

RAGNAR LOTHBROK AND THE SEMI-LEGENDARY  
HISTORY OF DENMARK

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by  
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## INTRODUCTION

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From the late eighth to the late eleventh centuries, nearly the entirety of Europe was held at the mercy of Scandinavian raiders. These Viking warriors took countless riches from the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian France, and, when plunder was not plentiful, extorted thousands of pounds of silver from the regions' rulers. By the end of the ninth century, they had conquered part of England, and by the end of the eleventh, their Norman descendants finished the task. Viking raiders made their way through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, conquered Slavic settlements in Russia, and crossed the Atlantic to settle Greenland and continental North America. Understandably, they have remained a colorful, important part of modern Western culture's collective imagination, and are ever present in the forms of football teams, blockbuster superheroes, and television series.

Common misconceptions about horns and barbarism aside, medieval Scandinavian culture was rich with legends, mythology, and heroic figures. While the exploits of later Viking raiders and Scandinavian kings were well documented, traveling back to the beginning of the Viking Age and beyond, documentation becomes increasingly scarce. Without a doubt, some of the most popular figures of the zenith of the Viking Age were Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons. These semi-legendary figures were

reportedly the kings of Denmark, and in the case of Ragnar himself, of all Scandinavia. Ragnar united Scandinavia and raided much of the known world. His sons led the Great Army to conquer England and martyr St. Edmund, and their descendants continued to rule both realms for centuries to come. Yet, as we will further discuss, there has been constant debate on the identity and even existence of Ragnar Lothbrok himself.

Over the next five chapters we will have two primary functions. The first is to trace the history of the Danish throne from the point at which it separates from mythology in the late fifth century — becoming what I will frequently call semi-legendary history — to the deaths of Ragnar’s supposed sons near the end of the ninth century. In doing so we will discuss certain insufficiencies in the historical record and the questions they raise in an attempt to fill those gaps with certain logical answers. This first task will place the political and cultural history of the Danish throne into context for the second task, which is an examination of Ragnar Lothbrok himself. Beginning in earnest with the third chapter, we will recount the legendary life of Ragnar Lothbrok as it appears in multiple sources, then embark on a discussion on the historical model, or models, for that legendary character. Finally, we will continue to look at Danish royalty with particular emphasis on Ragnar’s sons and the question of both their paternal and, more significantly, *maternal* parentage.

Before we begin I would like to make a few brief points on the primary sources utilized here. For the most part we will use continental chronicles. Of those there are five that are largely considered the most accurate and therefore important: *The Annals of St. Bertin*; *of Fulda*; *of Xanten*; *of St. Vaast*, and the *Chronicle of Regino of Prüm*. The latter two have proven rather difficult to find, so we will focus on the first three. Secondary chronicles will be called upon as well. Insular sources (sources from the British Isles) will primarily be used in the final chapters, with particular attention being given to England's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Ireland's *Annals of Ulster*. It is important to note that contemporary sources for this period are scarce throughout Europe, and many times historians have to make do with later histories. Much of Scandinavian historical and cultural material was written down by historians and poets both on the Scandinavian Peninsula and in Iceland during the twelfth century. Icelandic scholars in particular preserved or composed much of what is considered Scandinavia's legendary Saga tradition, including *Ragnarssaga Lothbroka*, or *Ragnar Lothbrok's Saga*. Sources, and particularly the Sagas, will be discussed as necessary later on.

As the contemporary chronicles and later histories often do not use a common language, and come from various locations and cultures, proper nouns, particularly names, are found in a variety of forms. This leads to some guesswork, and while certain equations of characters seem logical,

others are more outlandish. The equation and identification of certain names or figures with others will be a major theme over these discussions, and it will be noted when proper name equations are generally agreed upon. I will, unless the discussion of a name holds a pertinent place in discussion, be using the more Anglicized form of Scandinavian names, so as not to confuse between Norse, French, or Latin forms. For example, the traditional spelling *Ragner Loðbrok*, will generally appear as *Ragnar Lothbrok*. The name *Ragnar Lothbrok* itself presents a special case, and I will only use that form to refer to the legendary or semi-legendary character who appears in the *Gesta Danorum*, *Ragnar's Saga*, and related sources. The historical counterparts of that character will be referred to by the name, or names, that appear in continental and insular chronicles.

Finally, the appendix provides a series of maps and genealogies, as well as a general timeline of events, to facilitate the navigation of the myriad of names and locations that will present themselves over the next five chapters. With that said, we can now begin our discussion of the Danish throne in the murky waters of the fifth and sixth centuries.



## CHAPTER ONE

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### **The History of Denmark and Sweden to the Battle of Brávellir (c. 500-c. 750)**

Piecing together the early history of Scandinavian kingdoms is not an easy task. Their foundations lie in the dark ages and the dearth of historical sources necessitates a large amount of supposition and guesswork. Names are altered in spelling and form across languages now dead, while deeds and events are inflated to become legendary accomplishments. In fact, the large majority of sources we have are legends and sagas, while many others were written by chroniclers and scholars centuries after the events were purported to have occurred. These sources often provide something that can only be called a distorted remembrance of history rather than verifiable historical fact. There is general consensus on the validity of certain sources, which allows us to combine, equate, and patch together a series of events with a healthy degree of skepticism. This chapter will attempt to utilize these sources to piece together a chronology of Sweden and Denmark down to the mid eighth century. In doing so, I hope to begin to show the historical and political trends that produce the figure or figures who influenced the characterization of the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok.

One of the most useful pieces of literature when beginning the treacherous journey into early Scandinavian history is actually the Old English epic *Beowulf*. While the poem itself can hardly be taken as pure fact, certain places, figures, and events are confirmed in other sources. Notably the death of the Gautish king

Hyglac in Friesland is confirmed in continental chronicles, meaning *Beowulf* can be utilized at least as a guideline for the chronology of the period, if not as a source of history.<sup>1</sup> The poem is supplemented by various sources, with some holding more weight than others. The *Ynglingatal*, from the ninth century — which survives as the *Yngling Saga* in Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth century *Heimskringla* — is an invaluable source for information on the early Swedish tribe of kings, while primary information from Denmark can be pulled from Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>2</sup> Even with these later sources much is uncertain and still more is unknown all together. Before discussing the faint sketch of history we can assemble, it is necessary to briefly discuss Scandinavian geography.

As with most of Europe at the time, Scandinavia was far from a united region.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the Viking age the major Scandinavian kingdoms had coalesced, but we will begin in the sixth century, when the tribes of Scandinavia were largely independent. The heart of Swedish power lay in Uppland, also known as Svitjod, about midway up the Western Baltic coast. It was here the Swedish tribe had its origins and where the Yngling kings had their seat. Further south along the peninsula lay Götaland, commonly referred to as Gautland. This region itself can be divided into the smaller kingdoms of Västergötland and

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<sup>1</sup> G. Turville-Petre, *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia* (London: Hutchinson House, 1951), 38-43.

<sup>2</sup> T.D. Kendrick, *A History of the Vikings* (London: Methuen & Co, 1930), 78-116.

Östergötland. Following the Danish migration from Sweden, we find the region of Skåne, at the tip of the Swedish peninsula. The large island to the west of Skåne is Zealand, one of the earliest footholds in the region for the Danes, and on which the Scylding line of kings built their hall. Further west lies Jutland, a peninsula connected to the European continent and homeland of the eponymous Jutes. When speaking of Denmark I will use the name to mean the region encompassing Skåne, Zealand, Jutland, and the neighboring islands. Until the Viking Age and Scandinavian raids on the coasts of the English Channel the majority of significant history is constrained to these small kingdoms, that eventually became the more powerful kingdoms of Sweden and Denmark.

### **Hyglac, Ongentheow, and the Yngling Line**

What we can consider as at least semi-historical events in Sweden begin in *Beowulf* with the saga of Ongentheow, king in Uppland.<sup>4</sup> The epic tells how Ongentheow made war with the Swedes' long time adversaries, the Geats.<sup>5</sup> The king of the Geats at the time was called Hrethel, who had three sons, Herebeald, Hæthcyn, and Hyglac. In a series of events that is rather typical of medieval texts, Hæthcyn accidentally killed his elder brother Herebeald. Their father became consumed by grief at the death of his eldest son and reportedly died from his misery, leaving Hæthcyn to take his place on the Geatish throne. Seemingly

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<sup>4</sup> Ongentheow being the anglicized form of the name. In Old Norse it would appear as similar to "Angantyr." — Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 34-54.

<sup>5</sup> The identity of the Geats will be presently discussed, but for now we can assume they can be equated with the Gauts of Götaland.

prompted by nothing more than an ancient rivalry, Hæthcyn proceeded to raid the lands of the Swedes, and carry off Ongentheow's wife. The Swedes naturally gave pursuit and Hæthcyn was slain, leaving his forces to be rescued by the youngest of the three brothers, Hyglac, who then assumed the throne until he met his death raiding in Friesland.<sup>6</sup> It is this narrative, and more specifically the death of Hyglac in Friesland, which allows for *Beowulf* to be used as a historical guideline. The raid on Friesland, a territory situated to the south of the Jutland peninsula, is confirmed in continental chronicles. Gregory of Tours, a contemporary Frankish chronicler, wrote in his *Historia Francorum*, that a Danish king Chlochilaicus raided Friesland. Other chroniclers mention the event as well, calling him either king of the Geats or king of the Gauts.<sup>7</sup> The identity of Hyglac's people is admittedly inconsistent. It could easily be chalked up to the unfamiliarity of the Frankish chroniclers with the peoples of Scandinavia, though there have been attempts to identify the Geats who are prominent in *Beowulf* with other tribes of people more prominent in history. Regardless, the confirmation of Hyglac's existence outside of literature means we can begin to place the figures here discussed onto a more concrete chronology. Given the dates of the *Historia Francorum* and related chronicles, we can date Hyglac's rule and death to the first half of the sixth century, specifically between the years 515 and 530.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54. and Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 38-43.

<sup>7</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 38-43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The rivalry between Geats and Swedes continued after Hyglac's death as his son Heardred succeeded as king. In the years between Hyglac's ascension and death, Ongentheow died in his old age and was succeeded without conflict by his son Ohthere.<sup>9</sup> Ohthere is significant in this long convoluted line of semi-legendary kings as the first Swedish king to appear both in *Beowulf* and in the *Ynglingatal*. According to the saga, the Yngling line of kings extends back to the Norse pantheon, and Ohthere appears some fifteen rulers down the line. Ongentheow, his reported father, does not appear in the *Ynglingatal* in any form. His place is filled by King Egill, and while the two may be equated, much of their descriptions leaves this theory unconvincing. Ohthere *is* present in the *Ynglingatal*, though more prominence is given to his sons and their endeavors. Ohthere had two sons of importance, Eanmund and Eadgils,<sup>10</sup> who were meant to rule after their father's death. However, upon his death, Ohthere's brother Onela usurped the throne.<sup>11</sup> Eanmund and Eadgils fled for refuge, of all places, to the hall of King Heardred, son of Hyglac. Onela followed them to Gautland and slew both Eanmund and Heardred before returning to Uppland. Eadgils survived and assumed command of the Geats. With their forces, he returned to Uppland where he slew Onela, thus avenging his brother and allowing him to take his rightful place on his father's throne. From this point on, it also appears that the Geats and all of Götaland were

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<sup>9</sup> Ohthere also appears in sagas and chronicles as Ottar. — Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116

<sup>10</sup> Eadgils is also referred to as Anthils.

<sup>11</sup> Also called Ali.

held as subjects to the Swedish king in Uppland. The exact relationship is unknown, but the Gauts of Götaland are certainly mentioned in the sagas at dates later than this, which means they were not wiped out or absorbed completely.<sup>12</sup> The end of the wars with the Swedes would suggest an alliance at the least, but what is more likely, based on Eadgils' assumption of command over the Geats, is that Gautland survived as a vassal of the Yngling throne in what was perhaps as an early form of jarldom.

Moving away from *Beowulf* and on to its counterparts in sagas and chronicles there is a large amount of confusion concerning the identity of peoples or tribes. This confusion has already been seen with Hyglac and his raids into Friesland. The *Yngling Saga*, which was written from the *Ynglingatal* by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century, instead of describing a standing war between the Swedes and the Gauts, makes the Swedes rivals of the Danes. Gwyn Jones, in her *History of the Vikings*, argues that this is an error on the part of Sturluson. The saga claims that Ohthere died on a raid to Vendil in Jutland. However, as Jones points out, it is likely that Vendil in Jutland was confused with Vendil in Uppland. Indeed the chief burial mound at Uppland's Vendil is named Ottar's Howe. Further on in the saga Ohthere's son Anthils (Eadgils) makes war with Ali (Onela) who is king of Uppland in Norway. The transformation of Onela from a Swede, and the uncle of Eadgils, into a Norwegian king is generally regarded as an error, prompted by the existence of an Uppland in both Sweden and Norway. The

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<sup>12</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 38-43.

climactic battle between the two kings occurs, across sources, at Lake Vænir, equated to Vänern, which is located in Sweden.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the greatest omission in later chronicles, and a large source of debate among Scandinavian historians, is the precise identity of the Geats, who featured prominently in *Beowulf*. To this point we have made the assumption that they are one and the same with the Gauts. It is linguistically easy to imagine how the name *Geat* could have arisen from *Gaut*. However, Jones puts forth a discussion on the possibility that the Geats could have in fact been Jutes. The philological jump is not far, and the word *Geat* could have become *Jute* without too much trouble, or vice versa. It is also entirely possible the Old English poet of *Beowulf* simply confused tribal names, placing one where it did not belong. The argument for a Geat-Jute equivalence is best supported by Hyglac's raids into Friesland. It has already been seen that there was little consensus among continental chroniclers on his origins, as he was called king of Geats, Gauts, and Danes, by differing sources. In fact, placing the Geats in Jutland makes their raids into Friesland much more likely. There is convincing evidence that strong trading links existed between Denmark and Frisia in later centuries. Despite this, Jones rather convincingly argues that the Geats with whom the Swedes warred could be none other than the Gauts. Gautish origins lie in Västergötland, positioning them directly to the south of Uppland, and making them almost destined to become rivals of the Swedes. The fact that sagas of these wars include almost no mention

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<sup>13</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 38-43 and Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

of ships or naval ventures would be impossible had the Geats actually been positioned in Jutland.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we can conclude that many of the later sagas and chronicles that style Hyglac as a Dane or style the Geats as anything other than Gauts were simply mistaken due to chronological distance or simple unfamiliarity with the peoples of the region. The error could also have stemmed from the lack of Gautish importance past the sixth century. It is likely following Eadgil's ascension to the throne that the Gauts became subject to the Swedes. Their lack of prominence from this point on may have caused later chroniclers to overlook their significance, and to identify the Swedes' rivals for power as Danes, who held sway over Jutland, Zealand, and Skåne for centuries.

### **Denmark and the Scylding Kings**

The true historical beginning of Danish dominion over those lands has been long forgotten and what remains is regarded as pure legend. Much of Danish history is contained in the *Gesta Danorum*, written by Saxo Grammaticus in the twelfth century. According to early legends in the *Gesta*, the people who would eventually become Danes were led out of Swedish Uppland by Dan, the son of their king, Yppr. He traveled south where he took Zealand and the surrounding islands.<sup>15</sup> These united islands he called Vithesleth, or "the wide plain."<sup>16</sup> Sometime after that he added Fyn and Jutland to the west, then Skåne to his dominion, and resulting in the kingdom of Danmörk. There is likely little validity

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

<sup>15</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 44-58.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.



to this legend, but the narrative is correct concerning the significance of Zealand, Jutland, and Skåne in the creation of Denmark. By no means were these borders definitive nor was the Danish dominance over the region uncontested. Danish power in Jutland in particular was challenged by the native Herul people. The date of Danish settlement in Zealand and Jutland is also uncertain. Some place it as early as the third century, but it is more likely to have occurred in the latter half of the fifth. Despite some confusion it is reasonable to assume that the Danes had established themselves by the mid sixth century.<sup>17</sup>

The most celebrated kings of Denmark were of the Scylding line.<sup>18</sup> Tradition states that the family was founded by Scyld Scefing who, like Dan before him, seems to be entirely mythical. Scyld's grandson Halfdan however, appears both in *Beowulf* and in historical records. The name literally means "half-Dane," suggesting that the Scylding line was, at first, partially foreign to Denmark.<sup>19</sup> The family made their seat in Leire, on Zealand, and from there extended their power over the kingdom of Denmark. The Scylding line can be dated, like the Swedish kings, using the pages of *Beowulf*. In the epic, Halfdan's son Hrothgar followed him as king of the Danes and ruled sometime before the death of Hyglac, which we have already placed c. 515-c. 530. Hrothgar was said to have ruled long, so without too much supposition we can place Halfdan at the end of the fifth century, and Hrothgar ruling after his death into the early sixth. It

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<sup>17</sup> Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116.

<sup>18</sup> *Scylding* is the name as it appears in *Beowulf*. In Old Norse it appears as Skjöldungar.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

is said in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* that upon Halfdan's death Hrothgar shared rule of Denmark with his brother Helgi.<sup>20</sup> Saxo says Hrothgar made his seat, not at the traditional Leire, but rather in Jutland. Helgi, in contrast lived as a "King of the Sea," as a raiding Viking.<sup>21</sup> It seems likely that if Hrothgar took up position in Jutland, Helgi would have been left with the traditional Scylding hall in Zealand. Its position among the Danish islands and Helgi's reputation in the *Gesta* as a Viking raider lends this some validity. And if that is not enough, there is also evidence that Helgi's descendants held Leire in later decades. Helgi is also said to have warred with the Swedish king Eadgils.<sup>22</sup> Returning briefly to a previous discussion, the existence of a Dane-Swede war might help explain the seeming erasure of the Gauts from later texts.

In any case, the Scylding rivalry with the house of Yngling gains more importance in the next generation. During Helgi and Hrothgar's shared rule of Denmark, their largest concern was the internal power struggle with the Heathobard tribe. Both *Beowulf* and the shorter poem *Widsith* make it apparent that the Scyldings in Leire held a long-standing feud with the Heathobards who seem to have been based in Jutland.<sup>23</sup> With this being the case, an increase in Heathobardian activity in Jutland may be why Hrothgar chose to seat himself there rather than Leire. Since they are referred to as kings the Heathobard line

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<sup>20</sup> Hrothgar also appears across sources as Hróar or simple Ro.

<sup>21</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 44-58.

<sup>22</sup> Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

would likely have held a degree of independence from the Scylding throne. Whether the Scyldings intended for them to have that independence is unknown, but the Heathobards certainly had enough power to challenge the Scyldings and even match them in combat on occasion. In a similar fashion to the Geatish identity, the identity of the Heathobards themselves is subject to debate. There are two major views that hold the most support. The first being that the Heathobard line represents the Jutish division of the one time Danish invaders. The second reigning theory instead holds that they were the ruling family of the native Heruls.<sup>24</sup>

Each theory is considerably persuasive. The first suggests an internal rivalry at a time when the Danes were likely still struggling for a foothold in Zealand, Jutland, and the surrounding area. Given the nature of family rivalries across Europe in this period and the uncertainty of power in the fledgling kingdom, the possibility of an internal conflict is likely. However, the opposing theory seems just as likely. As an invading force the Danes certainly faced opposition from the native people. If the Heruls did have enough power and organization for one family to have control of the region, whether they named themselves kings or not, it is likely that they would take every opportunity to rebel against their conquerers. In terms of the immediate narrative, the Heathobard-Scylding conflict — which largely consisted of a prolonged series of raids — led to the death of Halfdan, and the ascension of Hrothgar and Helgi.

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<sup>24</sup> Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116.

Following the death of Halfdan, his sons avenged him by slaying the Heathobard king in return. There may have been peace for some years, but the Heathobards retaliated before too long, only to be defeated by Hrothgar along with Helgi's son Hrólfr. Whether that means Helgi had died or was occupied on raids away from Zealand is uncertain.

According to tradition, Hrólfr, generally known as Hrólfr Kraki, was conceived in a manner rather reminiscent of Greek theatrics. It seems Helgi, on one of his many raiding expeditions, raped and impregnated Thóra, the wife of a German prince.<sup>25</sup> She gave birth to a daughter, Yrsa, and when Yrsa was grown Thóra contrived for Helgi to marry her as an act of revenge. *Their* child was Hrólfr Kraki, and upon learning of their true relationship Helgi reportedly returned to the sea in shame while Yrsa went to Sweden to marry none other than Eadgils.<sup>26</sup> When he came of age Hrólfr took up the seat in Leire, and reportedly shared rule with Hrothgar for some time, but eventually held sole control of Denmark. During his reign he warred with Eadgils as his father had. The reasons behind these attacks on Sweden however, are debated. *Beowulf* allows us to imagine that the cause was familial. It seems the wife of Eadgils' uncle Onela — who had usurped the throne and was later killed by Eadgils himself — was kinswoman to Hrólfr and the Scylding line. The raids therefore, may have been intervention on her behalf.<sup>27</sup> However, Yrsa's position as Eadgils' wife sheds some doubt on this theory as

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<sup>25</sup> She is also called Ólöf.

<sup>26</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 44-58.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

maternal ties to Hrólfr would seem stronger than his ties to a more distant kinswoman. If the marriage led to a reluctant alliance between the Ynglings and Scyldings, it is possible there is some truth to the following narrative as it is laid out in the sagas.

The histories of the Danes and Swedes intersected as Eadgils was reportedly given aid by Hrólfr in the form of twelve berserkers during his conflict with Onela. It seems as though Eadgils never gave Hrólfr compensation or any of the gifts that he expected for this service. Hrólfr attacked Eadgils for this slight, but was repelled in a series of events that seems entirely fictitious, though he and his men escaped with their lives. The chief argument against this narrative would be one of chronology, but with some guesswork as to dates the story could indeed be possible. Eadgils and Hrólfr appear to be of the same generation, though admittedly the incestuous nature of Hrólfr's birth complicates our timeline. Eadgils' father Ohthere and uncle Onela would have been relatively contemporary with the Gautish Hyglac, whose death c. 515-c. 530 began our timeline. Eadgils therefore would have been contemporary with Hyglac's son Heardred. Both conceivably would have come to power around 520, with Eadgils perhaps a bit later, needing to fight for his throne. Since Hrólfr is said to have shared rule for a period with his uncle Hrothgar, whose own rule bridged the fifth and sixth centuries, his ascension at Leire could have occurred some time before this, around 510. This would allow him to be established long enough to send aid to his mother's husband Eadgils in his fight for the throne. The one limitation to this

argument is Yrsa herself. For the theory to hold true, she would have needed to marry Eadgils before his father's death, or at least before he took the throne. An early marriage is entirely likely, given Yrsa's heritage being both of the Scylding line, and of the likely powerful Germanic lineage of her mother. It would fit historic trends for the marriage alliance to have been forged early in the young couple's lives. The final assumption we must make to bolster the story as it appears in the saga rather than the theory surrounding Onela's widow, is that Yrsa was conceived before Helgi's ascension to the throne, and that Hrólfr was conceived while she was relatively young — probably between fifteen and twenty. Since all of this falls within the realm of reason, the outline of the story, as it appears in the sagas, seems to be more plausible. Eadgils, in desperate need of support, took aid from his son-in-law Hrólfr and the Danes in Zealand. However, his gratitude was apparently insufficient for Hrólfr who, despite maternal ties, attacked the Swedes and was repelled. According to saga legend, Hrólfr believed this failure caused him to lose Odin's favor. What is certain is that he died in battle not long after, warring with an upstart cousin in the mid sixth century.<sup>28</sup>

### **Ivar Vidfami and Harald Wartooth**

The history of Denmark, and Scandinavia in general, becomes obscured following the death of Hrólfr Kraki. From the mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries, there is little on record. What seems likely is that because Hrólfr left behind no

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<sup>28</sup> This cousin Hjørvard, was said to be king of Öland, a Baltic island off the coast of Sweden. The location of the island leads to the question of where the familial bond lay; and realistically it may have been through Yrsa's germanic line or even conceivably through Eadgils and the Ynglings. — Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

heir, the kingdom of Denmark became fragmented. Scylding kings with lesser claim to the throne at Leire took control of the various parts of the larger kingdom, ruling with independence.<sup>29</sup> It is, notably, during this time period that Prince Ambleth, who is popularly known as Hamlet, would have lived in Jutland.<sup>30</sup> The narrative of Denmark comes into sharper focus, and collides again with Swedish history, three generations down the line from Eadgils and Hrólfr. In the mid-seventh century the Yngling king in Uppland was Ingjald, the great-grandson of Eadgils. In the *Yngling Saga* it is said that Ingjald widened his kingdom through treachery. He invited the lesser kings of the surrounding realms to a feast at his hall where, after getting them drunk, he burned them alive.<sup>31</sup> One of the kings who was invited, but who declined to attend, was Ivar Vidfami,<sup>32</sup> king of Skåne, whose father Halfdan Snjalla was the great-grandson of Hrothgar. In Scandinavian legend, Ivar is treated in much the same way as the England's King Arthur. He is said to be of both the Scylding line and of Germanic royalty, and after inheriting Skåne is said to have conquered lands on the continent and as far as Northumbria. Much of this is certainly a false inflation of his accomplishments, but his conflict with Ingjald is more plausible. At this point, Ivar retook his family's traditional holdings in Denmark, then turned his sights on Ingjald in

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

<sup>30</sup> He, and his father before him, were perhaps members of the Heathobard line. — Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116.

<sup>31</sup> Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116. and Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

<sup>32</sup> Meaning Ivar "Far Reacher" — Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 44-58

Sweden.<sup>33</sup> Ingjald, no doubt frightened of Ivar's already impressive reputation, locked himself and his family in a hall, then proceeded to avoid capture by burning *himself* alive, along and all inside. Ivar assumed control of Sweden, and for that is given credit both for ending the Yngling line and for uniting the lands of modern Sweden.

As a matter of fact, the united kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden returned to fragmentation after Ivar's death, and it was left to his grandson Harald Hilditonn, called Wartooth, to reassemble them.<sup>34</sup> Harald Wartooth succeed after an extended campaign in the early eighth century, beginning in Denmark, then extending his power over Gautland and Uppland. Realistically, Harald and his grandfather Ivar before him would not have ruled a united kingdom, but rather a *confederacy* of Scandinavian kingdoms. Individual sub-kings under Harald would have recognized his superiority, but retained enough independence to believe they could revolt when opportunity presented. An important revolt occurred at the end of Harald's long reign, during which he was challenged by Sigurd Hring, a sub-king who is identified across sources as Harald's nephew.<sup>35</sup> His region of rule varies in the stories, and sources alternately have him as king of Denmark, Gautland, or Sweden. Of these, Sweden (meaning Uppland) and Vastergötland are most common and indeed seem the most likely. Denmark, at least, can be ruled

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<sup>33</sup> Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 78-116.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 34-54.

<sup>35</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 44-58.



out. Both sides raised great hosts and met at the Battle of Brávellir, c. 750. Harald, already weakened in his old age, fell to Sigurd who took the throne.

## **Conclusions**

In the above narrative we have seen Denmark and Sweden, both initially divided by rival tribes in independent regions, combine into larger kingdoms under their respective ruling lineages, then into an even larger confederation under the descendants of Ivar Vidfami. What though, is the significance of these events, especially pertaining to the question of Ragnar Lothbrok? At heart, the above events are significant because they concern Ragnar's kin. According to the sagas, the newly crowned Sigurd Hring was Ragnar's father, making the Scyldings his ancestors. Whether this ends up being found true or not the chronicles of the formation of the Swedish and Danish kingdoms reveal the deeper cultural and political milieu into which Ragnar was born. The unity of the kingdoms was never stable, and was constantly in danger of a kinsman or rival family making a bid for power. Denmark in particular was frequently divided between kings who shared the throne and ruled some combination of its smaller divisions. It was seen with Onela, it was seen with Sigurd centuries later, and certainly it will be seen again as we turn to events closer to Ragnar and his immediate family.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### **Expansion and the House of Godfred in the Ninth Century (c. 750-857)**

Immediately following the Battle of Brávellir and the ascension of Sigurd Hring, the history of Denmark and Sweden once again becomes obscured. Whether Sigurd's ascension led to immediate peace or further conflict is unknown and for the large part the question is rather irrelevant for this discussion. The exact date of Brávellir is also uncertain, and it is possible to place the battle within a range of some two centuries, depending on how one interprets chronicle evidence. For our purposes it is possible, and certainly convenient, to place the battle around the year 750. As we have already seen, tracing the generations of the Scylding line can easily place the battle there, though altering the average age gap between generations of rulers can shift the battle closer to the beginning of the century. Regardless, the line of Danish kings comes back into focus in the 770s. Contemporary sources for this period of Scandinavian history come not from Danish or Swedish origins, but rather from Frankish chroniclers, for it is at this point that Denmark and the Carolingian Empire begin to come into antagonistic contact.

This chapter will continue to trace the Danish throne and its royal house (or houses). Along the way, we will digress into necessary, if inconvenient, discussions of the power of the Danish throne and of Scandinavian succession. This discussion will recover the main features of the political atmosphere of the

ninth century, and place into context the exploits of a man who is almost certainly the historical mold for the legendary Ragnar, as well as the legacy of his ancestors and descendants.

### **The Danish Throne to 812**

In the year 771 the Frankish kingdom came under the rule of Charlemagne, known also as Charles the Great. He began a campaign of territorial expansion aimed not only at gathering lands under his rule, but also with spreading Christianity across the continent. By his death, the Carolingian empire stretched to encompass not only modern France, but Germany, Central Europe, and Lombardy in northern Italy as well. His expansion north naturally brought him into conflict with the Danes, whose realm stretched down the Jutland Peninsula to the Eider River. Up to this point Denmark was bordered to the south of this river by Saxony, the eponymous region of the Saxons. A year after his coronation Charlemagne began a campaign in Saxony which would eventually end, thirty years later, with the total domination of the region. Denmark and its kings naturally took note of events to the south especially when in 777 a Saxon chieftain named Widukind fled north seeking refuge with the Danish king whom Frankish sources name as Sigfred.<sup>1</sup> Little is known of this Sigfred, or when his rule began. He was succeeded in 800 by his son Godfred so, unless he held an abnormally long reign, it might be supposed that he ascended to the throne shortly before receiving Widukind, the Saxon refugee.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 204-240.

It would not be unreasonable to assume Sigfred had some blood relation to Sigurd Hring and the Scylding line. Certainly to hold the throne he would have needed some form of royal lineage. Genealogically connecting Sigfred to Sigurd is rather simple. If a young Sigurd Hring took the throne from the elderly Harald Wartooth around 750, a comfortable rule of twenty years places his death at the beginning of the decade in which Sigfred appears. It fits well with the theory that Sigfred was a relatively new king in 777. A theory that Sigfred and Sigurd were one in the same, while not impossible to make, is unnecessary in my opinion. As we will discuss in a later chapter, there is reasonable evidence to suggest contemporary chroniclers and later historians especially confused and mistranslated personal names, placing certain figures associated with the Ragnar legend in incorrect places and centuries. Equating the two would certainly streamline the historical narrative, but that begins to push Brávellir too close to the end of the eighth century. However, if we place Sigfred in the next generation, as Sigurd's son or nephew, the timeline to which we have already given relative credibility remains intact. The question also arises as to what lands Sigfred held — a question which becomes more significant as we shift focus to Godfred. In overthrowing Harald Wartooth, Sigurd Hring would have increased his own influence from his own sub-kingdom in Sweden (or Vastergötland) over the whole of the Scandinavian confederation. There is no evidence however that Sigfred and Godfred ruled over an area any larger than medieval Denmark or, as some

historians have argued, over an area larger than Jutland alone.<sup>2</sup> Placing Sigfred as Sigurd's successor on the throne of the High King therefore cannot be correct. It would be easier, and no less convenient, to place him as sub-king in one of Denmark's regions. Exact familial bonds must remain uncertain, but in the early 770s Sigfred could have been placed on the lesser throne in Denmark by his father, ascended to the position *following* his father (Sigurd Hring's brother), or gained his position by a similar series of events.

Sigfred died in the year 800 and was followed by his son Godfred in that same year, or shortly after. Some historians have equated this historical figure Godfred with the more legendary hero Gudröd, who appears in the *Ynglingatal*.<sup>3</sup> Gudröd was reportedly king in the Vestfold in Norway. While this identification falls apart under closer scrutiny it provides a link between Danish and Norwegian territories, which might foreshadow later political ties between the royalty of each region. For the time being, with the Carolingians on Denmark's doorstep across the Eider, Godfred was keenly aware of the Frankish threat and responded with a show of force. In 804 he mustered a fleet and put them on display outside Sliesthorp, on the border of Denmark and Saxony. While this encounter ended without battle, four years later Godfred acted more ostentatiously by invading the lands of the Abodrites.<sup>4</sup> These Slavic peoples had allied with Charlemagne during

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, Gustav Storm discussed this equation, though admittedly abandons it. — T.D. Kendrick, *A History of the Vikings*. (London: Methuen & Co, 1930), 119-226.

<sup>4</sup> Also spelled Obodrites, or Obotrites. — Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 119-226.

his North German wars, and resided on the South Baltic coast just to the east of Saxony. Godfred's victory over the tribe was unreserved; the Abodrites sued for peace, and after taking their chieftain into captivity, Godfred destroyed their commercial center, the town of Reric. While this series of events brought Godfred and Charlemagne into direct conflict, the Carolingian response was not as robust as Godfred might have expected. In fact, it seems he expected a considerable counter attack from Charlemagne for, upon returning to Denmark, Godfred gave orders for the construction (or at least expansion) of a fortification that stretched across the peninsula from the North Sea to the fjords on the eastern coast. This was the Danevirke: a system of earthworks that continued to be expanded and refortified into the twelfth century. The fortifications at this point might not have been needed as Charlemagne was more heavily invested in Italian and Iberian campaigns. However, the Abodrites were valuable allies, so Charlemagne sent his son Charles, called the Younger, with a contingent of the army. It seems Charles the Younger decided to use this contingent to pursue easier adversaries on the South Baltic coast rather than challenge Godfred directly. This period of conflict ended with a rather ineffective set of negotiations, during which Godfred agreed to return the Abodrite chief to his people, but subsequently returned home and executed him. Godfred spent the year 810 raiding the Frisian coast with his fleet and boasting of his coming conquest of Germany, claiming Frisia and Saxony would soon be Danish provinces. The boasting came to naught however, as in that year Godfred was murdered by a retainer and succeeded by his nephew

Hemming. Hemming, who apparently was a milder man than his uncle, agreed to peace terms with the Carolingian empire, officially accepting the Danish border at the Eider River.

With the death of Godfred we need once again to turn to the question of territory, and how powerful a throne Godfred, Sigfred, and their successors held. Sigfred, as we have discussed, likely ruled as a one time sub-king in Denmark, or at the least a relative in his father's generation would have, as there is no evidence for a Scandinavian confederation surviving after the reign of Sigurd Hring. In fact, it is more likely that the confederation broke apart, with the one time sub-kings maintaining their own interests without tribute to higher authority. Since we cannot know *how many* sub-kings existed during and after the reign of Sigurd Hring we cannot know how small or large a territory each controlled. As for Sigfred, Godfred, and later kings we will soon discuss, we do not know if they ruled the same territory as the old Scylding line or only some part of it on the Jutland Peninsula. Many historians hold the opinion that what we consider modern Denmark was not united at all until the reign of Harald Bluetooth in the mid tenth century.<sup>5</sup> The actions of Godfred however, do not seem like the actions of a lesser king. While many of his deeds might be chalked up to his braggart's personality, he did manage to challenge the might of the Carolingian Empire at its height, with little to no consequence. The primary grounds for the belief that Godfred was more powerful than a regional king comes from his attack on the

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240.

Abodrites. His raids into the Abodrite lands were not the profit driven raids of a warrior-chief. Rather, they were not concerned with *direct* profit, but looked towards long-term, trade based goals. An alliance with the Abodrites gave Charlemagne access to an east-west trade route that ran from Frisia to the East Baltic, and on to Russia. This route, called the Hollingstedt, was quite significant for Danish trade and intersected another North-South route at Danish Hedeby.<sup>6</sup> Godfred's destruction of Reric, the center of trade for the Abodrites, would redirect commerce towards Hedeby, and take away Carolingian control of the Hollingstedt. In fact, following the destruction of Reric in 808, Godfred took his fleet back to Sliesthorp, which lay near Hedeby, with instructions to hold the Eider River.<sup>7</sup> These actions, which clearly had an economic purpose, support the theory that Godfred and the generations around him held a powerful position in Scandinavian politics. The idea is strengthened if we consider that Godfred, as well as both Sigfred and Hemming, opened non-military negotiations with the Carolingians, which were eventually successful. These long sighted actions are not characteristic of lesser kings or tribal leaders, but seem akin to those of more important rulers.

### **The Houses of Godfred and Harald**

Hemming did succeed in signing a treaty with Charlemagne: the first of its kind on record for a Scandinavian kingdom. His success as a king was short lived

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<sup>6</sup> This North-South route, called the Army Road, ran from South West Europe up to the Kattegat and Norway. — Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



however, as he passed away the following year in 812. What followed is another dark period of Danish history and, while events are hazy, a general series of events can be pieced together from multiple chronicle sources. At this point there was civil war in Danish territory, which should come as no surprise.<sup>8</sup> In the previous chapter we explored the legendary history of Scandinavia and saw that every few generations the royal families engaged in wars of succession. In this case the seeming heir to the throne, Hemming's cousin Sigfred, was challenged by a certain Anulo, who may or may not have been a distant relative.

At this point it is worth taking a slight detour to discuss the current Danish manner of succession. What prompts this discussion is the rather interesting fact that in 812 Sigfred's claim to succeed was uncontested among his immediate relations. No sons of Godfred nor brothers of Hemming stepped forward to claim the throne, despite such figures certainly existing. The *Royal Frankish Annals* mention the expulsion of two sons of Godfred by their brothers in 819. Therefore, in 812 there may have been no less than four sons of the previous king present in the Danish kingdom, all of whom made no grab for power. It is likely that, at least in Godfred's family, succession went not to the king's eldest son, but rather to the eldest member of the entire family. Sigfred certainly believed himself to have a legitimate claim to the throne, but in 808, Reginaldus, another nephew of

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<sup>8</sup> R.W. McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" in *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress*, ed. Bo Almqvist and David Greene (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1976), 93-123.

Godfred, was believed to be “foremost next to the king.”<sup>9</sup> He died in that year however, allowing Sigfred to claim that title as his own, uncontested by brothers or cousins.<sup>10</sup> What of Anulo though? Who exactly was he and what right did he have to claim the throne of Hemming? There is a theory, supported by two main pieces of evidence that will be presently discussed, that in Denmark during the ninth century there was not one, but rather two ruling dynasties.<sup>11</sup> Hemming’s cousin Sigfred was the heir of one of these lines, one that we have discussed as kings that certainly held Jutland and very likely more territory to the North. Anulo however, belonged to a second family, one with enough power to challenge Sigfred’s claim, and was descended from a figure named Harald.<sup>12</sup> The view that these two houses existed and were in opposition to each other stems initially from the entry for the year 812 in the *Royal Frankish Annals*, which reads, translated from Latin,

“Not long after that, Hemming, King of the Danes died. Sigfred, nephew of King Godfred, and Anulo, nephew of Harald, himself King,

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<sup>9</sup> At least he is called such in the *Chronicon Moissiacense*. — McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123.

<sup>10</sup> The exact relations between members of this generation are rather uncertain. Hemming certainly had at least two brothers, Hancwin and Angandeo, who are mentioned as such in the *Royal Frankish Annals*. However, as Reginaldus and Sigfred are mentioned only as *nepos*, or nephews, of Godfred, it is unsure if either of them are brothers of these, or even to each other.

<sup>11</sup> The view was largely accepted by McTurk, and argued for initially by Storm, Vogel, and de Vries.

<sup>12</sup> Herioldus in Latin language sources.

both wished to succeed him. Being unable to come to an agreement, they raised troops, and met in battle where they both died.”<sup>13</sup>

The exact wording of this passage is disputed, as is so often the case. Significantly, the portion reading “Harald, *himself* King,” in alternate translations reads “Harald, the *former* King,” which leads to the necessary discussion of the preexistence of familial ties between the contestants and their houses. We can probably conclude there were two kingly families or factions, which we will call the Houses of Godfred and of Harald. In other words the theme of warring families and factions in the kingdom of Denmark continued. The identity of this Harald — the seeming patriarch of Anulo’s family — is unknown, for no other Harald or Herioldus appears in this period save for a later figure: a member of this house who we will style as Harald II.

According to the genealogies provided by McTurk, which are based mainly on the work of Vogel, the patriarchal Harald I died before or around 804 and was brother to Anulo’s father.<sup>14</sup> Anulo of course, needed to have come of age by 812 to claim the Danish throne. Harald I therefore would have been a contemporary of Godfred, and I think it likely they were distant cousins. The royal claims of Anulo must have come from somewhere and while it is possible he and his family were a upstart warrior clan it seems more likely, given what we have already seen of Scandinavian politics, that Anulo and Harald I were

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<sup>13</sup> *The Royal Frankish Annals*, in Bernhard Walter Scholz trans., *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1970. *s.a.* 812.

<sup>14</sup> McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123.

somehow linked, as Godfred was, to the Scylding line. The families likely split nearly a century before with the generation of Harald Wartooth. In legendary sources Wartooth is given various sons, but none seem to have historical relevance or even validity. The exact connection does not truly matter. Whether through a brother, sister, or nephew, the House of Harald must connect to Wartooth for the political trend to be accurate.

They also must have had considerable military power. Returning to 812, Anulo and his army battled Sigfred and his own. According to the *Royal Frankish Annals*, both contestants died, but it was the House of Harald that triumphed and placed Anulo's kinsmen, Regenfrid and Harald II, jointly on the throne.<sup>15</sup> For this to have happened, the armies of Anulo must have been comparable, if not superior, to the armies of Sigfred. I think it likely that the Danish kingdom was divided in a similar fashion to the arrangement between Hrothgar and Hrólfr in the early sixth century, when the Scylding line was challenged by the Heathobards; that is, Denmark politically consisted of two parts: Jutland down to the Eider, and another containing Skåne. If we allow our imagination to supply plausible details, Zealand and the Islands may well have been contested ground between the two major sections. While historical origins for this division of Denmark have already been seen, the two regions in this period might have been divided as sub-kingdoms under Ivar Vidfami or Harald Wartooth. If the immediate predecessors of Godfred and Sigfred (the elder) began as sub-kings under Sigurd Hring, what

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<sup>15</sup> Harald is also referred to as Harald Klak.

prevented the ancestors of Harald I from holding similar positions? Godfred certainly held Jutland, as evidenced by his conflict with Charlemagne and his erection of the Danevirke, and given his power and reach, he may have held the islands, but there is no evidence that he also ruled Skåne. The theory that the kingdom of Denmark was divided into sub-kingdoms, a condition which may have been traditional, would also explain the proliferation of co-rulers that appeared during the centuries we have discussed. While the newly crowned Regensfrid and Harald II are the only clear examples in the early decades of the ninth century, other co-kings soon appeared.

I will make one more brief point for a connection between the houses stretching to Harald Wartooth, which concerns naming conventions. We will return to this subject in more depth later during the discussion of the parentage of Ragnar, but it must be mentioned here as well. There was (and remains today in many societies) a tradition that dictates when a member of a family dies, the first child born after their death is honored with their name or some variation of it.<sup>16</sup> It is the reason family names persist throughout centuries. It seems reasonable therefore that the name *Harald*, appearing twice among the historical players we are presently considering, would link the House of Harald to the other most recent *Harald* we have seen, Harald Wartooth. The association is thin however, and while it may rest on rational grounds, historical sources that would support it are lacking.

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<sup>16</sup> McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123.

The joint rule of Harald II and Regenfrid was as short lived as the reign of Hemming. Following the climactic battle between Sigfred and Anulo, Godfred's sons, who supported their cousin in the war, were driven from Denmark to Sweden. This gave Regenfrid and Harald II, sons of the House of Harald. control over the kingdom for a brief time.<sup>17</sup> They agreed to keep Hemming's peace with the Carolingian Empire on the condition that *their* brother be released by the Carolingians back into their control.<sup>18</sup> The brothers also had to deal with antagonists in Westarfolda, which is described in the *Royal Frankish Annals* as lying to the extreme northeast of their kingdom. The region has been equated with Vestfold in Norway, and it is supposed by some that the people and royalty there were allied with the House of Godfred. The Vestfold-Denmark connection has already been seen in our brief discussion of Gudröd, the king in Vestfold some equate with Godfred. Harald and Regenfrid were seemingly successful in subduing the people of Westarfolda, though it was of little consequence. That same year, 813, Godfred's sons, having gathered support from Swedish allies in their exile, attacked and reclaimed their father's throne. Exactly who these sons of Godfred were is unknown. For the most part, in Frankish chronicles they are referred to as just that: "the sons of Godfred." One son is named however, and is presumably the foremost of his brothers. Beginning in 827 Horik I is mentioned across sources as king of Denmark, sometimes as sole ruler and sometimes with a

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<sup>17</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and Scholz, trans. *The Royal Frankish Annals s.a.* 812

<sup>18</sup> This brother, who is inconveniently also named Hemming, was captive in the Frankish court for reasons that are never mentioned in the chronicles.

co-king, as we will see.<sup>19</sup> He must therefore be considered the most significant player left in the House of Godfred and likely was the eldest of the clan after Sigfred's fall in the battle against Anulo. In 813, Horik and his brothers returned to Denmark and again met the House of Harald in battle. This time they were victorious; Regenfrid was slain and Harald II fled south to his allies in the Frankish court. The following year, 814, Charlemagne died and the Carolingian Empire passed to his son, Louis the Pious. Louis strengthened his alliance with Harald II and his house, granting him lands, or at least refuge, in Saxony until he could return to his throne in Denmark. To that end, Louis granted Harald command of an army composed of Saxons and Abodrites. Their initial attempts to invade in 815 were unsuccessful, and over the next decade Harald remained a constant thorn in the side of Horik and his brothers with the sometime support of the Carolingian court.

While Louis was often suspicious of the Danish kings, he did not shy from using them when he required it. In 817 he reportedly hired them and their army to raid Saxony and suppress an Abodrite revolt. In 819, according to the *Royal Frankish Annals*, Harald was finally successful in returning to Denmark, though the motivation behind certain events that year are obscured. It seems there was discord between the sons of Godfred who continued to share rule of the Danish kingdom. Two sons were said to have made an alliance with Harald while two did

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<sup>19</sup> Specifically he is mentioned in: *The Royal Frankish Annals* in 827 just before they end; in *The Annals of St. Bertin* in 836, 845, 847, and 850; in Rimbart's *Life of Anskar*, Chapter 24; and in *The Annals of Fulda* in 854. — McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

not and the latter were driven from the country.<sup>20</sup> Little to no mention of these exiled sons is seen after this time, so it can safely be assumed that Horik was one of the two who made peace with Harald. Harald was granted a part of the kingdom and allowed to rule as either a co-king or as a regional ruler.<sup>21</sup> If we here consider our previous discussion, where we assigned the House of Harald a seat in Skåne, we might assume that it was that same region Harald II was allowed to keep as his own. It would certainly require a bit of generosity on the part of Horik and his unnamed brother; generosity which Harald apparently did not appreciate. He maintained his alliance with Louis the Pious to the south and contrived to increase his holdings. In 823 he returned to Louis's court, where he sought the king's help against the sons of Godfred, who he claimed were attempting to drive him from the country. Louis responded by sending Harald back to Denmark with emissaries to negotiate with Horik. In 826, Harald again returned to the royal court, this time to be baptized into the Christian faith. For receiving this sacrament, Harald was granted lands in Frisia by Louis and then returned to Denmark with a Christian missionary in tow.<sup>22</sup> The following year, 827, the sons of Godfred were finally successful in driving Harald out of the country for good.

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<sup>20</sup> Scholz, trans. *The Royal Frankish Annals s.a.* 819.

<sup>21</sup> G. Turville-Petre, *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia*, (London: Hutchinson House, 1951), 66-85.

<sup>22</sup> This monk, St. Anskar, was the most significant force in the conversion of Scandinavia, though frankly rather insignificant for our discussions. — Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240.



He returned to his lands in Frisia, where he lived the remainder of his days patrolling the coast with his brother Rorik.

### **Horik I and Viking Activity Along the English Channel**

Before consigning himself to this fate Harald made one final attempt at regaining lands in Denmark. In 828, the Sons of Godfred were prepared to make a peace with Louis the Pious to end hostilities between the Carolingian Empire and the Danish kingdom and to settle their dispute with Harald. For that purpose an assembly was to be held on the banks of the Eider. It seems Harald was too eager and probably stinging from his expulsion from the kingdom. He gathered a hoard, crossed the Eider, and pillaged a number of Danish villages. Godfred's sons responded by canceling the negotiations, gathering their own troops, and retaliating. They plundered the Frankish stronghold across the river in Saxony before returning to their territory. They then sent an emissary to Louis explaining their actions, and demanding amends be made.<sup>23</sup> Amends were not forthcoming, for in the 830s, Louis became occupied with more pressing matters as his sons divided his territory amongst themselves, plunging the empire into civil war.<sup>24</sup> Horik, meanwhile, consolidated his own power in Denmark. In contemporary Frankish chronicles, mentions of the Sons of Godfred cease and are replaced by

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<sup>23</sup> Scholz, trans. *The Royal Frankish Annals s.a. 828*.

<sup>24</sup> The matter was settled in the 843 Treaty of Verdun, with the Empire divided into three parts; Lothar received the central regions including Burgundy, Alsace-Lorraine, and Italy, Louis the German received the Eastern empire, which would become the kingdom of Germany, and later the Holy Roman Empire. Charles the Bald took the west, which was France proper.

Horik, king of the Danes, or comparable forms and titles.<sup>25</sup> Horik was keenly aware of the turmoil in the Carolingian Empire and took it as an opportunity to send raiding parties down the English Channel to ravage the Frankish coast. The Frisian town of Dorestad became a particularly frequent target, and it would not be inconceivable to believe that this choice of destination, aside from it lying in one of the closest regions to Denmark, was partially motivated by the now decades old rivalry with Harald who had taken residence there. Raids in the 830s were generally focused on the Low Countries, but after the death of Louis the Pious in 840 they became more widespread as the Danish Viking raiders became bolder and traveled farther south.<sup>26</sup> This was the height of the Viking Age; over this and coming decades raiding parties from Denmark, as well as Swedish and Norwegian kingdoms were sent forth to the fractured Carolingian Empire and to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in Britain, then even further, penetrating into the Mediterranean.<sup>27</sup>

With raids having become a widespread and yearly phenomenon for the kingdoms on either side of the Channel, each aggressive Scandinavian action does not need to be discussed, though there are some of particular note. In 841, a fleet under the command of one Asgeir boldly sailed up the Seine river to sack Rouen and force the inhabitants to pay tribute. The following year a fleet of Vikings

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<sup>25</sup> See note 19 above.

<sup>26</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic Age*, 66-35.

<sup>27</sup> Raids into Anglo-Saxon Britain and further afield will be discussed in a later chapter, when we consider the supposed sons of Ragnar Lothbrok.

conducted a rather impressive series of raids in both England and France. The fleet sailed first up the Thames to sack London, then crossed to France to devastate the coastal town of Quentovic, and finally returned to England and plundered Rochester.<sup>28</sup> That same year, one of the most significant raids occurred on the Loire. A fleet of sixty-seven ships penetrated as far as Nantes, displaying excessive violence and killing countless people, including a bishop. These Vikings did *not*, however, retreat to Scandinavian territory as was conventional, but instead made a base at the island monastery of Noirmoutier, which had been previously attacked and was abandoned. The phenomenon of Viking winter camps became common and represented an escalation of traditional tactics that gave the Scandinavians a greater presence in both France and Britain. Furthermore, it is the belief of many historians that the raids during this period represented a clear state of war between the fragmented Carolingian empire and the Scandinavian kingdoms, headed by Horik I.<sup>29</sup> While many raiding parties were composed of Danes, many often contained Vikings from other kingdoms. The fleet that attacked Nantes is well documented as being from Vestfold. However this does not disprove that the series of campaigns were organized by Horik, at least in part. Remember, as we have already seen, Vestfold possibly held an alliance with the House of Godfred and therefore Denmark. Certainly Horik's familiarity with

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<sup>28</sup> Scholz, trans. *The Royal Frankish Annals* s.a. 842 and Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240.

<sup>29</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and Walther Vogel, *Die Normannen und das fränkische reich bis zur gründung der Normandie (799-911)* (Heidelberg, 1906) 80-124.

Frankish politics and its players would afford him a valuable position among his Scandinavian allies.

One of the most memorable and significant raids of the period finally brings us to a character many have associated with Ragnar Lothbrok. In 845 a fleet sailed up the Seine River to plunder Paris under the command of a Viking named Reginheri.<sup>30</sup> The attack on Paris is recorded in nearly every contemporary chronicle, and though the commanding Viking is called by various names, the similarity of each leaves no doubt there was indeed a sole leader we can equate to Ragnar.<sup>31</sup> Reginheri — who was likely a royal member of the House of Godfred — reached the Seine with a fleet of one hundred twenty ships in March of that year. Charles the Bald, who controlled this western region following the 843 Treaty of Verdun, met the fleet with an army, though he made the foolish mistake of dividing it on either side of the Seine. Reginheri chose to attack the smaller contingent, which he easily defeated, taking one hundred eleven prisoners. These men he proceeded to hang on an island in the middle of the river in full view of their comrades. He then continued to Paris and reached the town with unfortunate timing, on Easter Sunday. Much of the population managed to flee in time, having seen the ships approach, and by the time Reginheri and his men sacked the town the majority had likely escaped. Charles the Bald, having suffered a significant loss already, had few options and ended up paying the Danes a substantial sum of

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<sup>30</sup> The name Reginheri is taken from the *Annals of Xanten*, but the man leading the attack on Paris also frequently is named as Ragnerius and Ragneri.

<sup>31</sup> McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123. — This will be more closely discussed in a subsequent chapter.

seven thousand pounds of silver to depart in peace. This is the first recorded example of a *danegeld*: the practice of paying Viking raiders to depart in peace which became customary in France and England during the following decades.<sup>32</sup>

The expedition was not without divine punishment, at least if certain chroniclers are to be believed. During the attacks up the Seine, Reginheri and his men caught a pestilence which led to dysentery. According to the *Annals of Xanten*, this act of retribution from God led to Reginheri's death among many of his men.<sup>33</sup> In a following chapter we will discuss the identification of Reginheri with the legendary Ragnar, including the deaths of the two figures. Reginheri's death from disease in 845 contradicts the legendary death of Ragnar in the snake pit of King Ælla. For the time being we will remain in the Carolingian Empire, for in that same year another significant attack was made by the Danes, this time in Louis the German's eastern region. The *Annals of St. Bertin* record that Horik himself sent *six hundred* ships up the Elbe into Saxony. According to the same entry he was repelled by the Saxons with "the help of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup> From there the Vikings turned around and proceeded to attack various Slavic settlements. If there is any doubt that Horik was engaged in an organized series of campaigns against Louis the Pious and his sons, this event should dispel it. The fleet he mustered — while an allowance must be made for exaggeration in the

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<sup>32</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240. and Kendrick, *History of the Vikings*, 119-226.

<sup>33</sup> *The Annals of Xanten*, The Latin Library, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/xanten.html>. s.a. 845.

<sup>34</sup> Janet L. Nelson trans. *The Annals of St. Bertin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991). s.a. 845.

annals — was *five times* that which was used by Reginheri on the Seine.<sup>35</sup> The impressive organization needed to conduct multiple large scale raids during a single season *must* speak to the power and reach of Horik and his house.

Before moving on to closely discuss Reginheri and the Ragnar legend we must devote some time to the end of the House of Godfred. By the year 850 Horik I would have been a relatively old man, and his reign, which began in 814, would have been over thirty-five years long. In 850 discontent erupted within his house and Horik was forced into a war with two of his nephews, who are unnamed in the chronicles.<sup>36</sup> At its conclusion, Horik divided his kingdom and shared rule with these two nephews until 854. In that year *another* nephew, named as Gudurm, who had been in exile as a Viking raider, returned to Denmark to make war with his uncle.<sup>37</sup> I would argue at least one of these three nephews was the son of those brothers who had been deprived of their share of the kingdom and exiled in 819. While it is possible that the young members of the House of Godfred were simply overeager to come into their inheritance, it seems more likely that Horik had deprived them and their fathers of what they felt was their rightful position in the kingdom. The conflict came to a bloody end at a battle that reportedly lasted three days. In that battle nearly the entirety of the House of

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<sup>35</sup> There may have indeed been overlap between the fleets, the attack on Paris occurring in April, and this event reportedly occurring in June. — Nelson, trans. *The Annals of St. Bertin*. s.a. 845.

<sup>36</sup> Nelson, trans. *The Annals of St. Bertin*. s.a. 850.

<sup>37</sup> Timothy Reuter trans. *The Annals of Fulda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.) s.a. 854.

Godfred was extinguished. The house, likely divided on either side of the conflict, fought bitterly and according to the *Annals of Bertin*, “almost the entire nobility perished,” while the *Annals of Fulda* add, “of the royal family, no one remained except one small boy.”<sup>38</sup> This boy, who is identified as Horik II, is first mentioned as king of the Danes in 857, when he made minor amends with the House of Harald. According to the *Annals of Fulda*, he allowed Rorik, Harald II’s brother who was said to rule Dorestad, to occupy lands north of the Eider.

It is argued by McTurk, in conjunction with his arguments concerning the existence of the two royal houses, that the House of Harald did not participate in the battle of 854 and are not included in the nobility that sources concur were all killed. He continues to argue that Horik II was the last descendant of Godfred to hold the throne and that the co-kings who supposedly succeeded him, Halfdan and Sigfred, were members of the House of Harald. Horik II, who was called a boy in 854, yet was able to hold the throne in 857, would have been born around 840. McTurk Argues that Halfdan and Sigfred, who appeared first in 873, could not have been sons of Horik II *and* old enough to hold the throne in that year. As the remainder of the House of Godfred was dead and buried, McTurk argues they must have been members of the House of Harald.<sup>39</sup> The matter is complicated however, as Halfdan and Sigfred are also identified as sons of Ragnar, whom we

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson, trans. *The Annals of St. Bertin*. and Reuter, trans. *The Annals of Fulda*. s.a. 854.

<sup>39</sup> McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123.

have equated with Reginheri, a royal relative of Horik I. While for the time being this paradox must remain so but I will propose a solution in a following chapter.

## **Conclusions**

So now we have a clear painting of the politics of Denmark as they stood in the ninth century. As with the centuries that preceded it, the royalty of ninth century Denmark was engaged in long standing civil wars and feuds, punctuated by peace and solitary or joint rule by each generation's most successful members. The century was characterized by expansion into the territories of the Carolingians and into Anglo-Saxon England, first with Godfred confronting Charlemagne himself, and later with increasingly bold excursions up the rivers of France as the Carolingian empire fragmented. We have also touched upon what will be the subject of the remaining chapters: the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok's place in history. Reginheri's raids on Paris pale in comparison to the supposed exploits of Ragnar, and in the following chapter we will discuss the literary and historical origins of those exploits, both in *Ragnar's Saga* and in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. The exploits of Ragnar's sons will then be discussed in a further chapter, including Halfdan and Sigfred's paradoxical association with both Danish royal houses. Over the course of these remaining chapters the lineage of the House of Ragnar shall be untangled and reassembled in, hopefully, a clearer fashion.



## CHAPTER THREE

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### **The Story of the Legendary Ragnar Lothbrok**

Ragnar Lothbrok occupies a rather interesting position in Scandinavian history. If every tale about him is to be believed, the man would have been king over the entirety of Scandinavia, raided both in the British Isles and across the continent, fathered nearly a dozen children, and led a dynasty that provided Denmark with able kings for centuries. Ragnar Lothbrok, who has long stood as one of the most prominent Viking leaders in the creative imaginations of historians and authors alike, did not exist. A single figure who was known as “Ragnar Lothbrok” and gained prominence in Viking Europe cannot be found in contemporary sources, and the combination of the name Ragnar with the epithet Lothbrok (or “hairy breeches”) was not seen until the twelfth century. In many respects he has become an Arthurian figure: an epitome of the Viking spirit, a symbol of the age, and a leader the likes of which Scandinavia had not seen since Ivar Vidfami united the region. It therefore would be convenient to assign him his rightful place in legend, rather than history. He could there sit among his fellow Norse heroes, downing mead in Valhalla until Ragnarok brings it down. It would be convenient if not for the fact that his sons hold a much more concrete place in history, especially within Anglo-Saxon sources.<sup>1</sup> Ragnar and his sons appeared in

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<sup>1</sup> The Sons of Ragnar, and which historical figures can rightly hold that position, will be further discussed in a later chapter.

a period of history that blended both legend and fact. This semi-legendary period of Scandinavian history relies both on contemporary chronicles and later histories. The former — which were mostly written by the Viking's victims — are naturally tinged with bias, while the latter have a tendency to mistake or misread events, often with additional agendas. It is for this reason that Ragnar Lothbrok can both slay a mythical serpent, then father a lineage that can be traced down to Cnut the Great over a century and a half later. Over this chapter we will explore Ragnar's unique position and recount the narratives of Ragnar's life as they appear, first in the *Gesta Danorum*, and then in *Ragnar's Saga*. It is imperative that these summaries be made before attempting analysis as it is essential to be familiar with the Ragnar legend before attempting to place its hero in a historical context. While the tales deviate from what is considered historical fact, they do contain important patterns that help both to identify the origins of the Ragnar Lothbrok character and to understand the political situations in ninth century Denmark.

### **Saxo's Ragnar Lothbrok**

Saxo Grammaticus has not, by and large, earned a respected place among English scholars. His most influential work, the *Gesta Danorum*, or *History of the Danes*, has been criticized for inaccuracy and certain scholars accuse Saxo of collecting history in a “magpie” like fashion, recounting whichever stories he finds flashy and entertaining without historical substance to back them up.<sup>2</sup> This disdain for the work however, remains an English opinion, and in Saxo's native

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Fisher, notes on *The History of the Danes*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 1-16, 150-165.

Denmark, the *Gesta* is lauded as their seminal work of patriotic history. The patriotism inherent in the *Gesta* results because it makes no attempt to avoid being overly biased towards the exploits of the Danes. The work is divided into sixteen books. Books I through IX deal with what we have already termed semi-legendary history, the history of Denmark in the early middle ages for which few contemporary native sources exist. The early sections of the *Gesta* therefore draw too heavily on mythic sources to be considered entirely factual. Book IX in particular deals with the ascension, reign, and death of Ragnar Lothbrok, followed by the exploits of his descendants.<sup>3</sup> The book ends with the reign of Gorm the Old, who is accepted as the first factually documented king of Denmark. This bridges the first nine books to the final seven, which cover better documented Danish history down to Canute VI, with its last recorded event occurring in 1186. The entire history was completed by the early decades of the thirteenth century, and it has been suggested that Book IX was one of the last Saxo wrote.<sup>4</sup> By no means can the story of Ragnar here presented be considered contemporary to the man himself, and certain elements drive the narrative further from the realm of history. However, as we will soon discuss, Saxo's story is woven into the framework of events found in Frankish chronicles: the internal conflicts between the Houses of Godfred and Harald and the concentrated raiding campaign led by Horik I. It is through strategic equations and accidental misinterpretations that

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<sup>3</sup> In the *Gesta Danorum* the name appears in the form "Regner Lothbrog." I will use the more Anglicized form "Ragnar Lothbrok" for convenience.

<sup>4</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 235-297.

Ragnar is afforded his exceptional position in Saxo's narrative. Though the following slowly diverges further and further from what we might consider historical truth, it would serve well to recount the history of ninth century Denmark as presented in the *Gesta Danorum* so that we can later analyze Saxo's methods with regards to historical events.

Book IX of the *Gesta* begins with an already familiar event: the death of King Godfred.<sup>5</sup> According to Saxo he is succeeded by his son Olaf, whose reign receives only a few short sentences. His successor Hemming is given even less, though Saxo does note his peace with the Carolingian emperor Louis. Despite his inclusion by Saxo, Olaf is not considered to be a historical king of Denmark. While the sons of Godfred are indeed seen in contemporary sources, those sources also confirm that Godfred was instead succeeded by his nephew Hemming.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Saxo's first minor historical blunder of Book IX can be found in Hemming's peace with the Carolingians. Saxo names the Emperor as Louis, yet given that Hemming's historical reign was from 810-812, he would have dealt with Charlemagne himself. This minor error is likely due to Saxo's neglect of dates. He no doubt knew that Charlemagne died in 814, to be succeeded by his son Louis the Pious, and not being overly concerned with dates himself, misplaced Hemming's rule by a few years. The insertion of Olaf before him in the line of succession might also account for the discrepancy. This, while seemingly

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<sup>5</sup> Called Gøtrik by Saxo, King Godfred features heavily in the last sections of Book VIII

<sup>6</sup> Fisher, notes, 1-16, 150-165.

inconsequential, illustrates a pattern of misinterpretation that will hold significance later. Following Hemming's death, the kingdom was plunged into civil war as both the rightful heir Sigurd Hring and his cousin Ring contended for the throne. Sigurd, the father of Ragnar, is said to have been the son of a Norwegian king via Godfred's daughter. Ring is also said to have been a grandson of Godfred and both, due to positions of power in the kingdom, were able to gather significant support. The two met in battle, where they both died, and the throne passed to Ragnar, who had fought valiantly in that battle and inspired his father's men to victory. In this episode Sigurd can be equated with Sigfred, while Ring takes the place of Anulo, whom we saw in the previous chapter. While it is easy to imagine how *Sigfred* was misinterpreted or altered into *Sigurd* over time, the transition from *Anulo* to *Ring* requires more of an explanation, albeit a simple one. *Anulo* was often mistranslated as *Ring* due to the coincidence that the Latin word *anulus* translates into *ring*. The exact same mistranslation will occur in *Ragnar's Saga* and will lead to his parentage being wrongfully attributed to Sigurd Hring.

It is at this point that Saxo departs more or less completely from the historical record and for that reason it seems more logical to first summarize his account of Ragnar's life, then evaluate and perhaps correct his story. Ragnar, after taking the throne when he had "hardly been plucked from the cradle," was almost immediately occupied with trouble in Norway.<sup>7</sup> His paternal grandfather was

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<sup>7</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

Sigurd, king of Norway, who had recently been slain by Frø, a rival from Sweden. Ragnar, seeking vengeance, traveled to Norway where he was met with enthusiasm, especially among the Norwegian women Frø had abused, many of whom took to dressing as men and joined Ragnar's camp. One of these was Lathgertha, who made no attempt to hide her womanhood. After noting her fierce actions in the battle which successfully ended Frø's reign and life, Ragnar was quite taken with Lathgertha. He made advances towards her and she, in a fanciful fashion, set a bear and a hound to guard her house. Ragnar defeated these (the first of multiple beasts he will defeat, and by no means the most fantastic), and made Lathgertha his wife, siring two daughters and a son, Fridlef, with her. While this was occurring in Norway, certain Danish regions under Ragnar's control took the opportunity of their king's absence to revolt. Saxo makes note that the Scanians and Jutes allied with each other to attack the Sjællanders. He maintains that the Sjællanders, the inhabitants of Zealand, were steadfastly devoted to Ragnar, and were always loyal to him, while those in Jutland and Skåne made frequent attempts to rebel.<sup>8</sup> Ragnar, with his supporters, successfully put down the rebellion, first in Skåne, then Jutland.

This took considerable time, and during the campaigns Ragnar's affections turned away from his wife towards Thora, the daughter of King Heroth, and he divorced Lathgertha. Heroth was king of Sweden and some years before had given two snakes to his young daughter. Thora reared them to an enormous size

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<sup>8</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

and they became unruly. Saxo describes that when fully grown they, “scorched the countryside with their venomous breath,” marking them clearly as draconic creatures, borrowed straight from Norse Mythology.<sup>9</sup> The two serpents grew so ferocious that Herioth decreed any man who could rid his country of the beasts would be given the hand of his daughter. Ragnar heard the story from Swedish traders, and before setting out to make an attempt at the serpents, clothed himself in a woolen cloak and breeches made from fur. When he reached the freezing Swedish coast he jumped into the sea so that the water would freeze to him, hardening the clothing and protecting him from the bites and venom of the snakes. Ragnar met the beasts in battle — where his garb worked to protect him as he intended — and slew them both. King Herioth remarking on Ragnar’s dress, gave him the joking nickname Lothbrok, meaning “shaggy breeches,” before awarding Ragnar Thora’s hand in marriage. The two returned to Denmark and Ragnar fathered six sons with her; Rathbarth, Dunvat, Sigurd, Björn, Agner, and Ivar.

While Ragnar was away from home the Jutes and Scanians once again revolted, this time handing power to Harald, a figure who features prominently as Ragnar’s chief rival. Ragnar sent ambassadors to Norway to ask for assistance and was met with aid from his ex-wife Lathgertha. She returned to Denmark bringing with her an unnamed second husband and their son. Ragnar and Lathgertha met Harald in pitched battle on the fields of Woolly, where all (including Ragnar’s

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<sup>9</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

seven year old son Ivar) are said to have fought bravely.<sup>10</sup> Saxo makes particular note of Lathgertha and her bravery, then recounts that the night after the battle she slit her husband's throat and returned to Norway to govern his realm herself. Sigurd, another of Ragnar's sons, was wounded in the battle and placed in the care of doctors in a nearby town. There he was visited by an unnaturally tall stranger, undoubtedly the deity Odin (though he gives his name as Rofar) who heals Sigurd on the condition that all the souls Sigurd strikes down in war be dedicated to him. The clearly magical healing process left Sigurd with a distinguishing feature: eyes that bore markings like snakes. In popular imagination thereafter he was referred to as Sigurd Snake-in-Eye.

Much to Ragnar's dismay Thora was taken by disease, and to ease the grief of her passing, he set off on a series of raiding campaigns. From this point much of Ragnar's narrative deals with him quelling rebellions in various parts of his domain only to face another elsewhere. Ragnar first went to Britain where he killed the Northumbrian king Hama, whose son Ælla became king after him. After subduing Scotland, Pictland, and the Hebrides — regions which he placed under the governance of his sons Sigurd and Rathbarth — Ragnar returned to Scandinavia to place Norway under Fridlef. During these campaigns Harald returned from exile to lead yet another rebellion. On his return home Ragnar drove Harald out of the kingdom and forced him to flee into Germany. Then Ragnar raided Saxony, believing it to be Harald's chief refuge, where he was

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<sup>10</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.



intercepted by the Frankish King Charles.<sup>11</sup> Despite supernatural advice Charles received from a soothsayer, he met Ragnar in battle and when confronted with Ragnar's ferocity, turned tail and fled. After imposing tributes on the Saxons, Ragnar received word that King Heroth of Sweden had been killed, and that his sons via Thora were being denied their grandfather's inheritance. Ragnar, along with Björn, Fridlef, and Rathbarth, made their way to Sweden where they met the pretender, Sorli, and certain of his supporters in single combat. Ragnar and his sons were naturally victorious and Björn, who did not receive a single scratch in the fight, was given the name Ironside. In recounting this episode in Ragnar's narrative Saxo mentions that Ragnar's sons Regnald, Vithserk, and Erik, who were born by a woman named Svanloga, were not yet grown enough to aid their father and brothers. This is the first mention of these children and their mother and no mention is made of how she and Ragnar met or wed. The episode was immediately followed by a brief respite from war where Ragnar was enamored by a young Swedish woman whom he set out to woo. In a whimsical fashion Ragnar found his way into her bed by dressing as her bed maiden and impregnated her with a son whom he named Ubbe.

Afterwards the hero was once again plunged into battles and raids. First he traveled further east than he ever had and engaged in a campaign against the Hellespontines, the inhabitants of the region around the Dardanelles, rather close to Asia Minor and Constantinople itself. Despite Ragnar's victory over their King

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<sup>11</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297. — This would be Charles the Bald.

Dian his sons Daxon and Dian the younger found allegiance with both the Rutenians and Scythians through blood ties. The Rutenians were a slavic people who had provided the young princes with wives, while the Scythians of Central Eurasia were maternally related to the princes. Ragnar was still able to defeat the combined Scythian and Rutenian forces and placed the entire region under his son Vithserk, who had then presumably matured. He returned to Scandinavia where the Bjarmians — who held territory on the southern coast of the White Sea — had allied with the Finns to rebel against Ragnar's dominion. The resulting battle was a difficult one for Ragnar as he had trouble contenting with the Finnish use of skis to move swiftly over the icy terrain. However, through certain acts of nocturnal subterfuge Ragnar was victorious and took, Saxo notes, as much delight in the defeat of the Finns as he had in the defeat of Charles the Bald.<sup>12</sup>

While Ragnar finished his defeat of the Finns and Bjarmians, Esbern, who was the maternal grandfather of Ubbe, convinced his grandson to rebel against his father's throne in Götaland. Esbern made attempts to lure Björn into rebellion as well, but Björn was steadfastly loyal to his father. It should be noted that Ivar governed Jutland at this time and chose to remain neutral during this rebellion, instead going into self imposed exile. Ragnar was quick to meet Esbern in battle, where the rebellious man was slain. Ubbe fled temporarily but then renewed rebellion in Sjælland where he was defeated and captured. Word then came to Ragnar that in Scythia Daxon, the Hellespontian prince, had once again appeared.

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<sup>12</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

He had gathered support and through treachery had captured and executed Ragnar's son Vithserk. Saxo says that Daxon was moved by Vithserk's valor and allowed him to choose his own manner of execution. Vithserk chose immolation. Ragnar confined himself to his bed in grief at the loss of his young son before his Svanloga chided him and told him he must avenge Vithserk. So after restoring Ubbe to his favor Ragnar left the kingdom in the hands of Ivar and again traveled east, where he captured Daxon. Rather uncharacteristically, Ragnar chose to be merciful and after imprisoning Daxon for sometime he later released him and allowed him to return to his homeland. Upon returning west Ragnar then set out on a raiding campaign, first attacking lands in Norway and the Orkneys, before meeting the Scots in a three day battle. It was during this battle that Dunvat and Rathbarth, two of Ragnar's eldest sons, fought well but lost their lives. He briefly returned to Denmark, where he learned his wife Svanloga had died of disease, and immediately set out again on another series of raids. He first defeated Ælla in Britain, then traveled to Ireland where he slew Melbrikt. He camped in Dublin for a full twelve months before traveling through the Mediterranean to raid in Hellespont.

Returning from Hellespont Ragnar found Denmark in revolt, again under the restored leadership of Harald. After another defeat Harald went south and sought the help of the Frankish king Louis.<sup>13</sup> He was baptized into the Christian

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<sup>13</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297. — Historically this would have been Louis the Pious, but given the lengthy chronology of Saxo's narrative he may have meant Louis the German.

faith and his forces were bolstered by Louis's own from Saxony. With these reinforcements Harald returned to Denmark where he erected a church in Schleswig. Ragnar immediately tore this church down, an act which Saxo condemns, and ran Harald out of the kingdom once again. In the meantime Ælla, king of Northumbria, had gone to Ireland where he tortured and killed many of Ragnar's supporters. Ragnar crossed the channel and met Ælla in battle, but on this occasion Ragnar was not victorious. Saxo claims that the defeat was divine punishment for the destruction of the church at Schleswig. Ragnar was captured by Ælla and thrown into a venomous pit of snakes, which began to devour him. It was here he warned Ælla with a final quote: "If the young pigs only knew the distress of the their boar, they would certainly break into the sty and release him from his suffering without delay."<sup>14</sup> Understanding the unmistakable metaphor and fearing retribution from the ferocious Ragnar's equally ferocious sons, Ælla told his jailers to release him, but the command came too late. Ragnar perished, the news reached his sons, and they gathered an army to wreak havoc on the whole of England. That retribution will be touched on in the following chapter, but for now we will end Saxo's narrative. The story is clearly problematic. The deeds attributed to Ragnar are, while theoretically not impossible, implausible to say the least. These events also do not mesh well with what we already know of ninth century Denmark and the veracity of the narrative must be considered.

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<sup>14</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

## Ragnars Saga Lodbrokar

While Saxo Grammaticus puts forth his *Gesta Danorum* as an unexaggerated account of Danish history, other sources exist which paint the Ragnar legend with no pretense of it being anything other than legendary. Chief among them is *Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, or *Ragnar's Saga*, which is often paired with the poem *Krákumál*: a poem Ragnar reportedly sang as he lay dying in Ælla's snake pit. Sagas, as a unique narrative form, have their origins in Iceland, which was settled by Scandinavian voyagers at some point during the ninth century. While they certainly draw on a wide range of thematic influences, such as classical epics and chivalric romances, the thirteenth century Icelandic Sagas have a Scandinavian mythic heritage that sets them apart from other continental works. In general terms sagas can be divided between a number of categories determined by their subject matter. Chief among them are: *Íslendingasögur*, or "Sagas of the Icelanders," which concern themselves with the first generations of Scandinavians in Iceland; *Fornaldarsögur*, also called "Sagas of Old Times," which deal with ancient mythic tales of gods and demons stemming from Germanic mythology; and *Konungasögur*, "Kings' Sagas," which are centered on the lives of Scandinavian royalty. There is a fourth category, *Riddarasögur*, or "Knightly Sagas," which are generally translations of continental chivalric tales, or Icelandic imitations of those works.<sup>15</sup> These categories are by no means rigid and in fact the fluid nature of the genres often leads to overlap. *Fornaldarsögur* often overlap

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Waggoner, introduction to *The Sagas of Ragnar Lothbrok* (New Haven: Troth, 2009), viii-xxvii.

considerably with *Riddarsögur*, as well as with *Konungasögur*, as the chivalric ideas expressed in the Knightly Sagas lend themselves well to the Ancient Sagas' mythic tales, and the semi-legendary nature of Scandinavian kings means narratives of their lives often overlap with the Ancient Sagas. The *Völsunga Saga*, and by extension the entire Völsunga-Ragnar cycle, is considered to be foremost among the *Fornaldarsögur* and bridges the gap between them and the more historical Kings' Sagas.<sup>16</sup> The *Völsunga Saga* centers on the Völsung clan, concerning itself largely with the mythic hero Sigurd, and his valkyrie wife Brynhild.<sup>17</sup>

*Ragnar's Saga* begins not with the birth of Ragnar Lothbrok, but rather with the death of Sigurd and Brynhild and the childhood of their daughter Aslaug. She was placed under the protection of Heimer, Brynhild's brother in law. Early in the narrative Heimer rests on his journey at a small farm, and hides Aslaug in a harp. The owners of the farm, perceiving he was a man of great wealth, killed him as he slept and broke open the harp to search for hidden gold. There they discovered the child Aslaug, who they kept as their servant, calling her Kraka. The Saga then switches to an event which already appeared in the *Gesta Danorum*. In Gautland, there was a jarl named Herrud, who gave his daughter Thora a small serpent. She raised this serpent until it was large enough to stretch itself around her bower and proved itself to be quite a burden on Herrud, who had

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<sup>16</sup> Waggoner, intro to *Sagas*, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The *Völsunga Saga* has a far reaching literary significance, with its creative influence stretching as far as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

to feed it an ox at every meal. Like Heroth in the *Gesta*, he offered the hand of Thora to any man who could slay the beast. In Denmark, the reigning king was Sigurd Hring: the same Sigurd Hring who slew Harald Wartooth and took power at the Battle of Brávellir, as is noted in this Saga.<sup>18</sup> His only son was named Ragnar, who was the greatest warrior in the kingdom. When he heard of Herrud's promise, Ragnar traveled to Gautland. He dressed himself in a shaggy cape and shaggy breeches, both boiled in tar, and one night slew the serpent outside Thora's bower. In a folklore-ish fashion, Ragnar hid his success from the jarl, though the point of his spear had broken off in the flesh of the beast. Once the spearhead was fitted to the spear's shaft Ragnar claimed his victory and his prize. According to the Saga this deed made him, "by far the most famous man in all the Northlands."<sup>19</sup> He married Thora and returned to Denmark — which he now ruled — and had two sons with her, Eirek and Agnar. One day, after Eirek and Agnar had grown into strong men, Thora died, and Ragnar took to the sea as a raiding Viking.

On one of his many expeditions he came to Norway and happened upon the farm where Aslaug was a servant. Upon seeing her he was enamored by her beauty, but to test her he sent her a puzzle to solve. He bid her come to see him "neither clad nor unclad, neither sated nor hungry, and for her not to come alone, yet no one may come with her."<sup>20</sup> Aslaug solved the first paradox by dressing

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Waggoner, trans. *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, (New Haven: Troth, 2009), 1-58.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Waggoner, *Saga*, 1-58.

herself in a fishing net, and letting her hair cover her breasts, so that she was covered, but not clad in clothes. She then ate a bit of a leek, so that she had eaten food and was not hungry, but had not eaten enough to be satisfied. And finally, she was accompanied by a dog, so that she was not alone, but no person was with her. She joined Ragnar on his ship and he made her his wife, and though she warned that they must wait three nights before consummating their marriage, Ragnar disregarded her and slept with her that night. Ivar, the child conceived that night bore the consequences of that act and he was born “boneless.”<sup>21</sup> They had three more sons named Björn, Hvitserk, and Rognvald, all of whom, Ivar included, grew to be large, valiant men. Their siblings Eirik and Agnar had already gained prominence as Viking raiders, and when the sons of Ragnar and Aslaug came of age, they wished to gain the same fame as their half brothers. They targeted the town of Hvitabaer — a name which meant “white city” — which some have equated with Whitby in Northumbria, or Vitaby in Skåne.<sup>22</sup> Their successful attack there began their long careers as raiders.

Ragnar had an ally and a friend in the Swedish king Eystein who had a beautiful daughter named Ingibjorg. After much persuasion by his men, who said that as a great king he deserved to be married to someone better than a peasant girl, Ragnar and Ingibjorg were betrothed. By this they were referring to Aslaug, who they thought was the daughter of the peasant farmers who had raised her.

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<sup>21</sup> The origins of Ivar’s epithet *beinlauss*, meaning boneless is largely debated. The name could have originated anywhere from Ivar having a hereditary disease, to simple mistranslations or misinterpretations of the name. — Waggoner, intro to *Sagas*, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Returning home, Ragnar left Ingibjorg in Sweden, and begged his men not to speak of the betrothal. However, Aslaug learned of the other woman and confronted Ragnar. She revealed to him her true parentage and, once he knew that she was the daughter of the legendary Sigurd and Brynhild, Ragnar broke his betrothal with Ingibjorg and therefore his friendship with Eystein. When they heard the news, Ragnar's sons Agnar and Eirek began raiding in Sweden and Eystein's lands in Uppsala. Their forces met with those of King Eystein, and despite their strength and prowess, both Agnar and Eirek fell in battle. Ragnar and his remaining sons then raised a host to avenge their fallen kin. They traveled to Sweden with a fleet, accompanied by Aslaug, who intended to fight with them and had changed her name to Randalin. They fought a battle and the Saga notes that Björn and Hvitserk fought particularly ferociously.<sup>23</sup> During this episode too, Sigurd Snake-in-Eye makes his first appearance as a young boy. It is interesting to note that the Saga never refers to Sigurd as Ragnar's son. Rather, when he is mentioned it is always as Aslaug's son or Randalin's son (after she changes her name).<sup>24</sup>

After the war with Sweden, the sons of Ragnar set out on various raiding expeditions across the continent, and it is mentioned that Sigurd Snake-in-Eye accompanied them. Ragnar did not know where in particular his sons had gone, and he himself prepared to lead a party to raid in England. Before leaving he

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<sup>23</sup> Waggoner, *Saga*, 1-58.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

received a woven hair shirt from Aslaug, which she said would protect him from harm as long as he wore it. Ragnar donned it over his chain mail and set sail for England. According to the Saga, the king of England was named Ælla, whose men warned him in advance of Ragnar's landing. Ælla gathered his men, and met with Ragnar's in battle where Aslaug's promises about the woven shirt proved to true, for Ragnar suffered no harm. King Ælla's forces were stronger than Ragnar's however, and he was victorious, capturing Ragnar. He stripped the Danish king of his clothes, and had him thrown into a pit of venomous snakes, as in the *Gesta*. As he lay dying from the bites of the serpents, Ragnar spoke the line, "the piglets would protest loudly if the boar's plight they knew," and recognizing the warning and the coming threat of Ragnar's sons, Ælla prepared himself for war.

As we left the *Gesta Danorum* at this point, so shall we leave *Ragnar's Saga*. The remaining chapters deal with the revenge of Ragnar's sons, who heard the news and gathered the greatest army Scandinavia had ever seen to avenge their father. A word should be said of the *Krákumál*, reportedly recited by Ragnar as he lay dying in Ælla's snake pit. The poem is some twenty-nine verses long, each consisting of ten lines, and each beginning with the phrase, "We struck with our swords!"<sup>25</sup> The poem reads rather like Ragnar's resumé, and each verse recounts a particular achievement of the hero. There are particular verses of note. The first, like the *Gesta* and *Ragnar's Saga*, begins with the winning of Thora, and the acquisition of the name Lothbrok as he slays here serpent, here called a

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<sup>25</sup> Ben Waggoner, trans. *Krákumál* (New Haven: Troth, 2009), 75-83.

“heather-eel.” In the seventh verse, Ragnar recounts his war with King Eystein, whom he defeated on the Fields of Ullr. Verse fourteen speaks of a successful raid into Northumbria, while sixteen mentions the death of King Marstan in Ireland. The final verses (twenty four through twenty nine) bring the poem to the present, and Ragnar celebrates the life he has lived, and takes joy in the afterlife that awaits him. He warns Ælla and the Northumbrians that he and Aslaug’s sons are sure to avenge him, and then passes away, ending the recitation with the line, “laughing shall I die.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Little of the above narratives can be considered verifiable historical fact, and while Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* does make certain attempts to blend Ragnar’s saga into already established historical events, the inclusion of rather fantastical elements — such as Thora’s serpent — brings the rest of the narrative into question. What is certain is that even if all the events of the *Gesta* were to be verified, there is no way they could be attributed to a single figure. As we will discuss in the following chapter, while Saxo did draw primary inspiration from only a few historical persons, the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok was composed of characteristics from a number of individuals.

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<sup>26</sup> Waggoner, *Krákumál*, 75-83.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### **Reginheri and Other Historical Ragnar Models**

There are certain obvious discrepancies between the history laid out in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and the chain of events that was discussed in the second chapter. In fact, after the first short section of the *Gesta's* Book IX, Saxo's history corresponds closer to the legendary accounts of *Ragnar's Saga*. The largest issue, which this chapter will primarily tackle, is that the line of Danish kings traced in chapter two at no point includes Ragnar Lothbrok. In fact, the Danish hero's supposed reign would largely overlap the tenure of Horik I.

This chapter will explore the addition of Ragnar Lothbrok into the historical record, as well as the models Saxo drew upon to create his character. What must be understood is that Saxo Grammaticus was writing from a thirteenth century perspective and, more importantly, was writing with the patriotic intent of joining legendary Danish history to his nation's recorded events. Countless Danish kings and conquerors, between Ragnar's supposed floruit and Saxo's own, claimed lineage that went back to Ragnar and through him to Odin himself. The claims held obvious strategic purpose and held equivalent weight to classical Romans claiming descent from Jupiter. Saxo was, in essence, providing contemporary Denmark a tangible link with its own heroic past. In order to do so however, he needed to make certain strategic changes to his country's history.

## Ragnar's Insertion into History

The primary issue for Saxo was placing Ragnar within a historical context, though Anglo-Saxon and continental sources gave him bookends. The truce Hemming made with the Carolingian Empire meant that Ragnar could not have ruled before 812 and the appearance of his already matured sons in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle for the year 865 meant that he could not have lived past that year.<sup>1</sup> These limits gave Saxo a fifty year window to play with. Given the length of Ragnar's resumé, presented both in the *Saga* and *Krákumál*, Saxo evidently found it reasonable to assign Ragnar the entirety of those fifty-three years to rule. His failure to include dates, frankly, made Ragnar Lothbrok's insertion into Danish history all the easier.

According to Saxo, Ragnar was the son of Sigurd surnamed Hring, who fought his own cousin Ring for control of the Danish throne. Incorporating *Saga* evidence tells us that this Sigurd Ring was the same that fought and slew Harald Wartooth at the Battle of Brávellir. It is worth mentioning that while the oral tradition of Ragnar Lothbrok was certainly in existence prior to Saxo's life, both the *Gesta Danorum* and the written form of *Ragnar's Saga* are attributed to the early thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Whether the identification of Ragnar's father with Sigurd Hring originated with Saxo, the written *Ragnar's Saga*, or the earlier oral tradition is unclear, but it is certain that the *Saga* and Saxo are not in agreement

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850-880*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977), 1-67.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Waggoner, introduction to *The Sagas of Ragnar Lothbrok*, (New Haven: Troth, 2009), viii-xxvii.

on the father's place in Danish chronology. Sigurd Hring of the *Saga* is stated expressly to be the same Sigurd Hring who fought at Brávellir. Saxo however places Brávellir closer to a date that coincides with our placement in the first chapter, c. 750. While Saxo does not use express dates, there are several generations between the Battle of Brávellir at the beginning of Book VIII and Sigurd Hring's fight with Ring at the beginning of Book IX. Saxo too, names Harald Wartooth's rival at Brávellir only as *another* Ring, further separating that figure from Ragnar's father.

By and large, to understand Saxo and other historians' misinterpretation (or manipulation) of historical events, one must accept that often proper names, as they were translated from Old Norse, to Danish, French, English, and Latin, in every conceivable order, were misread, mistranslated, and improperly transcribed. Thus, when Saxo Grammaticus was seeking the proper point to place Ragnar Lothbrok and his father Sigurd, he discovered a section of history that included the names Sigifridus and Regenfridus.<sup>3</sup> It has been theorized that as the name *Sigifridus* was translated and transcribed across centuries and languages it evolved into the form *Sivard* which is used by Saxo, corresponding with the Anglicized Sigfred we used earlier; the Latin *Sigifridus* became the Old Norse *Sigfædr*, which became the Norwegian *Sigurd*, and finally transitioned into the Danish *Sivard*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Corresponding to the Sigfred and Regenfrid discussed in chapter two. — R.W. McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" in *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress*, Ed. Bo Almqvist and David Greene (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1976) 93-123.

<sup>4</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

Having now the names Sigurd and Sigifridus — which he held to be equivalent — Saxo also has a convenient misreading of Old Norse regnal lists. First, remember that the name Anulo was often mistranslated via Latin and written as Ring or Hring, and that in 812 Sigfred, or Sigifridus, fought against Anulo for the Danish throne. On Norse regnal lists there is a tradition of recording co-kings or rivals for the throne on the same line of text. Thus, when searching such lists and seeking a place for Sigurd and Ragnar, Saxo found, after Hemming, the entry “Sigifridus Hring.” While it initially indicated the rivalry between Sigfred and Anulo, Saxo misread the entry as *single* name, Sigurd Hring.<sup>5</sup> So while the legendary figure of Ragnar Lothbrok in *Ragnar’s Saga* is fathered by the semi-legendary figure Sigurd Hring, Saxo uses the same parentage to insert *his* semi-legendary Ragnar into historical records. He strengthens this insertion with further evidence found in the next entry on the regnal lists, *Regenfridus*, which he claimed was equivalent to *Ragnar*. Following the death of both Sigfred and Anulo in battle, the throne passed to the joint rule of Anulo’s kin Regenfrid and Harald II. So, misreading regnal lists, Saxo found the name Sigifridus Hring, which he held to be equitable with Sigurd Hring, the legendary father of Ragnar Lothbrok. Combining this with the conveniently placed entry of Regenfrid, Saxo inserted his own semi-legendary Ragnar into the historical record.

The regnal lists also provided Saxo with his Ragnar’s chief rival. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Ragnar is plagued on multiple occasions by his enemy Harald,

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<sup>5</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 1-67. and McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” 93-123.

who at times controlled various bits of territory, mostly in Saxony and Jutland, and gained the support of the Frankish king. Without a doubt this is the historical Harald II who succeeded to the throne after the death of Anulo, was driven out by the sons of Godfred, and made various attempts at regaining his position with the support of Louis the Pious. Saxo's account, of course, falls apart when considering historical records. At this point he has equated Ragnar Lothbrok with Regenfrid, and his father Sigurd Hring with Sigfred. He accurately assigned the role of Sigurd's rival to the mistranslated figure Ring (or Anulo) then linked *Ragnar's* rival to Anulo's kinsman, Harald. However, fairly strong evidence tells us that both Regenfrid and Anulo were *brothers* of Harald. The primary issue is the equation of Ragnar with Regenfrid, which is clearly erroneous. Regenfrid died in 813 after the sons of Godfred returned to Denmark to reclaim their father's throne. The assignment of Harald as Ragnar's rival stems from two pieces of information. First, historically, Harald was very prominent as a contender for, and would-be usurper of, the Danish throne. Even with assistance from the Frankish kingdom he was never entirely successful: a record which is echoed in his repeated defeats by Ragnar Lothbrok. The notion that Regenfrid and Harald were rivals may have originated with the histories of Adam of Bremen.<sup>6</sup> In his history, he recounts that at one point Harald expelled Regenfrid from the kingdom, who then lived as a Viking raider.<sup>7</sup> Adam himself may have been confusing Harald's

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<sup>6</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 1-67.

<sup>7</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 1-53.



brother Regenfrid, who died in 813, with their younger brother Rorik, who lived and raided with Harald later in Saxony.

Ignoring the untimely death of Saxo's stand-in Ragnar, Regenfrid, in 813, the largest problem with placing Ragnar on the Danish throne was the fact that it was already occupied by Horik I. Horik was foremost among Godfred's sons, who returned to Denmark in 813, slew Regenfrid, and began Harald's perpetual exile. He eventually gained sole regency over the Danish kingdom until he died with almost the entirety of his family in 854. Saxo's problem occurs because the reigns of Horik I from 813 to 854 and Horik II from c. 857 to c. 873, leave no room for Ragnar's supposed regency of 812 to 865. Saxo solves the problem by simply ignoring Horik I's reign. As we already established, Harald of the *Gesta Danorum* is identical to the historical Harald, even down to his conversion to Christianity. However, Harald's enemy was Horik who, in the *Gesta*, Saxo replaced with Ragnar, demoting Horik I and his descendant Horik II to lesser positions in history. Saxo might even have considered the elder to be one of Ragnar's sons. The Norse *Horik* is comparable with the Anglicized name *Erik*, and Saxo makes note of an Erik, son of Ragnar by Svanloga.<sup>8</sup> This Erik however, never held the Danish throne. Like his brothers, he governed various sections of his father's kingdom, but there is no evidence that his power extended beyond this, or even that Saxo considered him an important son.

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<sup>8</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 235-297.

In the *Gesta*, following Ragnar's death, the question of succession results in a civil war which extinguishes most of the royal lineage, except for his sons. After this the throne passes, by a unanimous vote, to Sigurd Snake-in-Eye.<sup>9</sup> When *he* died, Saxo claims Sigurd left behind a small child, also named Erik, as heir. The sequence of events here parallels the historical battle in which Horik I lost his life, along with entirety the House of Godfred, save the young Horik II. Saxo's Erik, son of Sigurd, was meant to be Horik II and was not a direct descendant of Horik I, but the grandson of Ragnar Lothbrok. This identification advanced Saxo's patriotic agenda, which was aimed at providing the historically recorded kings of later Danish history with a link to their legendary, or semi-legendary past. He achieved this goal by directly linking Horik II to the legendary Ragnar, though not without considerable work replacing Horik I.

The insertion of Ragnar into the historical record is further exemplified by the foundation of the church at Schleswig. According to Saxo, the church was established by the newly converted Harald, and torn down by Ragnar; an act for which he was divinely punished in the snake pit of King Ælla. In fact, the church was erected by Horik I, then demolished by Horik II.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, did not fit within Saxo's narrative of Ragnar and his rivalry with Harald, so the key figures were replaced with ones that better fit Saxo's goals.

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<sup>9</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

<sup>10</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 1-67. — Gwyn Jones in her *History of the Vikings*, believes the church was located at Hedeby, but the two locations are close enough geographically where it hardly matters.

## The Composite Hero, Ragnar Lothbrok

The Ragnar Lothbrok presented by Saxo Grammaticus shares far too much with the purely legendary figure in *Ragnar's Saga* to be afforded a position in history without considerable scrutiny and doubt. Given the evidence in Frankish annals, nothing appears that would place a figure known as Ragnar Lothbrok on the Danish throne. In fact there no evidence that would even suggest a man named Ragnar with the epithet Lothbrok existed at all. Historians claim the two names became attached in the twelfth century with the convention specifically originating in Ari Thorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*.<sup>11</sup> However, if Ragnar Lothbrok is ignored entirely the historical record suddenly becomes full of holes, for the legacy of his existence continued long after his death. One of the primary obstacles in assigning the legendary Ragnar a place in history is the manner of his death. The *Saga* and the *Gesta* both agree that Ragnar Lothbrok died in the snake pit of King Ælla of Northumbria. This, however, is clearly one of the more fanciful segments of the Ragnar narrative and was likely invented to justify the invasion of England by the Great Army under Ragnar's sons.<sup>12</sup> The simple fact remains that even if all the legendary accomplishments of Ragnar Lothbrok could be historically verified, it would be impossible for them to have been completed by one man. For that reason it is generally thought that the figure Saxo

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<sup>11</sup> Jan De Vries, "Die historischen Grundlagen der Ragnarssaga lodbrókar," in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, XXXIX (1923), 224-74. — McTurk thinks this is a rather bold claim, but agrees the convention originated during this century.

<sup>12</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. — The Great Army will be further touched on next chapter

Grammaticus presents is a composite hero based both on the fully legendary Ragnar Lothbrok as well as multiple real persons.<sup>13</sup> We have already seen evidence of this theory, as Saxo used both Regenfrid and Horik I as models to insert Ragnar into Danish history.

Thankfully, Saxo did not draw on endless sources to create his Ragnar character. While he used Regenfrid and Horik I for his initial insertion, for Ragnar's purported accomplishments and familial ties Saxo drew heavily on Reginheri, the Viking leader who attacked Paris in 845. He may also have included certain characteristics from a figure who appears in Irish annals as Ragnall. While it is entirely conceivable that minor details were pulled from other historical players, given the thinness of the historical record — even from Saxo's perspective in the early thirteenth century — it seems more reasonable that if the narrative of the *Gesta Danorum* was not entirely fabricated, it holds its historical sources in a few select figures. While Regenfrid provided a convenient insertion point for Saxo, he clearly was not the primary source of the character Ragnar Lothbrok. He appears only briefly in historical records and reportedly died in 813 after only a year on the throne. Reginheri, on the other hand, presents a far more reasonable primary source.

The equation of Reginheri with the legendary Ragnar rests on three major points; name, date, and parallel disease.<sup>14</sup> While we have exclusively used the

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<sup>13</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

name Reginheri to refer to the figure who led the Danes to attack Paris in 845, he only appears under that name in the *Annals of Xanten*. In point of fact, he appears more frequently in other sources as Ragneri or Ragnerius.<sup>15</sup> As these sources all agree that Paris was sacked in 845 by this figure, Ragneri and Reginheri must be one and the same. As there were no other Vikings active on the continent during this period with comparable names, save the already mentioned Regenfrid, Reginheri must be considered one of the only figures who served as a model for Ragnar Lothbrok.

It is important to note that we must concentrate on this relatively short span of years to find Saxo's source. As the sons of Ragnar were active in the 860s, their father must have flourished within a narrow window of time before that date. Reginheri's known exploits correspond with that window, even if the sources which place his death immediately after Paris are correct. For Ragnar's sons to have led an army to England in 865, as is expressly recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, they would need to have reached maturity by that year, meaning they could not have been born much later than the mid 840s. Reginheri, therefore, was active precisely in the right period; even if he died in 845, he would have had the opportunity to father the sons who would later invade England.<sup>16</sup> His reported death in 845, despite not agreeing with Ragnar's death in the *Gesta Danorum* or in *Ragnar's Saga*, does provide further evidence of the equivalency, although it is

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<sup>15</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the most tentative and circumstantial. During the raids on Bjarmaland in the *Gesta*, Saxo reports that Ragnar and his men were plagued by dysentery, which finished off many of them. This episode is paralleled by the bout of dysentery contracted by Reginheri's men following the sack of Paris, which some Frankish sources claim was the cause of Reginheri's death.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly the above arguments are loosely supported and largely rest on the fact that no alternatives present themselves. They gain their most merit however, when theories concerning Reginheri's parentage are brought into consideration.

Halfdan and Sigfred, two reported sons of Ragnar, apparently held joint control of the Danish throne in 873, as seen in the *Annals of Fulda*.<sup>18</sup> They succeeded to this throne, by all accounts, without opposition, likely after the death of Horik II. As they were unopposed — which was a rather abnormal occurrence — their claim to the throne must have held legitimacy beyond military capability. In other words, they must have had royal lineage. If we accept that Reginheri was the basis of Ragnar, especially as the father of Halfdan and Sigfred, then he too must have been of royal blood. Reginheri's royalty would have been seized upon by Saxo in his attempts to make Ragnar the foremost Scandinavian king of the ninth century. Yet, as we have concluded, Reginheri could not have been king as during his life the throne was held by Horik I. If he was not king, then he must have been in a position equivalent to a prince; a position close enough to Horik

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<sup>17</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Reuter, trans. *The Annals of Fulda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), *s.a.* 873.

and the line of succession so that his children could hold the throne, but not close enough that he himself would have succeeded at any point. Taking into consideration the political divisions of ninth century Denmark, Reginheri could therefore have belonged either to the House of Godfred or the House of Harald. Both families held considerable power at different times and a position in either could have lent Reginheri his prestige, and royal status.

It seems clear that he was not a member of the House of Harald. There is considerable evidence to believe that during the ninth century, the House of Harald was largely in decline. After the civil war in 812, and the subsequent expulsion of Harald in 813, the family seems to have lost its position in Denmark. Harald himself remained their most powerful member, and even he was left grasping for support south of the Eider. It seems likely therefore that Reginheri was a member of the House of Godfred, which fits well with the fact that he was trusted to lead a military expedition on Paris in 845.<sup>19</sup> We have already seen that Denmark was in a concentrated state of war under Horik I. The son of Godfred had spent the early parts of his reign consolidating his own power and after a feud estranged him from his brothers in the 820s, Horik would have likely turned to other family members to act as his generals in raids against Frankish and Anglo-Saxon towns. Reginheri's father, therefore, should be found within the branches of Godfred's family tree, but would not likely be connected to Horik through his

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<sup>19</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

brothers. Reginheri's father should be found further removed from Horik, and is most likely his cousin Sigfred, the one time heir to Godfred's throne.<sup>20</sup>

Explaining Reginheri's parentage begins in the same place as Saxo's insertion of Ragnar Lothbrok into history, and in doing so strengthens the equation of Ragnar and Reginheri. Saxo falsely equated Sigfred with Sigurd Hring, the father of the legendary Ragnar who fought at the battle of Brávellir. This may have been, in some part, a misreading of the historical record, or an incorrect memory of historical events. It is possible that the battle of 812 in which Sigfred lost his life was confused or combined with the earlier Battle of Brávellir.<sup>21</sup> While an equation of Sigfred and Sigurd Hring is unsupported, and while Sigfred is certainly not the father of Regensfrid, it remains entirely possible that Sigfred was the father of Reginheri. Consider first the question of dates and genealogy. Ragnar's sons, who led the Great Army in 865, actually made their first recorded appearance in the *Annals of Lindisfarne* in 855.<sup>22</sup> For this to be accurate the eldest among them must have been born at least twenty years previous, c. 835. If they were indeed the sons of Reginheri, Reginheri *himself* could not have been born later than another twenty years before that, placing the latest possible date of his birth in 815. Sigfred himself died in 812, meaning that if his child was born in the last years of his life, that child certainly could have

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<sup>20</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and De Vries, "Die historischen," 224-74.

<sup>21</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 1-67.

<sup>22</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.



grown up to lead Viking raids in the 840s and father his own children who were active in the 850s.<sup>23</sup>

These arguments gain further strength if we consider naming conventions. As already stated, medieval Germanic peoples often followed a custom of naming children for their recently deceased kin. It seems more than convenient that only a few years before the posited birth of Reginheri, Sigfred's brother Reginaldus was killed in battle. Recall that Reginaldus was foremost in the kingdom after Godfred until his death in 808, which transferred that position to Hemming. While Reginaldus has usually been identified as an elder brother of Hemming, he could also have been a brother of Sigfred. Chronicles only refer to the three by their relationship with their uncle, Godfred, and the identity of their father or fathers is never mentioned. In addition to the existence of this naming convention it should be noted that the convention was generally applied in reflection of the special relationship between an uncle and his nephew. While more antiquated systems of naming would have transferred the entirety of the name, by the ninth century it was more common for a variation of the root of the name to be used instead.<sup>24</sup> This can be seen in the preservation of the *Regin* root in its transference between *Reginaldus* and *Reginheri*. The same remains true if alternate forms are considered, such as *Ragnald* to *Ragnar*. While the transference of a name might

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<sup>23</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and De Vries, "Die historischen," 224-74.

<sup>24</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and George Flom, "Alliteration and Variation in Old Germanic Name-Giving," in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 32 No. 1 (Jan. 1917), 7-17.

seem too thin a reed to be considered real evidence, the practice held a great deal of reverence. The transference of a name was often associated with the transference of a soul, and therefore identity. By naming a child after deceased kin, the hope was that the child would take on their praiseworthy attributes, and the gravity of such a transference would ensure the practice was largely kept within immediate family.<sup>25</sup>

The conjectures that have been made above hold up well under scrutiny. It is certain that Sigfred, who died in 812, had a brother or cousin, named Reginaldus who died in 808. If Reginheri is identified at least as the father of Halfdan and Sigfred, who held the Danish throne in 873, the date of his birth would fit nicely between 808 and 812, between the deaths of his namesake and supposed father. And indeed, given that Horik was both in a state of war and estranged from his brothers by 845, it would make sense that he would turn to other members of his house to lead his raiding expeditions. Reginheri fits perfectly into these conditions, securing his place both as Sigfred's son and as Saxo's model for Ragnar Lothbrok.

Before concluding, something should be said of the figure Ragnall, who was active as a Viking raider during the same general period and may have been another historical source for the legendary Ragnar. Ragnall, who appears in Irish sources as the son of Albdan along with his *own* sons, can throw some light on the later sections of the legendary Ragnar's narrative, especially considering that

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<sup>25</sup> Flom, "Germanic Name-Giving," 7-17.

Reginheri is believed to have died shortly after 845. Ragnall, was active in the 860s after he was driven from Norway by his younger brothers, as is related in fragmentary Irish Annals.<sup>26</sup> Given this information, Ragnall is generally equated to Ragnvald, brother of the Norwegian king Harald Fairhair. That rivalry alone — between a figure with a name comparable to Ragnar and another figure named Harald — bears considerable merit in identifying Ragnall as another of Saxo's models. Ragnar Lothbrok's close ties to Norway (specifically Vestfold) strengthen this possibility. Since no evidence exists that Reginheri ever visited Norway, assigning Ragnar another source in Ragnall may explain the Norwegian connection in both *Ragnar's Saga* and the *Gesta Danorum*. While Godfred and later Horik may have had allies in Vestfold, Ragnar is said to have held dominion over Norway. If Ragnall, as Norwegian royalty, could be considered a Ragnar model, then that information becomes easier to explain.

Finally, Irish annals state that Ragnall's sons were raiding both along the Spanish coast and into the Mediterranean when they heard of their father's death, details that parallel the narrative of Ragnar's sons receiving the news of their father's passing while they raided in the far south. Viking expeditions into such territories are confirmed in Arabic sources for the late 850s, which corresponds with the Irish annals mentioning Ragnall and his sons' previous journeys to both Spain and Africa.<sup>27</sup> That said, the parallel between those raids and Björn

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<sup>26</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123. and John O'Donovan, ed. and trans. *Three Fragments copied from Ancient Sources by Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh* (1860).

<sup>27</sup> McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

Ironside's own historical raids into the Mediterranean would have made Saxo's combination of Ragnall and Reginheri into the Ragnar character all the easier.

### **Conclusions**

With those models explored, discussions will need to turn to the final piece of the puzzle: Ragnar's sons. Evidence surrounding the many reported sons of Ragnar Lothbrok seems to simultaneously complicate and clarify the question of Ragnar's historical identity. We have already made the point that Ragnar was primarily inspired by Reginheri and therefore the historical figures equatable with the legendary Ragnar's sons should attribute their parentage to him. For some there is little discrepancy between sources, but merely numerous sources to consider. Halfdan and Sigfred (who we will identify with Sigurd Snake-in-Eye) will need special consideration. If they are indeed to be identified as Reginheri, they therefore were members of the House of Godfred, but that house was supposedly extinguished in 854. This issue, while problematic, can be solved if we consider not only their father but their mother as well.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### **The Sons of Reginheri and Lothbroka**

The best evidence for the historicity of Ragnar, or at least the model on which that figure was based, is the fact that he had children. Multiple sources confirm the existence of figures who appear as either the sons of Ragnar or the sons of Lothbrok. It is worth mentioning that nowhere in contemporary sources are any of the figures referred to as the sons of *Ragnar Lothbrok*, further confirming the non-existence of a single Ragnar Lothbrok in the historical record. This chapter will begin by discussing the exploits of these figures. The deeds of Ragnar's sons are just as legendary as the exploits of their father but have the virtue of being verifiable. St. Edmund, for example, was certainly martyred by one or more sons of Ragnar. Proof of the fraternal connection between these figures is largely dependent on their relationships with each other, pieced together from a multitude of sources. The brothers are never listed altogether in contemporary chronicles, and the figures we will discuss were never all active in the same location. However, enough of them were active at the same time and in the same place that with information taken from multiple sources we can successfully link the brothers to each other. Once that is accomplished we will need to link them back to their parents and in doing so, uncover the identity of their mother

Records tell us there were far fewer brothers than Saxo Grammaticus and *Ragnar's Saga* would have us believe. According to Saxo, Ragnar had thirteen children: two daughters and a son, Fridlef, by Lathgertha; Rathbarth, Dunvat, Sigurd, Björn, Agner, and Ivar by Thora; Regnald, Vithserk, and Erik by Svanloga; and Ubbe by an unnamed Swedish woman. The saga version of Ragnar is less prolific. He has half the number of children: Eirek and Agnar by his first wife Thora; and Ivar, Björn, Hvitserk, Rognvald, and Sigurd by Aslaug. There are obvious discrepancies between these lists, which only becomes more apparent when consulting historical records. While numerous figures have been called children or descendants of Ragnar Lothbrok, there are five whom we can verify as related, and likely children of the primary Ragnar model, Reginheri. They are Björn Ironside, Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan, Ubbe, and Sigurd Snake-in-Eye.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will be devoted to the discussion of these five figures, their exploits, and how they relate to each other. Once this is clear we will discuss their parentage, both through Reginheri and through their mother. The brother's exploits were spread out across the continent and the British Isles, echoing the voyages of the sons of Ragnar in legend. The breadth of their activity may have been, in part, an expansion of the Danish war with Carolingian France and Anglo-Saxon England under Horik I and his successors.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Mawer, "Ragnar Lóthbrok and His Sons," in *Saga Book of the Viking Society* Vol. 6 (London: The Viking Club, 1909), 68-89., A.H. Smith, "The Sons of Ragnar Lothbrok," in *Saga Book of the Viking Club* Vol. 11 (London: The Viking Society, 1936), 173-196., and Rory McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1991), 1-51.

### **Björn Ironside in the Mediterranean.**

Of the five historical brothers the identity of Björn Ironside is the most uncertain. While his siblings appear in multiple contemporary sources, Björn is mainly discussed in William of Jumièges's eleventh century histories. In that narrative, Björn — whom William names as Bier Costae Ferrea, or “Bier Iron Ribs” — was sent by his father Lothrocus, King of Dacia, to win a kingdom for himself on the continent.<sup>2</sup> With him, Lothrocus sent Hasting, who was something of a mentor and tutor to Björn. Björn and Hasting gathered a small fleet and began raiding up the rivers of France. Of note, they sailed up the Seine to burn Jumièges and up the Loire to sack Nantes, Anjou, Tours, and Orleans twice. From that point on the narrative becomes more exotic. The Danish fleet sailed south and raided on the Atlantic coast of Spain before rounding the Iberian Peninsula and entering the Mediterranean. They raided then along the North African coast, before continuing to Italy, aiming for Rome. They reportedly mistook the coastal town of Luni for Rome and proceeded to plan a ruse to gain entrance. The Danes claimed their captain Hasting had fallen sick and that they wished to baptize him into the Christian faith before he died. Upon being admitted within the walls of Luni Hasting sprung from his bier and the host proceeded to sack the town, but left dejectedly after learning they were not actually in Rome.<sup>3</sup> Making his way home, Björn was reportedly wrecked on the coast of Anglo-Saxon England and then died

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<sup>2</sup> Mawer, “Lóthbrok and His Sons,” 68-89. and William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, trans. Elisabeth M.C. Van Houts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1-28.

<sup>3</sup> William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, 1-28.

in Frisia. William of Jumièges's narrative bears noticeable signs of embellishment, as should be expected, as he was writing two centuries after Björn's floruit. As with Saxo Grammaticus, William's distance from the lives of his subjects also caused him to neglect exact dates. His account does carry signs of accuracy however, evident in the atmosphere of Björn's voyages. He was sent by the king of Dacia (Denmark) to raid up the rivers of France and beyond. This in itself is characteristic of the ninth century Danish expeditions under Horik I. His voyages into the Mediterranean are admittedly more sensational, but not impossible; Viking raiders certainly *did* make it into the Mediterranean Sea.

William of Jumièges's narrative of Bier Costae Ferreae is complimented by multiple chronicle sources that refer to a figure named Berno, believed by many to be William's primary source for the life of Bier. From information gleaned from the *Annals of St. Bertin* and the *Annals of Fontenelle* we can place the height of Berno's activity squarely in the 850's, during the later years of King Horik I's reign.<sup>4</sup> The *Annals of St. Bertin* have many references of riverine Viking raids during this period. In 853, a group of Vikings — whom the annal calls Danish pirates — sailed up the Seine and the Loire to burn Tours, along with the neighboring church of St. Martin.<sup>5</sup> The following year the northmen chose to concentrate on the Loire alone, which they penetrated twice, first attacking Blois before being repelled outside Orleans, and later attacking Angers. It is worth

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<sup>4</sup> Mawer, "Lóthbrok and His Sons," 68-89. and McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Nelson trans. *The Annals of St. Bertin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), *s.a.* 853.



noting that *The Annals of St. Bertin* also make note of Denmark's civil war and Horik I's death in that year.<sup>6</sup> Nearly every year following, the annals make note of a Viking raid on the inland banks of a major river. Targets include Orleans, Poitiers, and Paris, echoing Björn's attacks in William of Jumièges's history.

Björn himself appears as Berno once by name in the *Annals of St. Bertin*. In 858 he was called chief of one group of pirates on the Seine and appeared before King Charles the Bald to offer him fidelity.<sup>7</sup> The ultimate objective of his submission is impossible to determine as Viking raids along the rivers of France certainly did not cease. A plausible explanation is that Björn was seeking temporary employment as a mercenary. Lothar I, Charles's half brother, had recently made similar alliances with the remnants of Harald II's forces in Frisia, and Charles — who was locked in dispute with both his nobles and Louis the German — would have been eager to take any support he could find.<sup>8</sup> Further evidence for the equation of William of Jumièges's Bier Costae Ferreae with Berno of the Frankish annals can be found in 859 where it is noted the Danes sailed through the straits between Spain and Africa before raiding on the Rhone River. The following year those same Danes made their way to Italy, where they sacked Pisa and other towns.<sup>9</sup> These two records strengthen two major points.

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<sup>6</sup> Nelson, *The Annals of St. Bertin*, s.a. 854

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, *The Annals of St. Bertin*, s.a. 858 — It is clear that though Björn might have been one of the most powerful leaders of riverine raids, he was not the only one. The annals mention Godfred, son of Harald II, as leading expeditions, as well as his uncle Rorik, who was mentioned in the second chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. s.a. 858

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. s.a. 859 and 860

First, based on the unique expedition into the Mediterranean, Berno was certainly the model for William of Jumièges's Bier, and therefore the legendary Björn Ironside. Second is that that expedition itself may have been partially a result of Björn's alliance with Charles the Bald. Italy and the east bank of the Rhone were holdings of Charles's family and rivals. It seems likely that after allying with Charles in 858, Björn left his lands in peace and, partially on Charles's request, sailed to attack the other fragments of the Carolingian Empire. It cannot be ignored that raids into the Mediterranean were also part of the continuing escalation of the Danish Viking war with their European neighbors. There is a secondary point that comes from this discussion and which will have a greater importance later in the chapter. Björn Ironside, whom we have identified as a son of Reginheri and therefore a member of the House of Godfred, was likely abroad during the civil war in 854, and certainly survived past that date. Considering that almost every contemporary source claims the house was extinguished in that war, Björn's continued existence must be taken into account when that claim is further discussed later on.

Unfortunately, little else can be said of Björn Ironside and his historical models. Of all the sons of Ragnar whom we can call historical, Björn is the least solid. He appears only briefly in records, and while many of the accomplishments attributed to him by William of Jumièges appear in those records, they exploits could easily have been the work of another Viking leader in the period. The fact that Björn is one of the few characters the chronicles expressly name as a leader

of a Viking fleet means that he *did* hold a significant position during that decade. In much the same way Reginheri was assigned a powerful position within the House of Godfred it can be assumed that Björn was also trusted enough by Horik I to lead expeditions in the early 850s. If we apply the same logic as in the previous chapter, Björn would therefore have been a trusted member of Horik's family. Considering the lineage we have already traced, he was likely Reginheri's son. This possibility is strengthened by William of Jumièges's claim that Bier was the son of King Lothrocus, a figure who was likely born of the early Ragnar Lothbrok tradition. With that in mind we can turn to the other sons of Reginheri.

### **Ivar, Halfdan, Ubbe, and the Great Viking Army**

According to *Ragnar's Saga*, after the hero's death at the hands of King Ælla, his sons raised a great host that made war on Northumbria and brought vengeance to the king by cutting a blood eagle into his back.<sup>10</sup> This gruesome form of execution involved breaking the victim's ribs, and pulling his lungs out of his back to be spread like eagle's wings. While we can say with a large amount of certainty that no historical model of Ragnar Lothbrok died in the snake pits of King Ælla, it is historical fact that in 865 the Great Army landed in England and spent the next decade crossing the English countryside to make war on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms before creating and settling the Danelaw. The general consensus is that the army was led by multiple men, many of whom were named in insular sources. Three figures in particular seem to have had primary control of the host:

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Waggoner, trans. *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, (New Haven: Troth, 2009), 1-58.

the brothers Ivar, Ubbe, and Halfdan, whose Viking careers are mainly contained to Britain and Ireland. While Ubbe is a lesser figure, Ivar and Halfdan succeed in terrorizing both areas and, it will be argued, became kings of Dublin and York.

While at one point thought to be thousands of men large, the Great Army has recently been given more conservative estimates. It is now thought the army consisted of only five hundred to one thousand men.<sup>11</sup> While this might come as a disappointment to romantic medievalists, the reduced estimates make the assertion that there were only half a dozen or so expedition leaders more believable. The army landed in East Anglia in 865 before making its way to Northumbria where the people had recently driven out their king Osberht in favor of Ælla. The two were forced to reconcile and make war on the Danes for two years before suffering defeat in 867.<sup>12</sup> The army then briefly attacked Mercia to the south, before it returned to East Anglia under Ivar and Ubbe in 870: a raid that resulted in the martyrdom of St. Edmund, which will be presently discussed. From there they turned their sights on Wessex, which they attacked under the primary leadership of Halfdan and a man named Bagsec, though they had to settle for peace after a defeat at Ashdown in 871.<sup>13</sup> By 874, Mercia had fallen and the Great Army split. A contingent under Halfdan returned to Northumbria where it made war on the Picts in Scotland for a brief time, before settling down to farm in

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<sup>11</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 204-240.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 204-240. and G.N. Garmonsway trans, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1953), s.a. 871

876.<sup>14</sup> The second contingent, now under Guthrum, returned to East Anglia then attacked Wessex again, where they had to contend with the newly crowned Alfred the Great. At this point the sons of Ragnar generally fade out the historical record while the army, under the leadership of Guthrum, continued to criss-cross England, made war with King Alfred, and eventually settled for the Danelaw in the 880s. The sons of Reginheri meanwhile, made themselves kingdoms in the British Isles.

Ivar, called the Boneless, was the first son of Reginheri to appear in the British Isles, a full decade before the invasion of the Great Army. He appeared first in Ireland under the name Imhar.<sup>15</sup> It is generally agreed that the Imhar who shows up in the *Annals of Ulster* and the fragmentary Irish annals is indeed the same Ivar who is named in English sources. This assumption is based on a number of considerations. First, the Irish annals are careful to distinguish between the Norwegian and Danish parties. The Norwegians are generally referred to as Northmen, and in that period were under the leadership of Olaf, a Norwegian royal.<sup>16</sup> The Danes however are either referred to as *Danair* or, more commonly, “dark heathens.”<sup>17</sup> Second, Imhar himself is conveniently absent from Irish

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<sup>14</sup>Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 876

<sup>15</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 127-177. and Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987.), 9-26.

<sup>16</sup> Olaf appears in Irish sources as Amhlaim.

<sup>17</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 127-177., John O'Donovan, ed. and trans. *Three Fragments copied from Ancient Sources by Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh* (1860). and Pádraig Bambury and Stephen Beechinor trans. *The Annals of Ulster* (Cork: University College, 2000).

sources during Ivar's activities in England, and reappears when Ivar fades from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.<sup>18</sup> Finally the Irish form *Imhar* can generally be shown to be equitable with the Scandinavian *Ivar*.<sup>19</sup>

Ivar appeared first in Ireland in 851, not to war against the Irish, but to challenge Norwegian superiority in those waters.<sup>20</sup> The Norwegians had held a near monopoly on Irish raids for the better part of the previous century. The following year the Norwegians made an attempt to repel the Danes, but were defeated in a battle that has been identified with the *Gesta Danorum*'s descriptions of Ragnar and his sons' initial forays into the British Isles.<sup>21</sup> In those raids Ragnar led his sons not only against Northumbria and Scotland, but against the Norwegian held Orkney Islands as well. It was in 853 that Olaf, the son of the Norwegian king, appeared though not to fight Ivar. Olaf instead allied with him against the kings of Ireland.<sup>22</sup> The next few years were a series of twisted, opportunistic liaisons, where Ivar was at times allied with Olaf, and at other times with Irish kings. The purpose these shifting alliances was to maintain a Danish presence and prevent Norwegian hegemony over Ireland. By the end of the decade however, Ivar is generally shown to be allied with Olaf. After 857 the

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<sup>18</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bambury and Beechinor, *The Annals of Ulster*.

<sup>19</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 127-177.

<sup>20</sup> Bambury and Beechinor, *The Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 851. and Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 127-177.

<sup>21</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 127-177.

<sup>22</sup> Chief among them at this point was High King Maelsechnaill.

*Annals of Ulster* hardly ever mention one without the other and it is during this period the Vikings in Ireland established their base at Dublin, with Ivar and Olaf sharing overlordship. Until 863 that is, at which point mentions of Ivar cease until his return in 871.<sup>23</sup> In 871 as well Olaf presumably returned to Norway, for Ivar is named as king of the Norsemen of all Ireland and Britain upon his recorded death in 873.<sup>24</sup> The eight-year absence of Ivar from the Irish annals coincides nearly perfectly with his tenure at the head of the Great Army, as shown in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has maintained its position as the foremost record of Anglo-Saxon England, and is our best source for information on Viking activity in Britain. The *Chronicle* — while generally referred to as if it were a single manuscript — actually exists as seven main versions. These have been designated  $\bar{A}$  and A through F, which in turn can be grouped into four distinct chronicles. A is in fact a transcript of  $\bar{A}$ , the Parker manuscript, which is the only extant contemporary copy of the chronicle in existence. The others are later copies of other contemporary manuscripts. B and C are thought to be nearly identical and copied from the same source. D stands alone, while F is a bilingual copy of E. Therefore, while these four chronicles (consisting of seven manuscripts) cover the same period and region of history, they each have a distinct context. Unless noted, references to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* will be to the Parker manuscript as it is

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<sup>23</sup> Bambury and Beechinor, *The Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 871

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. s.a. 873

the oldest of the seven.<sup>25</sup> The Great Army appears in the chronicle in 865, though Ivar himself is not named until the martyrdom of St. Edmund in 870.<sup>26</sup> In the F chronicle for that year Ivar and his brother Ubbe are listed at the head of the army that overran East Anglia and slew Edmund. The *Chronicle of Æthelweard* however, lists Ivar as the primary leader of the Great Army in 866, when it left East Anglia to conquer York.<sup>27</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in point of fact, does not name *any* leaders of the Great Army until Ivar and Ubbe appear in 870. Following that point, Halfdan is described as a primary leader at the Battle of Ashdown in 871.<sup>28</sup> He is next named in 875 when the army split and his contingent returned to Northumbria.<sup>29</sup> The relationship between Halfdan and Ivar is made explicit in the chronicle later in 878 when it claims that a brother of Halfdan and Ivar was slain attacking Devon.<sup>30</sup>

The incitement for the attack on York in 867 has long been a point of debate for ninth century historians. Those who accept the existence of Ragnar Lothbrok dismiss it as revenge on King Ælla, but as we have denied Ragnar's existence this explanation will not serve. Saxo tells us that Ivar was initially the

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<sup>25</sup> G.N. Garmonsway, introduction to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1953), xv-xliv.

<sup>26</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 865 and 870.

<sup>27</sup> J.A. Giles trans. "Æthelwerd's Chronicle," in *Six Old English Chronicles*, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 1-40. — He appears here as Hingwar. Æthelweard's Chronicle dates to the late tenth century.

<sup>28</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 871

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. s.a. 875

<sup>30</sup> This brother is thought to have been Ubbe, as will be discussed later in this chapter. — Ibid. s.a. 878



only son of Ragnar who ventured to Northumbria, taking with him a small fleet, which was joined by the larger army later.<sup>31</sup> If this is contextualized with contemporary sources, then we know that Ivar was already in Ireland prior to the arrival of the Great Army and that Northumbria was in a weak position as Osberht and Ælla contended for the throne. It is entirely plausible that Ivar was aware of this situation and sought to take advantage of it. If this part of the expedition was premeditated by Ivar, it resolves the confusion around the sudden march of the Danes from East Anglia to York. If the goal of the Great Army was to conquer and settle England, which it evidently was, Ivar could have planned for the first target to be Northumbria. He himself would then have traveled from Dublin to Northumbria in or shortly after 864 to be met by his brothers in 865, after which he led the army to take York, and return to East Anglia.

That return to East Anglia in 870 resulted in the death of their King Edmund, an event that would later secure his canonization, and cement him a place in the poetic legacy of England. While the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes brief note of his death, the legend of the martyrdom of St. Edmund grew over the century that followed. It is said that the story was preserved as oral tradition until it was written down by Abbo of Fleury near the end of the tenth century.<sup>32</sup> The narrative had grown by that point and it was said that Ivar and Ubbe, heads of the

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<sup>31</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, trans. Peter Fisher, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 235-29.

<sup>32</sup> Grant Loomis, "The Growth of the Saint Edmund Legend," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, Vol. 14 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 83-113.

Heathen Army and sons of Ragnar, had heard of Edmund's strength and piety. Being jealous pagans they sought him out, bound him to a tree, and shot him full of arrows before decapitating his body. According to Abbo of Fleury, Edmund called upon Christ throughout his execution.<sup>33</sup> While this colorful tale contains exaggerations the basic facts remain true. In 870 the Great Army departed York and attacked East Anglia where King Edmund was slain. The preservation of Ivar and Ubbe's relationship is also significant as it fraternally links them not only to each other, but to Halfdan as well.

### **The Later Careers and Deaths of Ivar, Halfdan, and Ubbe**

All three of the sons of Reginheri fade from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before the final dissolution of the Great Army. Ivar returned to Dublin following the martyrdom of St. Edmund and remained there for two years until his death in 873. Little is known about the cause of Ivar's death, but as he does not appear in contemporary sources from that point, the note in the *Annals of Ulster* must be considered correct. It appears that between 871 and 873 Ivar gained sole kingship over the Scandinavians in both Dublin and York, as he is recorded as such upon his death. Following his death however, that kingship was left empty, and the next half decade will see Halfdan attempt to claim it as his own. Following the death of Ivar, Halfdan's first goal was to retake York, which he did in 875 after splitting his contingent from the rest of the Great Army.<sup>34</sup> His first recorded appearance in

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<sup>33</sup> Loomis, "Saint Edmund," 83-113.

<sup>34</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 875.

Ireland is in that year as well, when he appears as Albann in the *Annals of Ulster*. It is reported there that he slew Eystein, son of Olaf, who had succeeded his father as Ivar's ally in Dublin and apparently succeeded Ivar himself as king.<sup>35</sup> The next reference to Halfdan in Ireland comes from the *Cogadh Gaedhel*, which tells us he was attacked by the Irish high king Áed Findlaith in 876.<sup>36</sup> The *Cogadh Gaedhel* and the *Annals of Ulster* agree that in 877 Halfdan lost his life in a battle with Norwegian forces off the coast of Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

The identification of Halfdan in English sources with the Albann of Irish sources is admittedly a point of contention. The argument for such an identification rests first on the fact that the *Cogadh Gaedhel* refers to Albann as a son of Ragnall, who is assumed to be synonymous with Ragnar Lothbrok of later tradition. While we have already seen a Ragnall appear in Irish sources, there is no need to equate the two. The Ragnall who appears in fragmentary Irish annals for the 860s was clearly Norwegian, and is identified as such. Albann, son of Ragnall, is called a dark heathen in the *Annals of Ulster* and therefore was Danish. His father would probably have been Danish as well, meaning the remembrance of his father as *Ragnall* was more likely a corruption of *Ragnar*, itself stemming from Halfdan's real father, Reginheri. Albann's identification as the *king* of the dark heathens also strengthens his equation with Halfdan. It is clear from the

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<sup>35</sup> Bambury and Beechinor, *The Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 875

<sup>36</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, 224-264. — That is the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, or *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*.

<sup>37</sup> Bambury and Beechinor, *The Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 877.

*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that by 875 Halfdan was considered the king, or at least leader, of the Danes in York. The *Annals of Ulster* recognize Albann as holding that position and it is unlikely that a second king of the Danes would exist in the British Isles without mention in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Finally, the fraternal bond between Halfdan and Ivar makes Albann's attempts on the throne of Dublin more logical. Albann does not appear in Irish annals until this point, when he begins making clear attempts on Dublin. This rash move cannot make sense unless Albann had a reasonable claim on the throne. Identifying him with Halfdan, the brother of their recently deceased king Ivar, gives him that claim. With that identification made we can firmly place the death of Halfdan in 877. This is contradicted by the *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, which claims Halfdan fell in battle at Devon in 878.<sup>38</sup> Æthelweard was mistaken however, and the leadership of the attack on Devon rightfully belongs to Ubbe.

Ubbe himself is a rather elusive figure and outside of the *Gesta Danorum* he appears in relatively few sources. Foremost among them is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in which Ubbe appears on two significant occasions. The first of these occasions is the martyrdom of St. Edmund and the second is the battle in Devon. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that a brother of Halfdan and Ivar was in Wessex, in Devon, and there was slain with eight hundred of his men. It continues that the Anglo-Saxons captured the Dane's banner, which bore the standard of a

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<sup>38</sup> Giles, "Ethelwerd's Chronicle," 1-40. and McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51.

raven.<sup>39</sup> The *Annals of St. Neot*, speaking of the same event, expands on the banner, claiming it was fashioned by sisters of Ivar and Ubbe, the daughters of Lothbrok.<sup>40</sup> In a twelfth century Anglo-Norman history Geoffrey Gaimar goes one step further and positively identifies the leader of the expedition as Ubbe.<sup>41</sup> The identification of Ivar and Halfdan's unknown brother is tentative as it rests almost entirely on non-contemporary authorities but, historically, no other brothers can fit the mold. Neither Ivar nor Halfdan can be the leader of the Devon attack; aside from being expressly named as the leader's brothers, both Ivar and Halfdan were dead by 878. Furthermore, there is no record of Björn in insular chronicles, or of Sigurd, who was likely concerned with Scandinavia. This leaves Ubbe, who was already seen in East Anglia a few years prior. Unless further contemporary evidence presents itself, the most reliable sources we have place Ubbe as the Viking leader who lost his life in Devon.

Sources also give Ubbe a unique connection to Frisia. *The Annals of Lindisfarne* and the *History of St. Cuthbert* claim all three brothers led a raid on Sheppey in 855 at the head of both Frisian and Danish forces.<sup>42</sup> Ubbe is named in the *History of St. Cuthbert* as duke of Frisia, and he and Halfdan later appear as leaders of the Danish forces in Northumbria. In that appearance Halfdan is

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<sup>39</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 878 —The Æ version alone omits the detail of the raven.

<sup>40</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. and Mawer, "Lóthbrok and His Sons," 68-89.

<sup>41</sup> Mawer, "Lóthbrok and His Sons," 68-89.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

described as “King of Denmark,” while Ubbe again appears as “Duke of Frisia.” On contemporary accounts we have evidence that Halfdan was indeed considered a king in Denmark during the early 870’s.<sup>43</sup> While Halfdan’s position in Denmark will be discussed next, the verification of this claim also lends some credibility to the claim that Ubbe was duke in Frisia. For the time being, the significance of that claim will be left hanging, and the thread will be picked up in a later discussion.

### **Sigurd and Halfdan, Kings of Denmark.**

The career of the final son of Reginheri was brief, obscure, and mostly contained within Denmark. Sigurd appears in continental chronicles as Sigfred, and the equation between the two forms can be made using the same method as discussed in chapter four concerning Sigfred (the elder) and Sigurd Hring. Chronicle evidence comes mainly from the *Annals of Fulda* with additional information from the *Annals of St. Vaast*. In the year 873, Sigfred and his brother Halfdan, both kings in Denmark, sent envoys to the France to sue for peace.<sup>44</sup> This is the sole mention of Halfdan as a king in Denmark, which will be considered presently. Sigfred then appears in 882 along with a confederate named Godfred, who is recorded as a duke.<sup>45</sup> The two were attacked by Frankish forces and to appease their assailants Godfred agreed to be baptized into Christianity. In

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<sup>43</sup> Timothy Reuter, trans. *The Annals of Fulda*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), *s.a.* 873

<sup>44</sup> Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda*, *s.a.* 873

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* *s.a.* 882

turn he was granted the same lands in Frisia that were earlier held by Rorik.<sup>46</sup> In 855 Godfred, now called a king, plotted against the Franks and was killed for his transgression.<sup>47</sup> There are two plausible death dates for King Sigfred; the first is in Frisia in 887, where he is recorded in *Annals of St. Vaast* as falling in battle. The second is 891, where it is recorded in *The Annals of Fulda* that both he and Godfred fell in battle with the Franks.<sup>48</sup> While it is tempting to declare the later date an error, as both Godfred and Sigfred surely could not have been alive in 891, it has been suggested that Saga evidence confirms the later death date.<sup>49</sup> Regardless, there is ample evidence to accept that Sigfred was king of the Danes, following Horik II, during the 870s and 880s. While evidence from the continental chronicles is scarce there is no reason that, given what we know of the houses of Godfred and Harald and of the sons of Reginheri, we cannot construct a likely chronology of events in late ninth century Denmark.

Horik II succeeded to the throne as a young boy following the death of Horik I in 854 and ruled until at least 864. This is known from a letter sent by Pope Nicholas I to him in that year.<sup>50</sup> Sometime between 864 and 873, Sigurd, called Sigfred, ascended to the throne. His ascension was likely closer to the later end of that range of dates as the urgency of diplomats sent south of the Eider

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<sup>46</sup> Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda*, s.a. 882.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. s.a. 885

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. s.a. 891

<sup>49</sup> Mawer, "Lóthbrok and His Sons," 68-89.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

suggests Sigurd had recently taken the throne and wished to sue for peace. His brother Halfdan, meanwhile, can be identified as the same Halfdan who was active in the British Isles.<sup>51</sup> Halfdan of the *Annals of Fulda* it has been argued, could not have been the same as Halfdan in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as he would have been preoccupied leading the Great Army in 873. The events in the *Annals of Fulda* however, occur during a series of years when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is rather taciturn. During the years surrounding 873, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports multiple times that the heathens “made peace with the Mercians,” or that the host merely wintered in certain locations.<sup>52</sup> It would therefore seem the mid 870s were a relatively quiet period for the Great Army. As already discussed, Ivar had returned to Dublin in 871 and died in 873. It would be plausible that in the year 873, Halfdan briefly returned home to Denmark, perhaps to take the news of Ivar’s death to their brother Sigurd, and found himself momentarily caught up in continental politics. It is certain that he does not appear in continental sources later, while his recorded exploits in the British Isles during the later 870s have already been discussed. It seems Sigurd continued to rule Denmark without him.

Godfred, who appears in 882, could have theoretically succeeded Ubbe as duke in Frisia. He is titled “duke” in the *Annals of Fulda* for that year, and his

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<sup>51</sup> Mawer, “Lóthbrok and His Sons,” 68-89, McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar’s Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51., and R.W. McTurk, “Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?” in *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress*, Ed. Bo Almqvist and David Greene (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1976) 93-123.

<sup>52</sup> Garmonsway, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 872-874



baptism apparently elevated him to the status of king, which is recorded in 885.<sup>53</sup> His grant of lands in Frisia and the invocation of Rorik makes it possible that Godfred was a relative of Rorik and a descendant of the House of Harald.<sup>54</sup> I would argue that the earlier death dates of 855 and 877 for Godfred and Sigurd respectively are more accurate than the later date of 891. On that point, Godfred's treachery and death in 885 seems to be valid and is reminiscent of his relative Harald II's frequent oath-breaking at the beginning of the century. This would bring into question the evidence of 891 and make Sigurd's death in 887 more likely.

There are certain complications that arise from these theories. Sigurd, Halfdan, and their brothers have been identified as sons of Reginheri, and therefore were members of the House of Godfred. Continental sources all confirm however that in 854 the House of Godfred was extinguished, except for Horik II. If Sigurd was in fact a member of this family, why was he not included in the family that died in 854 and why is he found sharing rule with a possible member of his family's eternal rivals in the 880s? On that note, why is his brother Ubbe listed in multiple sources as the duke of Frisia, the traditional lands of the House of Harald?

Before answering these questions, which can be done with one additional argument, it would be useful to summarize the previous sections. We have

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<sup>53</sup> Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda*, s.a. 882 and 885

<sup>54</sup> The name Godfred already entered into the House of Harald, attached to Harald II's son, who raided up the rivers of France in the 850s.

discussed, and argued for, the existence of five historical sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, and therefore of Reginheri. First, Björn, who is found in William of Jumiéges's history and in the *Annals of St. Bertin*, raiding along the rivers of France and then penetrating the Mediterranean in the late 850s. Second, Ivar, who in the 850s made his way to Ireland where he allied occasionally with Olaf of Norway and became king of Dublin. Ivar then, in the 860s, led the Great Army during its in England where he captured York and became sole king of all the Scandinavians in both Dublin and York. He returned to Ireland after martyring King Edmund in 871 and died there in 873. Primarily, Ivar's narrative is found in the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, with some ancillary texts. Ubbe, the third son, also commanded the Great Army and aided in the death of Edmund. He reportedly died in Devon in 878 under a raven banner. Halfdan also led the Great Army and succeeded as king of York in 875. He is briefly seen in continental records during a lull in activity in England. After 875, he attempted to retake Ivar's claim on Dublin and died in 877 doing battle with the Norwegians. The fifth and final brother, Sigurd, succeeded to the Danish throne after the death of Horik II sometime in the 860s. He shared rule during the 880s with Godfred, and died either in 887 or in 891. With those connections in mind, as well as the problems which arose in identifying these brothers as sons of Reginheri, we can turn to a discussion of their mother.

## **The Origins of *Lothbroka***

One of the primary problems resulting from assigning these five brothers a position in the House of Godfred, is that they should have died in the battles of 854 with the rest of their kin. If it is to be argued that these brothers were historical models for the legendary sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, as is almost certain, they would need to be sons of Reginheri, who has been identified as the primary historical model for Ragnar himself. While certain arguments could be constructed that they were the sons of other potential models, such arguments are easily dispelled. In the previous chapter we discussed Reginheri alongside three other serious contenders for the honor of having been Ragnar's historical counterpart. Those are, Regenfrid, Horik I, and Ragnall of the Irish annals. Regenfrid died in 813, and while he would afford his sons a royal position in the House of Harald, the brothers were most active in the 850s to the 880s, and would therefore have been born no earlier than the 830s. While Ragnall was certainly a model for later events in the *Gesta Danorum* and *Ragnar's Saga* he has clearly been identified as Norwegian and therefore it is unlikely he would have had any sons who were identified as Danes, as all the brothers were at one point or another.

Horik I remains a prime candidate, as his sons certainly could have been important Danish leaders, and would have succeeded to the throne upon his death, but it is highly unlikely that any of his sons would be overlooked in the accounts of the bloodshed of 854. This leaves Reginheri as the only viable candidate for the

father of the five brothers, but loose ends remain. The issues can be solved not through the paternal line, but by considering the *maternal* line. In this section I will argue that the five sons were fathered by Reginheri but mothered by a woman named Lothbroka. Lothbroka was a member of the House of Harald and possibly a daughter of one of Harald II's elder brothers. She married Reginheri as part of an alliance between the two kingly families and was a prominent figure in her own right. Her own importance, as well as the death of Reginheri early in the lives of his children, led the five brothers to become more closely associated with the House of Harald than with their father's family, and therefore overlooked in accounts of 854. Their royal position, though both parents afforded them both leadership positions on the continent, in the British Isles, and in Denmark itself.

The main obstacle in assigning the sons of Reginheri a mother named Lothbroka, is that nowhere in the legendary traditions of Scandinavia is Ragnar Lothbrok remembered as a woman. This obstacle would hold more weight were it not for the fact that no contemporary sources mention a figure named as *Ragnar Lothbrok* or any form of that name. Were one to appear who could plausibly linked to Reginheri, or another Ragnar model, the argument would fall apart. As it happens, while many sources have either a form of *Ragnar* or a form of *Lothbrok*, no *Ragnar Lothbrok* appears. Irish sources prefer to use *Ragnall*, reflecting *Ragnar* in some cases and paralleling the use of multiple forms of *Ragnar* or *Reginheri* in non-Scandinavian continental sources. English sources prefer to use a form of *Lothbrok*, as do some later continental historians, such as Adam of

Bremen and William of Jumiéges.<sup>55</sup> Only in Scandinavian sources does the combination of *Ragnar* and *Lothbrok* appear and that practice does not begin until the twelfth century, in Ari Thorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*. Northern naming customs are also relevant: One rarely finds Old Norse nicknames unattached to personal names. Nicknames never stand alone, and are only seen attached to a proper name. Therefore the use of *Lothbrok* alone, unattached to *Ragnar* or any other name is grounds enough to consider it a proper name in its own right.<sup>56</sup> This argument leads to the conclusion that there were two people in the ninth century: one named Lothbrok and another named Ragnar, who were prominent Danish figures. This chapter has shown that the five figures who are alternately called sons of Ragnar or of Lothbrok can be linked as brothers. Halfdan, Ivar, and Ubbe are linked in insular sources with Sigurd connected through the *Annals of Fulda* and Björn added through their parent by way of William of Jumiéges. If both the models for Ragnar and Lothbrok were male there would be a break in logic, which is solved by making Lothbrok female, and the mother, rather than father, of the five brothers. Over the centuries, as the female identification of Lothbroka was forgotten, her figure was combined with the more prominent male Ragnar model to become Ragnar Lothbrok by the mid twelfth century.<sup>57</sup>

The only extant signs of a female Lothbrok appear in the inscriptions of Maeshowe in the Orkneys. The inscription of note reads, "This mound was raided

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<sup>55</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. following E.H. Lind.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

earlier than Lothbrok's; her sons they were bold..." or in its original language, "Sjá huagr var fryy hlaðinn heldr Loðbrókar. Synir hennar þeir váru hvatir."<sup>58</sup> Advocates for a female Lothbrok point to this inscription, and generally use the female form *Loðbrókar* as evidence. In his 1991, *Studies in Ragnars Saga Lodbrokar*, McTurk argues that greater attention should be paid to the possessive pronoun *hennar*, which he says holds a stronger feminine gender than *Loðbrókar*.<sup>59</sup> In that same work, McTurk embarks on an ingenious and convincing argument for the origin of the word *Lothbrok* with great emphasis placed on its feminine nature. As it is extremely relevant for the identification of a historical Lothbroka, I will summarize that argument here. The primary explanation of *Lothbrok*, in the context of *Ragnar's Saga* is thought to be the hairy clothes he wears to combat Thora's serpents. However, as this portion of the *Saga* is the most obviously fictitious, it seems plausible that it was invented by drawing on prior folklore traditions in order to explain the epithet that had become attached to the name Ragnar. McTurk begins with the arguments of Sahlgren, who proposed that the name of a Germanic fertility goddess could be derived from the place name of Locknevi and its older form Lodkonuvi. He argues that the older form followed a pattern of naming sacred places and therefore could be read as "the sacred place of Loðkona," the two roots of that name being *loð-* and *-kona*. *Loð-* (and the related word *loðinn*) translates to "hairy, wooly, densely covered in

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<sup>58</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51 and Gustav Storm, *Kritiske bidrag til Vikingetidens historie, (I. Ragnar Lodbrok og Gange-Rolf)* (Kristiania: The Norse Publishing Association, 1878).

<sup>59</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51

grass,” and in the *Saga* is seen in the name *Lothbrok*, referring to Ragnar’s hairy clothing. McTurk argues, following Sahlgren, that since the root *-kona* can mean either queen or woman, Locknevi was the sacred place of a hairy or grass covered queen he believes to be identifiable with the Germanic harvest and fertility goddess Nerthus described by Tacitus.<sup>60</sup> He believes that the name *Lodkona* was used in place of the goddess’s taboo proper name, following traditional Germanic religious customs.

To link the goddess with *Ragnar’s Saga* McTurk refers to one of the saga’s final chapters, which is set long after Ragnar’s death, wherein a group of Danes discover a large wooden idol on the island of Samsø which lays to the north of the island Fyn. The wooden man tells them that he was built to be worshiped by the sons of Lothbrok, the “synir lodbrokar.”<sup>61</sup> McTurk claims that *lodbrokar* is a misreading of the original manuscript, where the word appears as *lodbrokʀ*, and should properly be read as *lodbroku*. He explains that *Lodbroku* is the genitive form of the feminine *lodbroka*.<sup>62</sup> This analysis is paired with evidence that the word *bróka* was used as a poetic equivalent to *woman*, as seen in Snorri Sturlusson’s *Edda*, which McTurk uses to argue that *Lodbroka*, like *Lodkona* before it, was used as a name for the fertility goddess. Deploying the Maeshowe inscription and assuming that the feminine words posited are correct, we have the

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<sup>60</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar’s Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51

<sup>61</sup> Waggoner, *Saga*, 1-58. and McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar’s Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51.

<sup>62</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar’s Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51 - Genitive referring to a word which alters another, in this case *Lodbroku* altering the plural noun *synir*.

hypothesis that during the ninth century a prominent woman existed who was named for, and maybe associated with, this early Germanic fertility goddess, and whose sons were also active and well known. The final piece of the puzzle that must be taken from McTurk is the argument that the common noun *loðbrok*, which does indeed refer to hairy or shaggy breeches, was derived from the word *loðbrækr*, which was itself associated with the cult of worship surrounding the hypothetical goddess. McTurk makes reference to the ancient Germanic practice of bedecking idols or living humans with plant material to invoke fertility. This, he claims, gave rise to the practice of wearing shaggy costumes such as *loðbrækr* by devout worshipers of fertility goddesses, and specifically Loðkona. The relative rarity of both the common noun *loðbrok* and the proper name *Loðbroka* plausibly led to the two being combined over time, and then attached to the legendary figure of Ragnar.

To recount the above, the word *Lothbrok* is philologically linked to the cult of a harvest and fertility goddess and existed originally in a primarily feminine form. The rarity of unattached epithets in Old Norse and the use of alternately *Ragnar* or *Lothbrok* — but never both — in both insular and continental sources are evidence that Ragnar and Lothbrok existed as two distinct figures. The Maeshowe inscription and the evidence in the “wooden man” chapter of *Ragnar’s Saga* are grounds to consider the second figure, Lothbrok, to be a woman, properly named Lothbroka, whose identity and femininity were forgotten between the ninth and twelfth centuries. And finally, the strong fraternal links



between the five figures discussed earlier in the section are sufficient grounds to identify both Reginheri and Lothbroka as their parents. McTurk agrees with all the above points, save the last, which he dismisses offhand as impossible.<sup>63</sup> It is that marriage however, that I would argue existed, and in existing, solves the primary problems we have encountered with linking Ragnar's sons to their historical father Reginheri. All that remains is to place that marriage in historical context.

### **The Historical Context of Reginheri and Lothbroka**

First and foremost, it has been argued by certain historians that Sigfred and Halfdan, who appear in 873, could not be sons of Reginheri as Reginheri was certainly a member of the House Godfred. Alternately, it has also been argued that they were Reginheri's sons, but he could not have been a member of the House of Godfred. Since both options negate each other yet hold up equally well to scrutiny there seems to be no clear solution. The discovery of Lothbroka in the historical record is that solution. We should note that in Scandinavia sons were often named after their mothers if the mother held a prominent place in society. This can be seen in the example of Sven Estridsson, an early eleventh century Danish king, who was named for his mother, a Danish princess and daughter of Sweyn Forkbeard.<sup>64</sup> That onomastic pattern can be applied to the sons of Reginheri and Lothbroka, with the consideration that Lothbroka herself was equally as

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<sup>63</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51 and McTurk, "Ragnar Lodbrók in the Irish Annals?" 93-123.

<sup>64</sup> McTurk, *Studies in Ragnar's Saga Lodbrokar*, 1-51

prominent as her husband. I would argue that this is evident, not in chronicle evidence, but in the thematic prominence of shield-maidens, or warrior-women, in legendary accounts of Ragnar Lothbrok. In both the *Gesta Danorum* and *Ragnar's Saga*, Ragnar marries a woman who is renowned for her prowess in battle. In the *Gesta* it is Lathgertha, who proves herself in battle with Frø and later Harald.<sup>65</sup> In the saga, this role is filled by Aslaug, who prominently features in the majority of the saga as a strong willed warrior.<sup>66</sup> While it is not evident that either of these women would be a perfect analogue for Lothbroka, the association of Ragnar's wives with warrior women cannot be inconsequential. If Ragnar was based on a historical model, his wives must have been to a certain degree as well.

Aslaug and Lathgertha also have the shared characteristic of holding positions of political power. Lathgertha slew her second husband to become a jarl in her own right where Aslaug held a position of mythic royalty, linked to the legendary Sigurd and Brynhild of the *Völsunga Saga*. Thora too appears alternately as a daughter of the king of Sweden or of a jarl in Sweden.<sup>67</sup> Considering this and considering her need to pass her legacy to her sons, Reginheri's wife should hold a similar position of power and for that reason should be assigned to one of the major houses of Denmark. As an incestuous bond within the House of Godfred is highly unlikely she would therefore be a member of the House of Harald. The association is further supported considering the point

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<sup>65</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

<sup>66</sup> Waggoner, *Saga*, 1-58.

<sup>67</sup> Waggoner, *Saga*, 1-58. and Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 235-297.

that Ubbe was considered a duke in Frisia, which was granted to Harald II and his brother Rorik by the Carolingians in return for their loyalty. If Ubbe's mother was a member of the family of Harald, his position as duke becomes more logical. It should also be noted that there are relatively few points where Lothbroka fits within Harald's dynasty as she should be relatively the same age as Reginheri. Harald II would likely not have had children before his son Godfred, who was born in the 820s. Similarly, Rorik — who survived into the 870s — was probably the youngest sibling and born too late to father Lothbroka. That leaves the primary candidates Anulo and Regenfrid, and it is most convenient to identify Lothbroka as the daughter of the eldest, Anulo. Reginheri's father Sigfred and Anulo both fell in 812 while contending for the Danish throne as the eldest in their respective families. Placing Lothbroka as Anulo's daughter would ensure that she was born within a few years of Reginheri and certainly not after 812. Positing that Anulo was her father might also strengthen our previous arguments concerning the confusion in naming Ragnar Lothbrok's father as Sigurd Hring.

What remains is to discuss the incentives and chronology surrounding the union of two houses who hitherto had been bitter rivals. I would argue that the union was forged in the late 820s, likely in the year 826. It was in that year, according the continental chronicles, that Harald II was baptized, accepted lands in Frisia, and returned to Denmark. It appears that in that year, the sons of Godfred (Horik I included) were prepared to make peace with their Danish brethren and with the Carolingians to the south. Or perhaps Horik I wished to

feign peace with the Carolingians until his own position was solidified. The year is significant both because it is one of the few instances of peace between the Houses of Godfred and Harald and because it marks a point where Reginheri and Lothbroka, both presumably in their late teens, could have been married. The peace, brokered by baptism and marriage, was of course broken by Harald shortly after, but his attitude can be considered an outlier or as a holdover from the previous decades' antagonism. Certainly Harald's son Godfred and his brother Rorik had no great quarrel with Horik I and his successors and even led significant raids into France, furthering Horik's war efforts. A marriage date of 826 would also mean that birth dates for Reginheri's sons beginning in the early 830s would be entirely likely. By Reginheri's death in 845 his eldest son could not have been more than a teenager, and by the time the boys reached maturity and began to make names for themselves, they would have been associated with their mother, who was important in her own right, equally with their father. By 854, as the oldest sons were at the peak of their careers and the youngest were beginning, they could have been associated with their mother to the point that they were not included in records that the House of Godfred was extinguished in that year. Or at least, many were abroad, meaning they might not have participated in the civil war and were overlooked by continental chroniclers.

## **Conclusions**

With the inclusion of Lothbroka in the historical record, almost all uncertainty surrounding the sons of Reginheri disappears. After the early death of

their father in 845 the five sons were associated closely with their mother's house and therefore overlooked in recollections of 854. The marriage alliance between Reginheri and Lothbroka, echoing countless marriage alliances of the same period, dispelled the remaining antagonism between the families of Godfred and Harald (with the exception of Harald II) allowing Horik I to concentrate on his raids into France and further abroad. The association of Ubbe with Frisia falls into place, as does the cooperation of Godfred, son of Harald, and his now cousin Sigurd in the 880s. Most importantly, the origins of the combination of *Ragnar* and *Lothbrok* in the twelfth century are reconciled, as well as the separate mentions of these names in earlier sources. Two figures, Reginheri and Lothbroka, together parented the five brothers who would become the models for the legendary sons of Ragnar Lothbrok.

## CONCLUSIONS

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Ragnar Lothbrok holds a unique place in both the history and literary tradition of Denmark with one foot firmly planted in each world. He truly bridges the legendary and recorded history of Scandinavia and his historical models existed at the height of the Viking Age during a period which can only be described as semi-legendary. While a number of those models existed, paramount among them was Reginheri, the scion of the House of Godfred in the mid ninth century who lost his life after attacking Paris in 845. His historical birthright extends back to the sixth century and the early medieval kings of Denmark and Sweden. The Yngling line in Sweden and the Scylding line in Denmark — whose histories were intertwined throughout the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries — forged Scandinavia into a region of tense political rivalries, and constantly changing alliances. By 750 and Harald Wartooth's death at the hands of his nephew Sigurd Hring, this atmosphere had condensed into a form that would produce the families of Godfred and Harald who warred for hegemony in the early ninth century.

It is in this tense atmosphere that Reginheri was born to Sigfred, the one time heir to the Danish throne. Though he himself was never king, Reginheri held a significant position under his relative Horik I and was likely one of the few family members Horik trusted by the middle of the century. It is perhaps for this reason that Reginheri was betrothed to Lothbroka, a daughter of the House of

Harald who was probably the child of Sigfred's chief rival Anulo. Together, the two fathered five sons who shaped the late ninth century. Björn Ironside raided the Mediterranean in the 850s while his brother Ivar the Boneless helped found the Viking kingdom of Dublin. Ivar then, with Ubbe and Halfdan, founded Viking York and conquered half of England, while Sigurd Snake-in-Eye succeeded to the Danish throne and continued Horik I's war with the rest of Europe.

As centuries progressed, much of the lives Reginheri, Lothbroka, and their children was lost to history. Few contemporary annals record their existence without bias and later historians were undone by the merciless progression of time. Most significantly, Lothbroka's separate identity was forgotten, and she was first misremembered as a male figure, then combined with her husband into the composite hero Ragnar Lothbrok. The legendary Ragnar, while a wonderfully gripping character, should be remembered as a construct, while Lothbroka and Reginheri should be remembered for who they were: two figures that together founded the family that shaped the high Viking Age. Ragnar Lothbrok's dual position as both a literary and historic figure has long clouded discussions of the Viking Age.

The acceptance that Ragnar Lothbrok existed only as a fictional character and was inspired by one or more real Viking leaders helps to clarify these discussions. My own assertion that the five figures who we consider historical sons of Ragnar had a mother who was equally important as their father clarifies the discussions further. The marriage of Reginheri and Lothbroka, firmly tangled

in royal rivalries of Denmark, solves a number of problems surrounding Ragnar's family. Through them the sons of Ragnar — who were arguably the most influential Viking raiders of the ninth century — gain a solidified place in historical records, where before much was left uncertain.



## APPENDIX

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### Genealogies, Maps, and Timeline

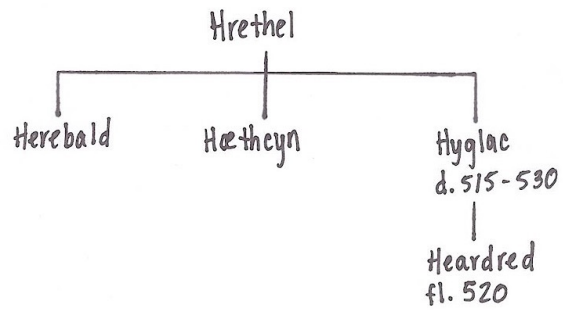
The following genealogies and maps have been included, alongside a general timeline of events, to facilitate comprehension of the myriad of names, dates, and places that have been mentioned in the past five chapters. The genealogies include family trees for: the Geats, Swedes, and Danes in the sixth through eighth centuries; the Houses of Godfred and Harald in the ninth century; Ragnar Lothbrok's family in the *Gesta Danorum* and in *Ragnar's Saga*; and the family of Reginheri and Lothbroka. Maps, labeled primarily using information from Gwyn Jones's *History of the Vikings*, for general places of significance in Scandinavia, Denmark, Carolingian Europe, and the British Isles follow.

## **General Timeline**

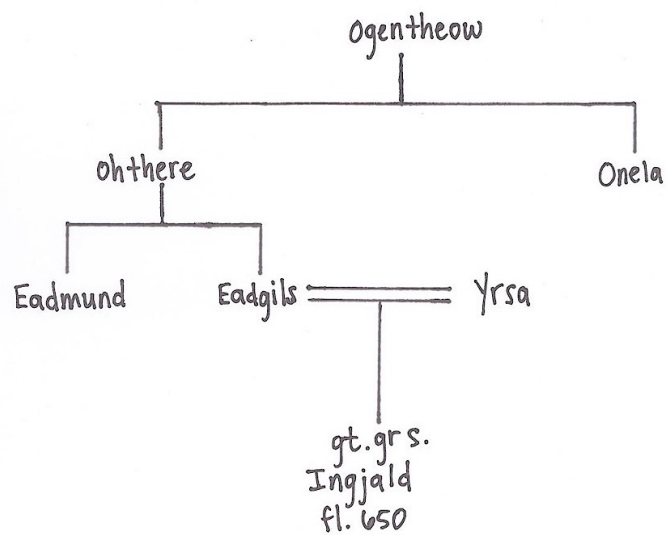
- c. 480-520: Hrothgar ruled in Denmark
- c. 515-530: Hyglac ruled and died in Götaland
- c. 520: Hrólfr comes to power in Denmark; Eadgils wars with Onela in Sweden
- c. 650-670: Ivar Vidfami unites Scandinavia
- c. 750: His grandson, Harald Wartooth, is killed by Sigurd Hring at Brávellir
- 771: Charlemagne crowned undisputed King of the Franks
- 772-802: Charlemagne conquers Saxony
- c. 775: Sigfred ascends to the Danish Throne
- 800: Sigfred dies and is succeeded by Godfred
- 808: Godfred defeats the Abodrites; Reginaldus, heir to the throne, dies
- c. 808-812: Birth dates of both Reginheri and Lothbroka
- 810: Godfred dies and is succeeded by Hemming
- 812: Hemming dies; civil war ensues between Sigfred of the House of Godfred and Anulo of the House of Harald; Both are killed and Anulo's brothers Regenfridus and Harald II take the throne
- 813: The Sons of Godfred, including Horik I slay Regenfridus and exile Harald II
- 814: Charlemagne dies, and is succeeded by Louis the Pious
- 815-819: Harald II allies with Louis the Pious and attempts to reenter Denmark
- 819: Horik I expels two of his brothers
- c. 825: Horik I reigns as sole king of Denmark
- 826: Harald II is baptized and makes peace with Horik I; Reginheri and Lothbroka are betrothed as part of this peace; Louis the Pious grants the House of Harald lands in Frisia
- 827: Harald II breaks the peace and is expelled again
- 830s: The sons of Louis the Pious war between themselves; Horik I sends Viking raiders down the coast of France; the sons of Reginheri and Lothbroka are born
- 840: Louis the Pious dies; The Carolingian Empire divides between Lothar I, Louis II and Charles the Bald
- 841: Viking raiders attack Rouen on the Seine
- 842: A single fleet of raiders attacks London, Quentovic, and Rochester; sixty-seven ships attack Nantes, then make base at Noirmoutier
- 845: A fleet under Reginheri attacks Paris; Reginheri dies of dysentery
- 850: Horik I shares rule with two nephews
- 850s: Viking raiders under Björn raid the riverine coasts of France
- 851: Ivar first appears in Ireland
- 853: Olaf appears in Ireland and frequently allies with Ivar

- 854: Horik I wars with his nephew Gudurm, and most of the House of Godfred is extinguished
- 855: The sons of Reginheri lead an attack on Sheppey
- 857: Horik II holds the Danish throne
- 858: Björn offers fidelity to Charles the Bald
- 859: Björn enters the Mediterranean
- c. 863: Ivar leaves Ireland
- 865: The Great Army under Ivar, Halfdan, Ubbe, lands in East Anglia; around this time Sigfred (Sigurd) ascends to the throne
- 867: The Great Army conquers York
- 870: Ivar and Ubbe martyr St. Edmund, king of East Anglia
- 871: Ivar returns to Ireland; Bagsec and Halfdan are defeated at Ashdown; Alfred the Great is crowned King of Wessex
- 873: Sigfred and Halfdan send envoys to France; Ivar dies in Ireland as “King of all the Scandinavians in Britain and Ireland”
- 875: Halfdan takes a contingent of the Great Army to farm settle Northumbria; Guthrum continues to war with Wessex; Halfdan slays Eystein, son of Olaf in Ireland
- 877: Halfdan dies in battle attempting to retake Dublin
- 878: Ubbe dies in battle at Devon under a raven standard
- 882: Godfred, ally of Sigfred, is baptized and is granted lands in Frisia
- 885: Godfred plots against the Franks and is killed
- 886: Alfred and Guthrum make peace and settle on the border of the Danelaw
- 887: Sigfred dies in battle
- 891: Another Sigfred and Godfred fall in battle (perhaps a chronicle error)
- c. 1150: The oral tradition of *Ragnar's Saga* is written down
- c. 1208: Saxo Grammaticus completes the *Gesta Danorum*

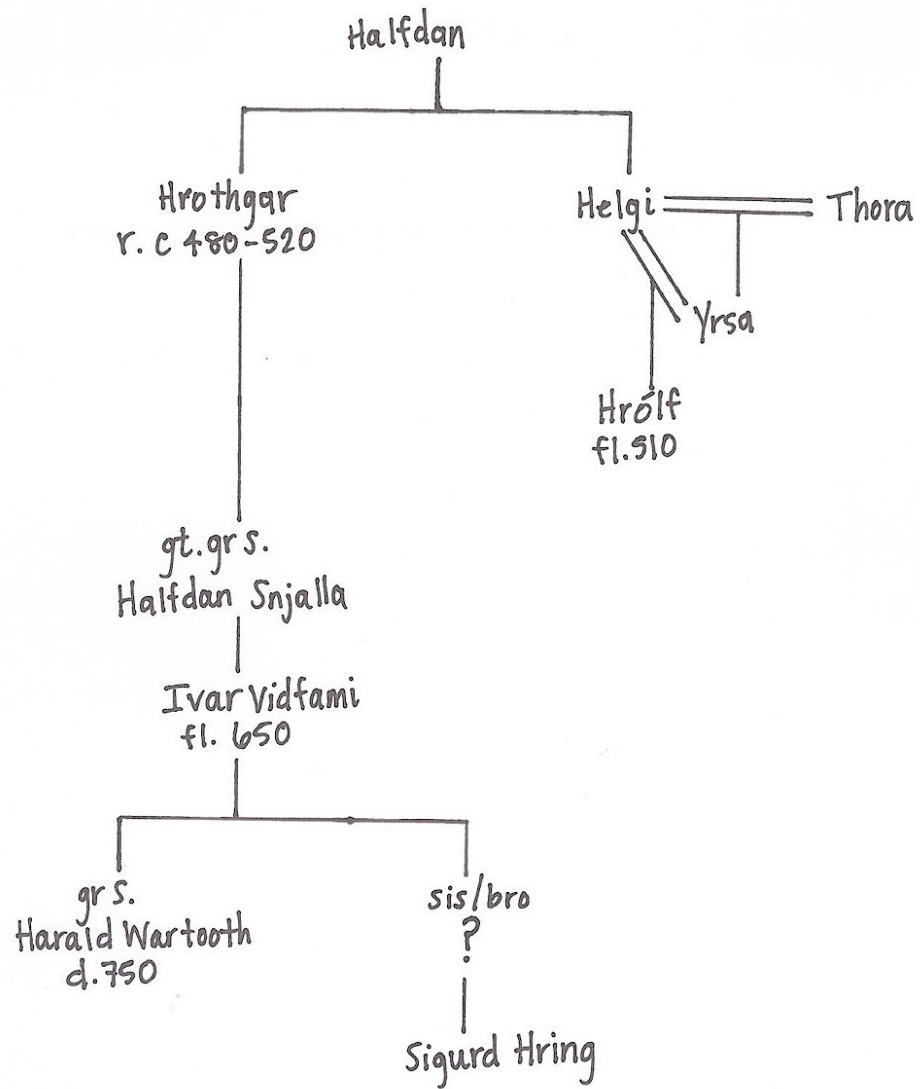
**A: The Geatish Royal Family in the Sixth Century**



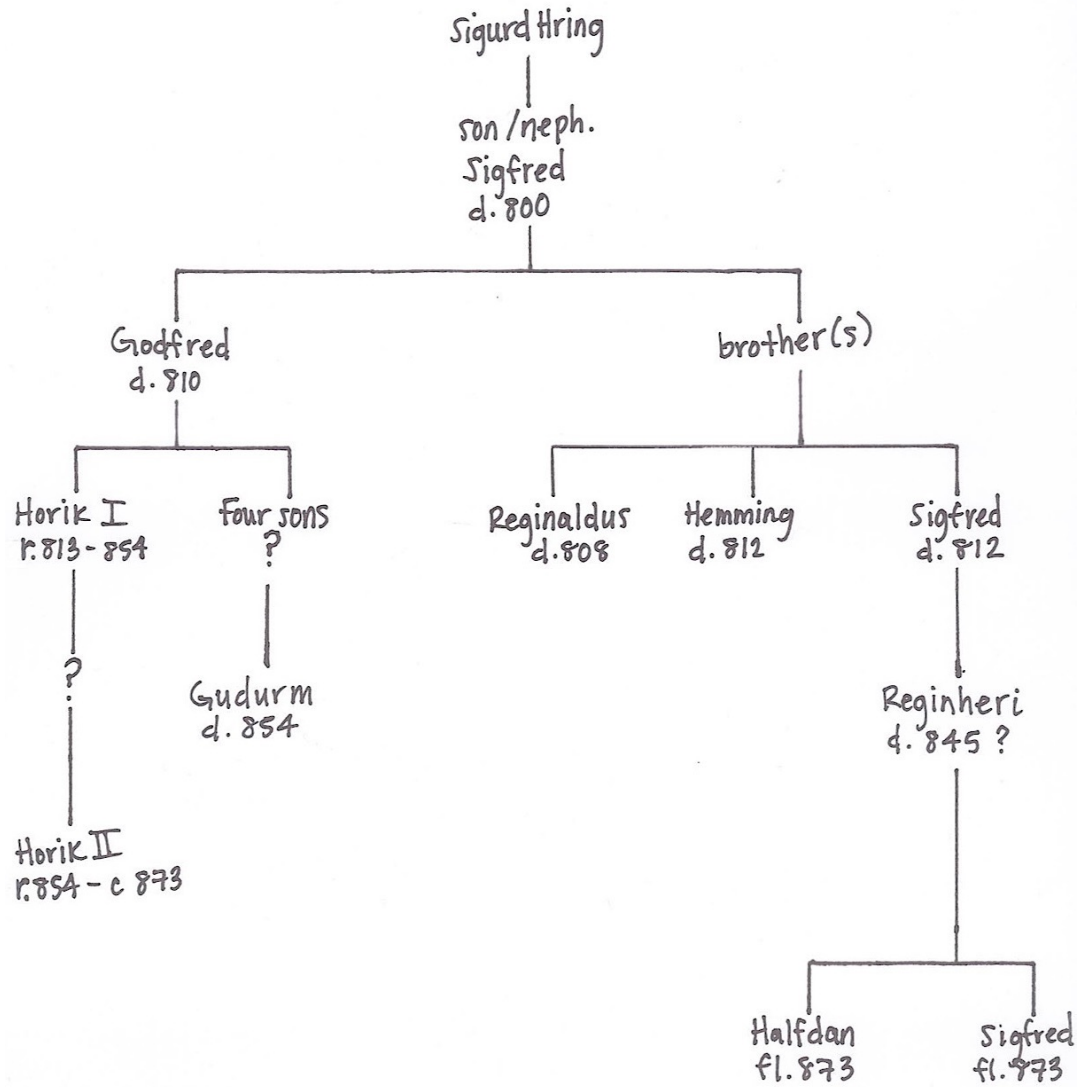
**B: The Swedish Royal Family in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries**



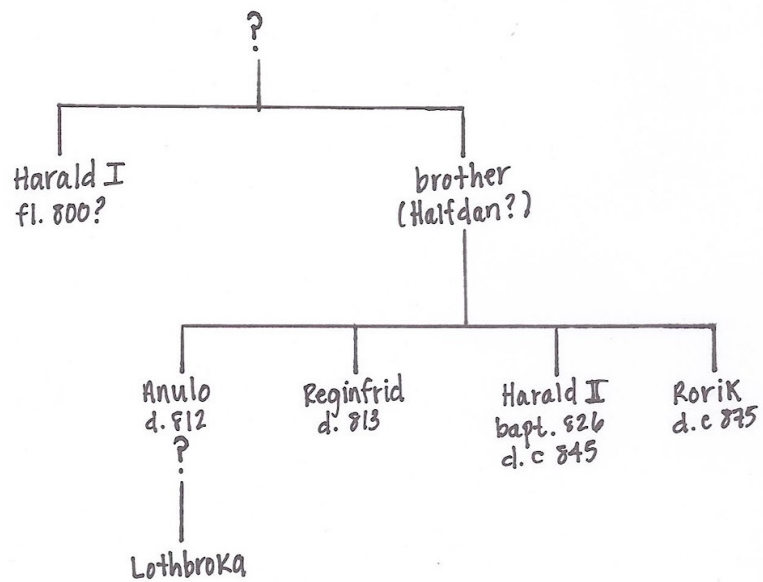
C: The Danish Royal Family from the Sixth to the Eighth Century



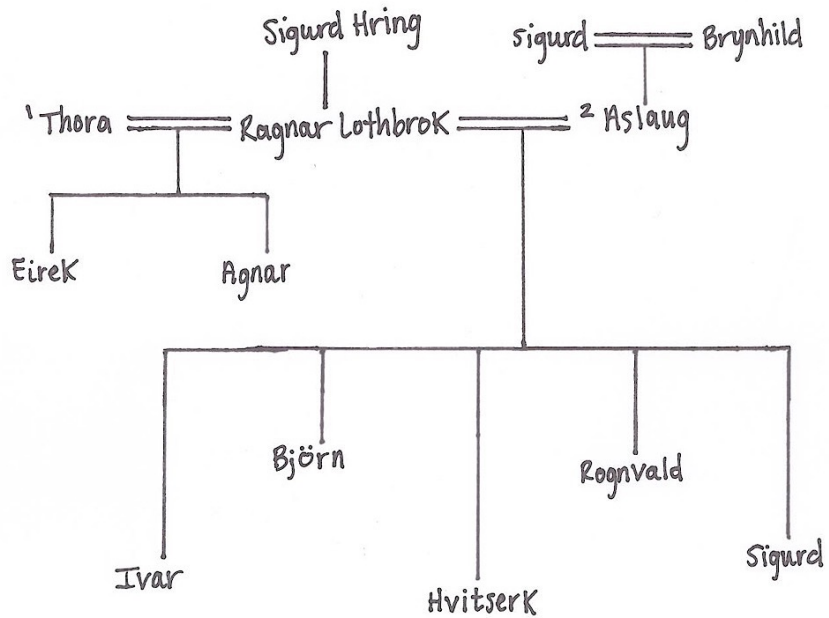
**D: The House of Godfred in the Ninth Century**



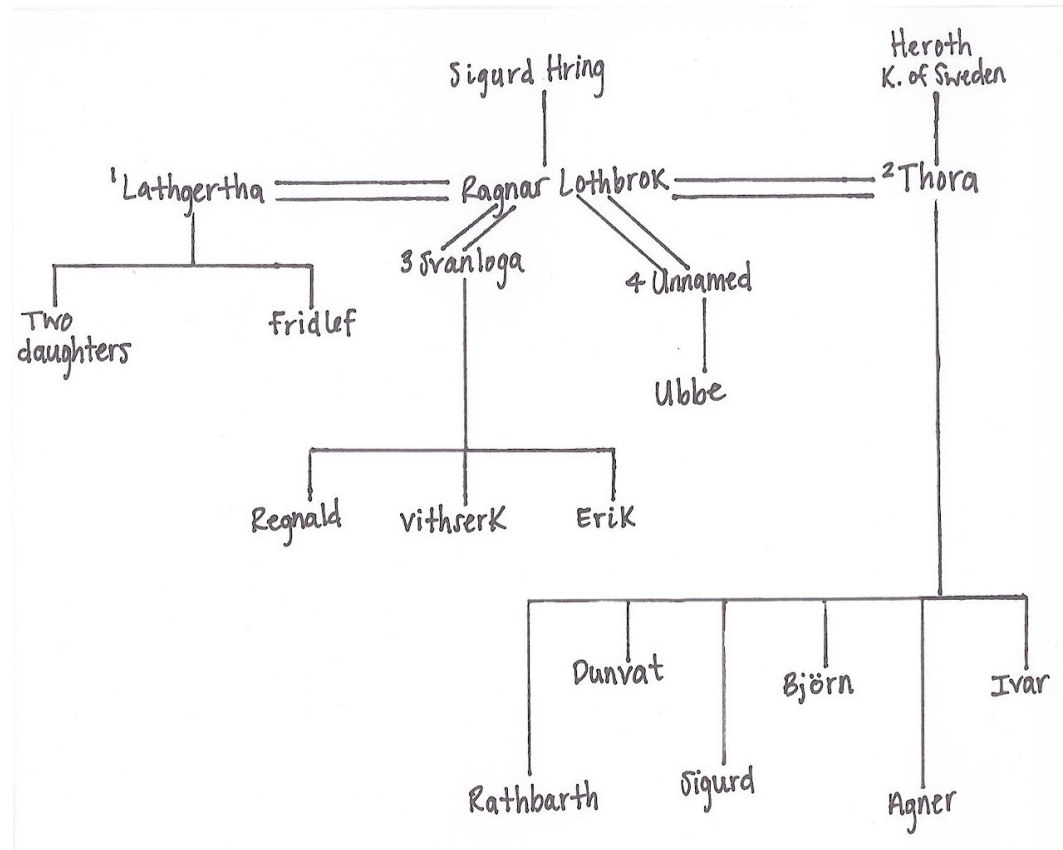
### E: The House of Harald in the Ninth Century



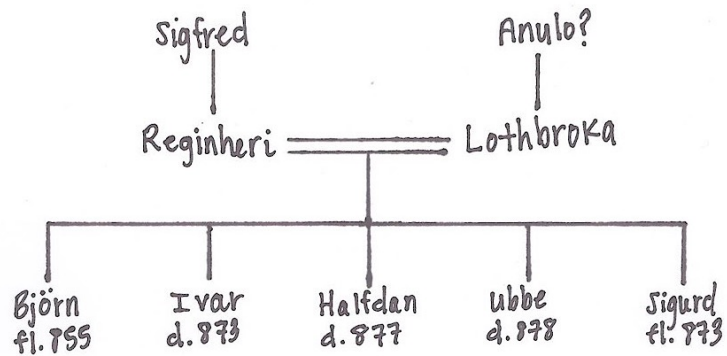
### F: The Family of Ragnar Lothbrok in *Ragnar's Saga*



### G: The Family of Ragnar Lothbrok in the *Gesta Danorum*



### H: The Family of Reginheri and Lothbroka





## **Map I: Medieval Scandinavia**



## Map II: Medieval Denmark



### Map III: Carolingian Europe



# Map IV: Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England



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