing with violence and resentment towards one another. There is, however, a deeper connection with the characters and the divine. The first major difference in the topic of religion is the actual involvement of the supernatural and interventions from the gods. The Vikings and the Christians in the series get visions on multiple occasions, which more often than not come true. This would suggest that the question of which religion actually exists is not valid since both are equally represented by involvement of their respective gods. One of such characters is Athelstan, who has several visions during his life, which were discussed in the analysis of his character. One of his most notable visions was the vision of his crucifixion, which happened prior

to his death (Blagden, “Eye for an Eye” 00:25:33-00:25:50). This scene suggests that the prophecies and visions are not merely a matter of belief, but actually foretell the future. Another instance of such visions happens to Lagertha when she sees her husband Ragnar die not long before his actual death. The segment acted by Winnick happens in “Baldur” at 00:21:00-00:23:20 and presents the vision as completely accurate to the actual death of Ragnar. Despite the fact that there are some vague similarities between *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom* in this respect when Iseult correctly foretold the future for Uhtred, the supernatural events are almost unrepresented in the novels and the series. *Vikings* is very concentrated on spiritual lives of the main characters and such connections to the divine are frequent.

This consequently presents the Vikings as more spiritual than the Danes in *The Last Kingdom*. The Vikings are more devoted to their gods and often perform religious rituals and sacrifices in order to appease them. One of such instances happens in “Sacrifice” at 00:38:23-00:45:30, and is presented in a completely different manner than sacrifices described in *The Last Kingdom*. The Vikings in this segment are portrayed as a very spiritual nation, who during the animal and human sacrifice willingly offer their lives in order to honour the gods. The ritual is spectated by the whole village of Kattegat who observe the event with respect to the volunteers. The ritual is accompanied by peaceful singing, rather than coinciding with debauched partying and excessive drinking as is described in Cornwell’s novels. This in my experience instils the feeling of respect and participation. There are several rituals presented in the series, the purpose of which varies. The most common ones are sacrifices before battles to receive support from the gods and sacrifices to ensure a successful harvest. One of the most important characters in terms of religion is their oracle The Seer, who is regularly visited by the main Viking characters. His prophecies always come true and he is portrayed as a genuine connection to the gods. He could be, however, in ways compared to a simple fortune-teller due to his ambiguous and riddle-like answers. *Vikings* also features a scene where Ivar the Boneless declares himself a god (Andersen, “Hell” 00:07:52-00:08:30). This is the only instance of an individual comparing themselves to deities and takes a new level on the portrayal of religion. In *The Last Kingdom* there was a question of faith whereas in *Vikings* is about choice. Interventions from the Gods and the supernatural happen often on both sides, which makes Ivar’s claim about being the chosen one more believable to people than in *The Last Kingdom* would be, since there the intervention from the divine is merely a theory.

When the Vikings come in contact with the English, the reception of each other's fate is the same as in *The Last Kingdom*. The shift of religious focus is also very similar to *The Last Kingdom*, since with the beginning of the Viking invasion and Ragnar's baptism, the focus shifts from paganism to Christianity. Like the Danes in *The Last Kingdom*, the Vikings are also interested in Christianity. They are asking questions about the Christian God, which is the best portrayed by Ragnar and his fascination with Athelstan, who for a moment during his time in Kattegat loses his faith and regains it at the very end of his life when he receives the vision of his death.

Religion in *Vikings* is largely portrayed through individuals and their personal struggles with their belief. This is not the case in *The Last Kingdom*, where the religious identity crises are not given such focus. *The Last Kingdom* deals with religion in general and presents religious dualism rather than an in-depth spirituality of individual characters. This can be illustrated by several characters in *Vikings*. The first character to discuss in this respect is Floki, a shipbuilder who has several episodes of visions where the gods are talking directly to him. His religious opinions can be compared to Christians' in both series and novels, because he is one of the few Viking characters who perceives Christians as heathens who worship the wrong god. He develops a hatred for the Christians which can be compared to the hatred of Christians towards the pagans in all discussed works. This is especially well illustrated where he kills Athelstan without any other reason than hatred towards the Christian God (Skarsgård, Blagden, "Born Again" 00:39:11-00:40:48). Another character who is deeply involved in worshipping of the gods is Lagertha, who performs several rituals in order to give tribute to the gods. One of the most notable rituals is a sacrifice to the god Freyr (Winnick, "Warrior's Fate" 00:39:23-00:43:16). This ritual creates the same atmosphere of awe as the previously described one. The ritual for fertile land and abundant harvest is also spectated by the English, among which were King Ecbert and Athelstan. Their willing participation of the English in sacrificial rituals is unheard of in *The Last Kingdom*, which points to the fact that the tolerance towards pagans was on some level established prior to Alfred's reign in the series. This tolerance brings the two cultures together and to a degree provides an insight in their religion for the English, whereas in *The Last Kingdom*, most of the English perceived the Danes merely as uncultured savages because they only had contact with them through violence. Lagertha was in the analysis of her character compared to Brida based on her bravery and warrior mindset. Spiritually, however, she resembles Iseult from *Pale Horseman*, who was often conducting religious and prophetic rituals, one of the most notable being the healing of Alfred's son Edward.

From the perspective of religion, the story of Alfred is in *Vikings* portrayed differently from *The Last Kingdom*. Alfred is a son of Athelstan who sleeps with the wife of Aethelwulf, who despite the fact that he was conceived in great sin raises him as his son. This shows the difference of how adultery was received in both stories. In *The Last Kingdom* Brida pretended that she was an illegitimate child of Edmund, which Ælswith condemned and thought of her as a lesser child. This was not the case with Alfred, who was loved by everyone despite his origin. In addition, Judith's punishment for adultery was different from Æthelflaed's who was urged to finance the building of a monastery in order to be forgiven for the adultery. Judith was tortured and had her ear cut off as a punishment, because she would not tell the name of Alfred's father, but when she does, Aethelwulf's father King Ecbert proceeds to pardon her. During a conversation with Aethelwulf he says, "So how can we punish a woman who, like the blessed Virgin, has been chosen by God to give birth to a very special child?" (Koache, "Born Again" 00:18:02-00:18:12). This shows how Alfred is from his very conception forward thought of as a man of God, which later in life helps him to become king over his brother. Alfred in *Vikings* gets several visions, some of which are of Athelstan who guides and helps him through hard times and on one occasion leads him in open water where he always drowns. This action led Alfred to realize that his stepfather Aethelwulf found it in his heart to love him, when he saved him from drowning. In comparison to *The Last Kingdom*, *Vikings* does not emphasize Alfred's religious life to that extent. He however, is still portrayed as a very religious character, who rules in accordance with Christian morals. After a battle of Marton he gives a speech which is full of encouragement in belief and recognition of God's influence on the outcome of the battle: " Friends, when I saw that deer, I knew it not for a deer, but as Christ, who had taken that shape to show us that he was with us. That he would not abandon us this day" (Walsh-Peelo, "Born Again" 00:25:53-00:26:51). This speech shows some similarities with *The Last Kingdom*, where Alfred would hold such speeches to encourage the fighters and remind them that God was on their side. The difference between their portrayals, however, is to be expected, since *Vikings* is focused more on the Vikings and their invasions and way of life rather than on the Christians, who are there to fulfil the story.

The series were written based on different influences, which justifies the differences between the stories and their take on religious themes. There are also other probable limitations to why the series cannot focus more on the religious life of the characters. The purpose of *Vikings* is to create a story around them and portray their voyages and invasions across the world, whereas *The Last*

Kingdom tries to capture Cornwell's novels and put them to life. Religious themes are, based on my experiences with analysing both types of works, easier to capture in literature, where the detailed descriptions of characters' personal beliefs add to the story. Were the series to replicate that, the balance between the main storyline and the establishment of cultural and religious state of either Christians or pagans would be lost. This in my opinion also affects the ratings, since the combativeness is what the Vikings are known for. Despite *Vikings* being historically generally inaccurate, they offer a much deeper insight in religious and cultural life of the Vikings than *The Last Kingdom* series.

Alfred the Great in Other Literature and Television

The direct and indirect contribution of Alfred the Great to literature is immense. With his translations, he paved the way for Latin works to be understood and widely available to people who did not have the education to read Latin. Translating mostly ecclesiastical works, Alfred connected religion and education ensuring, that people who could read simultaneously learned about God, and offered a way for priests to teach catechesis and hold sermons in English. His indirect contributions might be even greater, since various literary and cinematic works are telling his story repeatedly. His life was documented by Asser in his biography *The Life of King Alfred*, which is one of the most valuable sources for studying his life and placing him in history. There are numerous novels that feature him as an important character, such as *The Saxon Stories* by Bernard Cornwell, which are analysed in this thesis, *The King of Athelney* by Alfred Duggan, and several other novels, memoirs and biographies. Alfred is also featured in several poems, one of which is Francis Turner Palgrave's poem "Alfred the Great", with one stanza describing the battle of Edington:

For England fight; nor Dane nor Saxon flinch;

Then Alfred strikes his blow; the realm is free:—

He, changing at the font his foe to friend,

Yields for the time, to gain the far-off end,

By moderation doubling victory. (The Visions of England 24)

Palgrave dedicated most of his poems from this collection to Alfred, who is mentioned or referenced in most of the poems.

There are also many cinematic adaptations of his life. Some of the movies featuring Alfred the Great are Clive Donner's *Alfred the Great* released in 1969 and Jeshua De Horta's *The Saxon Chronicles* released in 2006. Alfred is also featured in the TV-series *Vikings* and *The Last Kingdom*, which is the adaptation of Cornwell's Saxon stories. Their depictions of Alfred are very alike as far as his character and his contributions are concerned, which points to the fact that Alfred the Great is a widely recognized and respected persona with a well-known personality and an interesting life story, the portrayal of which is in literary or cinematic form enjoyed by many.

Alfred the Great and the history of the Anglo-Saxons in general has also been a great influence on one of the most recognized authors of the century – J.R.R. Tolkien. Besides being a prolific author, Tolkien was also a professor of Anglo-Saxon, the language that according to Thomas Honegger inspired the names and languages of his characters in his *The Book of Lost Tales*. One of his many inspirations for his works is the name *Ælfwine*, which can be translated as “elf-friend”, was used by Tolkien as a proper name, a title and a concept (J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment 4). According to Honneger, *Ælfwine* was a common name during the Anglo-Saxon period and incidentally this was also the name of Alfred's grandson. Tolkien also used Anglo-Saxon names and words for naming people and beings, more specifically; the names of horses in the army of Rohan are mainly derived from Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. Hilary Wynne writes that:

The language of Rohan (“Rohirric”) is a form of Old English: for instance, the “Mark” is related to the Old English “*mearc*,” meaning “border, boundary or limit.” The first king of Rohan, Eorl the Young, has a name that means simply “*earl*” in Old English. The Rohirrim, in fact, speak Old Mercian, the particular dialect of Old English that would have been spoke by Tolkien's ancestors in the West Midlands. (J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment 576)

This shows the impact Old English language had on Tolkien and the potential the language and culture have, to be incorporated in fantasy literature. Tolkien derived his inspiration from not only the general culture and language of the Anglo-Saxons, but also from Alfred the Great himself. Alfred translated Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which includes the concept of good and

evil, which Tolkien adopted for the idea of “the one ring to rule them all”. Kathleen E. Dubs writes that, “in *The Lord of the Rings*, as in Boethius’ work, there is no role for chance, but there is a role for fate” (J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment 215). This corresponds well to the properties of the ring, which chooses the bearer in advance and marks the course of their life. The protagonist is then urged to accept the fate the ring has given them and fulfil the part they are destined to complete, which was the case with many characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, with Frodo being among the most notable ones.

There are also theories of similarities between Alfred and Aragorn, even though most agree that Alfred based Aragorn on Oswald of Northumbria, who was exiled and upon his return, just like Aragorn, claimed his throne. According to Alban Gautier, this is where the similarities between Oswald and Aragorn end. The most convincing argument for the claim are in my opinion the similarities between their loneliness, when they both, driven from their homeland, wander around anonymously without any significant immediate support. Gautier analyses that, “Both Alfred and Aragorn resort then to the same solution: they ride to a meeting place, which is also a standing stone, where they hope to muster fresh troops” (From Dejection in Winter to Victory in Spring 104). Reclamation of the throne can also apply to Alfred, who took Wessex back from the Danes. There are many theories and parallels between Tolkien and his influences, but there is no denying that Alfred and the Anglo-Saxon culture were major inspirations for Tolkien’s revered novels.

Conclusion

In conclusion, religious themes in works set in the Anglo-Saxon period have a substantial role in analysed literature and cinematic works. *The Saxon Stories* provides a historically relatively correct representation of the period with the majority of the characters inspired by real historical figures and events. The purpose of religion in the discussed works is to add a new dimension to the story of Viking raids and the Anglo-Saxon resistance and the subsequent conversion of the pagans. Religion is an important topic especially in works that are historically correct to the extent of *The Saxon Stories*, which offers credibility in presenting the importance religion was given to by people. Incorporating detailed explanations of the religious state in the works not only gives them a deeper dimension and wholesomeness, but also serves the educational purpose, since paganism is generally less known to an average reader than Christianity. This is especially true for the television series *Vikings*, which focused much more on pagan traditions and the Viking way of life than any other work analysed in the thesis. *The Last Kingdom*, *The Pale Horseman*, *Lords of the North* and *Death of Kings* were the most important novels of *The Saxon Stories* for the research. They follow the life and reign of Alfred the Great, whose life marked the timeframe for the execution of this thesis. The theme of religion changed after Alfred's coronation in *The Last Kingdom* by becoming more intense and frequent. There is an increased number of passages, dialogues and symbolic sayings, which remain unchanged until his death in *Death of Kings*. During his reign in the discussed novels, there are mentioned several of his achievements and reforms on the field of religion and education. His importance in this respect is well presented, since he is regarded as the central figure representing Christianity. This is shown by the amount of religious language and symbolism, which is incorporated in *The Saxon Stories*. Cornwell's novels, however, give a scarce presentation of the Danish religious life. Pagan traditions and religious way of life is presented vaguely, which is in accordance with Uhtred's statement that the Danes did not spend their life worshipping their gods, and had few traditions and none of the sacred literature. This, however, is the complete opposite of the television series *Vikings*, which described the pagan religion almost to the same extent as the Christianity, if not more. This is understandable, since it is evident from the title of the series alone, that the Vikings are the central point of the story. On the other hand, television series *The Last Kingdom* presented religion of the Danes to an even lesser extent than the novels, since Uhtred's life with the pagans is presented in whole in the first

episode, which takes away most of his descriptions and participation in their religious celebrations. This is also the case with the representation of Christianity and the religious language, since a substantial part of religious themes were presented through his self-consciousness, which offered a subjective and unflattering view on the Church, which is known for the period and some of the accusations are still battled by the institution. These observations include greed, ungodliness and the abuse of power for personal gratification.

The importance of Alfred the Great is also seen in the amount of other literature and cinematic works. His influence and religious, scholastic and military reforms were the inspiration for many authors and producers – from poets to producers and novelists. One of them was J.R.R. Tolkien, who derived his inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon language, culture and also from Alfred the Great himself. All of the works that feature Alfred the Great are uniform in their portrayal of the king. He is always portrayed as a pious king, who is more than capable of leading his subject in ecclesiastical and secular ways of life. Besides his culture and strong belief in God, one of the most prominent virtues presented by the authors was his military competence, at which he excelled. This representation is alike in all of the works analysed in this thesis.

Overall, religion in the works set in the Anglo-Saxon England is an interesting topic for research. Religion is one of the systems that is present from the beginning of man, the importance of which fluctuates throughout history. The discussed period is rich with religious traditions and Christian way of life, which made this thesis possible to conclude. The works set in the period are being produced at an astonishing rate, and so are new historical discoveries dealing with the Anglo-Saxon England. This will, in the future, possibly allow making an even deeper connection with religion and the modern literary works, which will perhaps not be limited to the period of one of the most notable king, but also to eras that precede him, which are, at the moment, less favourable by the authors.

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Izjavljam, da je magistrsko delo v celoti moje avtorsko delo ter da so uporabljeni viri in literatura navedeni v skladu s strokovnimi standardi in veljavno zakonodajo.

Škofja Loka, 2. september 2019

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