

Representation of History in Selected *The Last Kingdom* Novels by Bernard Cornwell and the Television Series Adaptation

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ABSTRAKT

Cílem této práce je představit historické události zobrazené ve vybraných románech série *Poslední Království* od Bernarda Cornwella a ve stejnojmenném seriálu, který byl vytvořen společností Netflix. Za tímto účelem, práce poukazuje na vybrané historická fakta, týkající se Anglie 9. století, která byla využita v románech a jejich seriálové adaptaci, se speciálním zaměřením na kulturní a náboženské rozdíly mezi Anglosasy a Dány. Dále práce porovnává věrnost TV adaptace s romány a ukazuje změny v ději, vyprávění a postavách. Tato práce byla provedena na základě hloubkové srovnávací analýzy románů *Páni severu* (2006) a *Píseň meče* (2007) a TV adaptace *Poslední Království* (2017) druhá série. Výsledky této práce ukazují, které historické události byli využity v knihách, jak s nimi předloha a adaptace naložila a také do jaké míry adaptace následuje knižní předlohu.

Klíčová slova: Věrnost, *Poslední Království*, invaze vikingů, kniha versus adaptace, historická fikce, Anglie, deváté století, Bernard Cornwell.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to point out the historical events used in selected Bernard's *The Last Kingdom* novels and their Netflix TV adaptation. To achieve this, the thesis points out the historical facts of 9th-century England, which were utilized in the novels and the TV adaptation, with a special focus on the cultural and religious differences between Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Furthermore, the work compares the fidelity of the TV adaptation to novels and shows the changes in the plot, narration, and characters within the novels and the TV adaptation. This work has been conducted utilizing an in-depth comparative analysis of the novels *The Lords of the North* (2006) and *Sword Song* (2007) and the Netflix adaptation of *The Last Kingdom* 2nd season (2017). In conclusion, the work shows which historical events are used in the novels, how the novels and adaptation portray them, and how well the adaptation follows the novels.

Keywords: fidelity, *The Last Kingdom*, Viking invasion, books versus TV adaptation, historical fiction, England, 9th century, Bernard Cornwell.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching history made easy: with attention-grabbing stories from novelists and some magic of cinema; Bernard Cornwell and Netflix directors bring to life not only some real-life characters from 9th-century England but also the cultures and religions.

In the 9th century, the British island was torn by internal wars, but a new threat lurked in the north, the Vikings. It is up to Alfred the Great and his descendants to deal with this new threat, and maybe one of them will make his dream come true; A dream of one kingdom, *The Last Kingdom* – England.

Bernard Cornwell wrote this story based on the history of the creation of England and mixed it with fiction to make it more appealing. Netflix directors took notice of his work and, in the end, adapted it. But the question remains how accurate Cornwell's story is from a historical point of view. Furthermore, what degree of fidelity is achieved by the TV adaptation to novels, and does it maintain historical accuracy?

The main goal of this thesis is to give an insight into historical representation included in Bernard Cornwell's novels *The Lord of the North* (2006) and *Sword Song* (2007), as well as in the Netflix TV adaptation, the second season of *The Last Kingdom* (2017). It establishes what the historical and religious background of 9th-century England looked like and then further analyzes the utilization of it in novels and TV adaptations. Furthermore, it demonstrates what adaptation is and how important fidelity is when creating adaptations.

The work concludes that both selected Bernard Cornwell's novels utilize not only historical events but also historical religious aspects of the era; Cornwell uses a plethora of historical figures, historical and religious aspects. Meanwhile, the TV adaptation took some creative liberty, especially with the sequence of events, then used different characters instead of those used in the books. Except for these small deviations, the adaptation follows the story authentically to the novels, reaching fidelity very often. However, when it comes to the historical and religious aspects, the adaptation does portrait them to a degree, but without properly introducing them; this fact devalues the informativity of the adaptation. Therefore, it seems like the creators put larger emphasis on entertainment value.

1 REPRESENTED HISTORY

1.1 Historical background of England in the 9th century

From a village into manors, from manors into baronies, from baronies into counties, from counties into duchies, from duchies into kingdoms, from kingdoms into empires, and ultimately, from empires to dust. That was the backbone of the medieval age Europe. Before the Kingdom of England was unified to its most famous stage of the late medieval age, it was once fragmented into the kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria, East Anglia, and Kent.¹

The island of England, a fertile land with rich soil, was torn by internal wars between many participants, such as the Anglo-Saxons in the South, the Picts from the north, and the Britons from the west. These wars had various reasons; most of the time, they were territorial or political disputes, family feuds or yearning for power and wealth. These wars caused much bloodshed, leaving one or the other participant weakened and easy prey for the new threat entering the island; the Vikings, emerging from Scandinavia.²

The very first recorded attack of the Vikings on English soil was the raid of Lindisfarne in the year 793. Lindisfarne belonged to the kingdom of Northumbria, which today is known as the North-East of England.³ Back in the medieval age, religions played an important role for almost everyone. Regarding 9th century England, the people who lived there were mostly Christians and Lindisfarne was considered the cradle of Christianity for England; one of England's more critical holy sites since the bones of holy Cuthbert were buried there.⁴ One of the many possible causes for the Vikings' attack on Lindisfarne to strike against the Christians could have been their aggressive spread of their faith.⁵

In the beginning, Vikings were not referred to as Vikings but as heathen men for their different paganistic religion and especially gruesome methods of warfare and religious practices; the word Vikings came into use much later in the 19th century due to newly found admiration for the Viking sagas.⁶ During the 9th century, Vikings were often referred to as

¹ Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066* (Pegasus Books, 2021), 296.

² Schama, Simon. *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World 3000 B.C.-1603 A.D.*, 54.

³ Stefan Brink, "Who were the Vikings?" in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 5.

⁴ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 174.

⁵ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 177.

⁶ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 175.

Danes, heathens, or Northmen.⁷ It is commonly believed that Vikings started raiding due to overpopulation in Scandinavia. But it was after many years of raiding that the Vikings showed any aspirations for acquiring land for themselves in England.⁸ Their main aim at that period was to get rich; the Vikings knew about the wealth of the English island. They attacked unknowing strangers who had completely different beliefs, systems, and priorities in other parts of the world.⁹ The 9th century is also well known for its flourishing of trade; England made good use of the English Channel to bring the riches and goods from the continent. Thanks to this, the kings and monasteries grew more affluent and prosperous, and so did the Vikings.¹⁰

The Vikings excelled at shipmaking; they were able to build fast ships that were propelled by a combination of oars and sails. This gave the Vikings an upper hand, being able to traverse both sea and river with the same efficiency. Thus, allowing for a quick raid of settlements located not only on the coast, but on the shores of rivers as well. Therefore, leaving the site with the loot and enslaved people before the military reinforcement would come.¹¹ Another critical point is that these ships came in different designs and sizes. There are two preserved ships to this day, which showcase how many people one ship could carry. These particular ships have 15 and 16 oar holes on each side; usually, one oar meant two oarsmen. Therefore, one ship could carry at least 30 people. The rest of the space could be either filled with plunder and slaves or with warriors. Thus, one ship could carry up to 40 warriors; a fleet of 35 such ships could carry a whole army.¹²

1.1.1 Armies

Nowadays, one of the biggest reasons we get a job is money. That has remained the same throughout the history of humankind, and the same applies to the 9th century. The Vikings and Anglo-Saxon armies were fueled by the promise of profit and fame (fame especially for Vikings and their Paganistic beliefs in Valhalla; more will be explained in the following chapters). Given the Vikings' fearsome raiding reputation, it was rare for foreign

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Coupland, Simon. "The Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England to 911." In *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190-201. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521362924.010>.

⁹ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 176.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 182.

monarchs to seek a diplomatic pact with the Vikings to protect their borders.¹³ It could be a promise of peace, non-aggression pacts, or full alliances. Ultimately, if these attempts were successful, they were always accompanied by a substantial price of the given pact. The monarchs were able to offer items such as plates, cups, belt buckles, and more made from different, expensive materials, ranging from bronze to gold. Monarchs were not afraid to send even weapons, further arming potential threats.¹⁴ This caused the growth of the warlords. Being wealthier and more prestigious than the other warlords attracted more warriors, who flocked to the banner of a given warlord.¹⁵ Therefore, these warriors would voluntarily lay down their lives for the promise of wealth and the glory of dying in a battle.¹⁶ With these growing numbers of loyal warriors, the warlords could be more daring. Thus, they could demand higher prices for peace, and if the opposing side refused, the wealth was taken from them by force.¹⁷

When it comes to the Anglo-Saxons, they created a system called the Fyrd, also known as the standing army, where half of the man stayed at home, taking care of the field and garrisoning city walls, and the other half on the service in the actual army, ready to fight. Fyrds were composed of levies from different regions of the given kingdom.¹⁸

1.1.2 Hierarchy of Power:

The Anglo-Saxon society was structured into a pyramid of power, where on top resides the king; after him, there are his lieutenants, ealdormen, who controlled the local regions (also called shires). The king and the ealdormen also formed a witan, a court event where they discussed politics, diplomacy, laws, and the granting of land. Beneath the ealdormen were the local lords (thegns), owners of the land in the given region where the peasants worked on their fields, and the numerous enslaved people below them.¹⁹

The Vikings maintained a comparable hierarchical system of power. At the top was the king or chieftain, followed by the Jarls, who were the Viking equivalent of ealdormen. The Jarls were responsible for overseeing the development of their designated regions and

¹³ Dawn M. Headly and Julian D. Richard, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), Part 1, chap. 2, Kindle.

¹⁴ Dawn and Julian, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England*, chap 1, Kindle.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Neil Price, "Sorcery and Circumpolar Traditions in Old Norse Belief" in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 257.

¹⁷ Dawn and Julian, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England*, chap 1.

¹⁸ Dawn and Julian, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England*, chap 9.

¹⁹ Dawn and Julian, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England*, chap 1.

for supplying the king with men (levies) and tributes.²⁰ Underneath the Jarls were the smaller landowners, also known as farmers and traders. At the lowest level of the hierarchy were enslaved people, who represented an essential commodity for the Vikings as well as for other societies of the time.²¹

1.2 Religion in the 9th century England

As previously mentioned, religion played a significant role throughout the entire medieval period across Europe. In the 9th century, England, the Anglo-Saxons were worshipping Christianity, meanwhile the invading forces of Vikings worshipped the old Norse religion, which nowadays is referred to as Asatru.²² It is important to notice that in comparison to Christianity, there are scarce written sources and reliable texts concerning Viking religion.²³ As Anders Hultgård mentions, most of our nowadays knowledge of Viking religion comes from “medieval Christian culture”²⁴, which on its own may or may not be reliable due to the possible biases of historians of the era who wanted to “promote the royal cause.”²⁵

There are archaeological sites which brought an enormous insight into the Viking culture. However, when it comes to the religion itself, the results may vary depending on the location and type of the site.²⁶ Among the few written sources which gave us an insight into the religious aspect of Vikings are the Eddic poems, which consist of the *Völuspá*, the *Vafþrúðnismál* and the *Grímnismál*.²⁷

1.2.1 Christianity in 9th century England

Throughout this bachelor's thesis, the term Christianity will be used as a reference to the Catholic Church. Before the arrival of Anglo-Saxons, the British Isles belonged to the Britons, the natives of the island who worshipped pagan gods.²⁸ According to Morris, the death of King Penda of Mercia, who was the last pagan king, was the milestone that marked

²⁰ Olaf Sundqvist, “Cult Leaders, Rules and Religion” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price, (Routledge, 2008), 224.

²¹ Johan Callmer, “Scandinavia and the Continent in the Viking Age” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 449.

²² Joshua, Rood. “Investigations into Asatru.” *AURA – Tidsskrift for Akademiske Studier Av Nyreligiøsitet* 11, no. 1 (2020): 81. <https://doi.org/10.31265/aura.359>.

²³ Anders Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 212.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 341.

²⁶ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 213.

²⁷ Larrington, Carolyne, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn, eds. *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.

²⁸ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 24.

the decisions of the kingdoms of Wessex, Kent, Northumbria, and East Anglia to start worshipping Christianity and accepting it as their faith.²⁹ Therefore, Catholic Christianity took hold of the whole of England and became the main faith of the common people as well. Due to the quick growth of Christian faith (which had a fast effect on the powers of the kings), there was no need for barrow burials nor mead-halls since Catholic Christianity was against these pagan rituals and was preaching humbleness.³⁰

When it comes to the core beliefs of Christianity, this religion is considered a monotheistic faith. Meaning, people believed in one God.³¹ It is important to differentiate the two main branches of 9th-century Christianity, namely the Catholic church (Western Church) and the Orthodox church (Eastern Church).³² When it comes to the actual structure and rules, McGrath mentions that the Catholic clergy is not permitted to marry and the priests can be only males; when it comes to females, they are allowed to take “pastoral and liturgical responsibilities.”³³

The hierarchy of the Catholic church includes, firstly, the Pope, who is the leader of the whole church with the main goal of “globalizing evangelization”³⁴, the Pope is usually seen as an emissary of God himself, thanks to that, in the medieval ages. They wielded an enormous influence and power; this power could often be threatening to the kings, creating tension between them and the church.³⁵ Secondly, the cardinals are there to choose the successor after the death of a previous pope, thirdly, some bishops are on the lower end of the hierarchy. Both the cardinals and the bishops are chosen by the pope himself with the duty to perform “administrative responsibilities”³⁶ With that, the bishops became powerful and influential in the assigned region; their main goal was to build churches and spread Catholic Christianity further.³⁷

Another important aspect of Catholic Christianity was the monasteries, often targeted specifically by the Vikings for raid since they were usually a wealthy place. The purpose of monasteries was to follow strict rules to achieve and reinforce spiritual values; meanwhile

²⁹ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 82.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, 1st ed. (Penguin Books, 2010), chap. 2, Kindle.

³² MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, 1st ed., chap. 9, Kindle.

³³ McGrath, Alister E. *Christianity: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), chap. 5, Kindle.

³⁴ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 214.

³⁵ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 4.

³⁶ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 5.

³⁷ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 7.

being guided by the “directions of a superior”³⁸ all within a safe seclusion from the outside world; which was achieved by a defensive wall surrounding the area of the monastery.³⁹ Apart from monasteries, I cannot omit the importance of churches as they are one of the main sites of Christianity and places where the worshipping took mainly takes place. Churches are built in the shape of a cross to remind even the illiterates of other cultures of the importance of a cross. Another important sign for churches was the “baptismal fonts”⁴⁰ which was mostly placed in front of the door to symbolize the entering to the Christian faith⁴¹ Baptism itself was seen as a “formal admission”⁴² to the church and it was one of many services that the church provides, other services could be funerals or weddings which utilize texts from “liturgy”⁴³ which are texts that explain the “believes and core values of Christianity.”⁴⁴ Lastly, it is important to mention the Christian saints. The saints are individuals whose deaths played a significant role throughout Christian history. These dead were celebrated by leaving food next to their tombs, remembering and honoring their death and deeds.⁴⁵

1.2.2 Old Norse religion

One of the noticeable and main points of Old Norse paganism was that people believed in numerous gods who, to a degree, coexisted with each other. According to Hultgård, these gods were communally worshipped and believed in, yet each believer worshipped one or a couple of gods, whom they aligned with the most, whether it was through fear, companionship, wrath, deception, power or friendship.⁴⁶ Hultgård further notes that these deities were often regarded as *fulltrúi* ‘confidant’ or *ástvinr* ‘close friend’.⁴⁷ According to Hultgård, the Old Norse pagans believed in Yggdrasill, which is also known as the cosmic tree, representing time and space.⁴⁸ They also believed that our universe would end with Ragnarök, where this tree will burn and almost everything will die. But, after Ragnarök, the universe will be reborn with some of the gods surviving along with a “primordial couple

³⁸ McGrath, Alister E. *Christianity: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), chap. 4, Kindle.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 3.

⁴³ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 5.

⁴⁴ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 6.

⁴⁵ Alister E, *Christianity: An Introduction*. Chap. 7.

⁴⁶ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 215.

called Líf and Lífþrasir”⁴⁹ who will restart humankind. It is important to notice, the pagans believed in multiple realms, such as *Niflheimr*, which can be considered the pagan version of hell, and *Valhalla*, which could be seen as the pagan version of heaven.⁵⁰ These realms played an important role in the daily life of the believers, in the same way as heaven and hell for Christians; this is also pointed out in *The Last Kingdom* series.

When it comes to deities, there are three which have to be mentioned for their significance for the religion as a whole. Firstly, *Óðinn* commonly believed as the kings of gods and war, usually he is depicted as one-eyed old man who hang himself on the tree of life for 9 days, he is also the one responsible for choosing the best human warriors who will feast with him in the great halls of Valhalla (*Vallhol*) and defend it against the Ragnarök. Secondly, *Baldr*, a god who has been killed and his death is the foreshadowing of the upcoming Ragnarök, and he shall resurrect only after it. Lastly, there is *Loki*, the god of trickery and the one responsible for the death of *Baldr*.⁵¹

Next aspect that I would like to emphasize when it comes the old Norse religion are the three faith spinners (as they are referred to in the Last Kingdom series) also called *nornir*, according to Raudvere the *nornir* represent three agents of fate commonly popularized as the past, present and future⁵² and they are responsible for “the destiny of whole universe”⁵³ which is bound to be destroyed.⁵⁴ The last aspect I have to emphasize is the *shapeshifters*, also known as individuals who can change their appearance. Most often, these were depicted as mysterious nightriders, Odin’s most trusted and powerful warriors, to help or scare away other beings.⁵⁵ With the religious side established, the Viking religious personnel (equivalent of a priests) were called the *goði*, these were not only priests representing the religion but also could occupied the position of a judge or a politician, another important role to this religion is the occupation of *seiðr* which could roughly mean a sorcerer or a seer, the one who interact with gods and foresee the future.⁵⁶ It is important to notice that the only signs

⁴⁹ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 214.

⁵⁰ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 214, 217.

⁵¹ Jens Peter Schjødt, “The Old Norse Gods” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 221.

⁵² Catharina Raudvere, “Popular Religion in the Viking Age” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 238.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Catharina Raudvere, “Popular Religion in the Viking Age,” 241.

⁵⁶ Neil Price, “Sorcery and Circumpolar Traditions in Old Norse Belief,” 246.

of Scandinavian paganism that are left are the ritual stones and archaeological sites. Therefore, we do not know much about their exact rituals.

2 BERNARD CORNWELL AND HIS NOVELS

It was in London on 23. February 1944, when Bernard Cornwell was born into a military family. His father served in the Canadian Air Force; his mother served in the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force. His first job was teaching, after that, he started working for the BBC, where he worked his way up to the position of head of current affairs of BBC Northern Ireland.⁵⁷ Bernard wanted to move to the States with his partner, but his request for a green card was rejected, thus, he started writing historical books, which did not require a green card. This meant the birth of *The Sharp Stories* (1981),⁵⁸ which are historical fiction covering the era of the Napoleonic wars. Besides that, Cornwell wrote other novels and series, such as *Grail Quest* (2000), *Starbucks Chronicles* (1993), *The Arthur Books* (1995), *Stonehenge* (1999), and many more.⁵⁹ He started writing *The Saxon Stories* in 2004 but thanks to the success of the Netflix adaptation, this series of novels has been renamed "*The Last Kingdom*" series⁶⁰.

The Last Kingdom series premiered on the 10th of October 2015 and finished on the 9th of March 2022. The series contained 5 seasons. The story of Uhtred of Bebbanburg was concluded with a movie, "*Seven Kings Must Die*", which premiered on 14th of April 2023. The Last Kingdom Series was produced by Carnival Films for Netflix.⁶¹

In general, the main plot of *The Last Kingdom* (both novels and the series) follows the life of Uhtred of Bebbanburg, from his childhood when he was taken from a noble Saxon family and raised by Vikings, to his adulthood and reclaiming his birthright. He struggles to belong to either Saxons or Danes, but in the end, he becomes and stays a loyal King Alfred the Great.

In the following analysis, I will analyze two books from the series, namely: *The Lords of the North* (2006) and *The Sword Song* (2007). The main reason for choosing these particular two is; Firstly, 3rd and 4th books fit exactly into the 2nd season, which has 8 episodes in total. Each book is represented in 4 episodes.

⁵⁷ "About," Bernard Cornwell, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://www.bernardcornwell.net/about/>

⁵⁸ "Sharpe Books," Bernard Cornwell, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://www.bernardcornwell.net/series/the-sharpe-books/>

⁵⁹ "The Books," Bernard Cornwell, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://www.bernardcornwell.net/books/>

⁶⁰ "The Last Kingdom Series (formerly The Warrior Chronicles/Saxon Stories)," Bernard Cornwell, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://www.bernardcornwell.net/the-last-kingdom-series-formerly-the-warrior-chroniclessaxon-stories/>

⁶¹ "About" The Last Kingdom, accessed March 3, 2025, <http://www.thelastkingdom.tv/about>

Secondly, it also shows the internal conflict between Uhtred's consciousness and his Danish versus Saxon side. Due to this, Uhtred suffers a lot since he is rejected by both sides, making him an outcast a lot of the time. This is especially shown in the TV adaptation, utilizing judgmental looks and scenes where other characters are undermining Uhtred's loyalty.

Thirdly, the theme of destiny plays an important role throughout the whole novel, but in the fourth book especially, where Uhtred must decide which side he will join, either the Danish side or he will stay loyal to King Alfred, to whom he has sworn an oath. This theme is represented by the three spinners of faith, who played an important role in the Old Norse religion. They are mentioned throughout the book and TV adaptation.

From a historical point of view, these two books and the adaptation take place approximately between the years 875-890. Thus, between the key events fall the creation of Danelaw, the Battle of Lunden, the bond between Mercia and Wessex and overall, the solidification of power under the reign of Alfred the Great.

3 THEORY OF ADAPTATION

One of the main goals of this thesis is to compare the Netflix adaptation with Cornwell's novels. This chapter will establish what adaptation is and outline the key aspects that should be considered when creating one.

Adaptation is a type of transfer of a story from one medium to another. The main goal of adaptation should always be to bring a new audience.⁶² As Hutcheon mentions, "Adaptations are often compared to translations. Just as there is no such thing as a literal translation, there can be no literal adaptation."⁶³ Thus, adaptation will always have to alter some aspects of the original work. As Hutcheon wrote herself, "Adaptation is a form of repetition without replication."⁶⁴ It is impossible to recreate the story, settings, etc., completely. There are many reasons for this fact, such as nowadays politics of the world, customs and traditions, language itself and many more.⁶⁵ Thus, to fit everything from the source is a very difficult, but achievable, task. However, certain elements must often be omitted from the source material to suit the medium into which the story is being adapted, or due to other constraints. This is a question of fidelity, in other words, how adaptation is close to the related work which is being adapted.⁶⁶

When creating an adaptation, it is essential to consider the following key aspects of adaptation:⁶⁷

Firstly, the final work itself needs to be established as an adaptation. For example, the right medium and genre need to be chosen (such as from a novel to a screen). It is important to openly acknowledge that the given work is an adaptation to avoid confusion of the audience and possible plagiarism.⁶⁸ This, in turn, raises the question of what will be adapted, and to what degree fidelity to the source material should be maintained.

Secondly, as Hutcheon mentioned, "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation."⁶⁹ This can create a lot of controversy, mainly within films which are based on popular novels. As a result, the creators must be careful and account

⁶² Hutcheon, Linda, Siobhan O'Flynn, *Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁶³ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 16.

⁶⁴ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*. xviii.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 20.

⁶⁷ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

⁶⁸ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 9.

⁶⁹ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 8.

for this fact.⁷⁰ The creators should not omit the importance of fidelity, due to the simple fact of the already existing audience of the previous work. “The more rabid the fans, the more disappointed they can potentially be...”⁷¹ Hutcheon wrote, meanwhile pointing out an example of the director of Harry Potter who mentioned how he would be crucified by the fans if he did not follow the novels.⁷² Thus, the intertextuality of adaptation will always be connected to another work, with bigger or smaller deviations. The audience will react differently if they have seen, read, or played the source material. Hutcheon further mentions the example of Paul Anderson’s movie, *Resident Evil* (2002) and the difference in perception of the audience who had played the game versus those who have not.⁷³

“An adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 123.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 8

⁷⁴ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 9

4 INTRODUCTION OF THE ANALYSIS.

For the sake of clarity and structure, the analysis has been divided into sections:

The first section will encompass the differences that do not fit into any of the following sections. The second section will be devoted to characters; it will encompass the characters, what role they play in the story, and whether there is a difference between the novels and the adaptation. Furthermore, this chapter will give information about their historical doubles or inspirations (where applicable). The third section will be focused on places; It will describe the places mentioned in the books and their adaptation with their historical counterparts (where applicable). And finally, the last section will be devoted to the plot itself; it will give a thorough analysis of the differences that were made in the adaptation. At the same time, this section will also cover the religious and cultural aspects from the historical point of view (where applicable).

4.1 Early observations and notes

This Chapter will introduce aspects which need to be considered and do not fit into any other chapter.

Firstly, it is important to point out the narrative situation of the books and the series. The story of the books is narrated from the first-person narration by Uhtred; Therefore, describing what was happening to Uhtred and around Uhtred alone. Meanwhile, the Netflix adaptation is narrated from a third-person point of view where the narrator is omniscient. Showing the audience what is happening, for example, in Wessex when Uhtred is in the North. For the sake of comparison, only scenes with Uhtred will be mentioned.

Secondly, throughout the novels, Uhtred mentions the usage of his helmet, yet in the adaptation, helmets are scarcely used. I believe that this change may have been influenced by the conventions of the film industry, where actors are often cast and marketed based on their appearance.

The main goal of this thesis is to showcase the historical aspects and events that happened during the reign of Alfred the Great which lasted from the years 871 until 899⁷⁵ used in selected Bernard's *The Last Kingdom* novels and their TV Analysis compares the fidelity of adaptation to novels and shows the changes in the plot, narration, and characters

⁷⁵ Schama, Simon. *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World 3000 B.C.-1603 A.D.*, 59.

within the novels and the adaptation, while pointing out historical aspects where possible. It is crucial to remember what Hutcheon has said: “An adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.”⁷⁶

4.2 Characters: Who’ Who

This Chapter will introduce the prominent characters of the books and the adaptation, providing historical context where applicable.

4.2.1 Real-life characters

Alfred the Great – the king of Wessex; his dream is to unify the kingdoms under one – The Kingdom of England.⁷⁷ He instructed his scholars to write down the history in the making during his reign, also known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. Yet, their trustworthiness is debatable.⁷⁸ King Alfred is responsible for the unification of Wessex and Mercia when he married off his daughter, Lady Aethelflaed, to Lord Aethelred of Mercia.⁷⁹ He is portrayed as a very pious king and a scholar who suffers from some unknown illness. According to Morris, “Whatever it was, it lasted a long time, periodically plaguing him until the final years of his life, and the king interpreted it as a burden sent by God to test him.”⁸⁰ King Alfred is truthfully depicted in the novels and the TV adaptation as well; both show Alfred as a pious king interested in scholarship, suffering from an illness. The TV adaptation is more explicit with Alfred’s dream of England in comparison to the novels.

Aethelwold – nephew of Alfred; while growing up, he was seen as unfit to rule, so his father, Aethelred of Wessex, decided to give the crown to Alfred instead.⁸¹ According to Morris, after the death of Alfred the Great, Edward (Alfred’s firstborn son) inherited the crown of Wessex, and Aethelwold started a rebellion which Edward wanted to quickly extinguish. Under the threat of siege, Aethelwold escaped to Danelaw to seek refuge.⁸² Later on, Aethelwold is found dead after the battle of Holme, where he sided with the Vikings.⁸³ In

⁷⁶ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 9

⁷⁷ Nelson, Janet L. *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others*. 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), 47.

⁷⁸ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 48.

⁷⁹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 382.

⁸⁰ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 208.

⁸¹ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 251.

⁸² Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 252.

⁸³ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 255.

the novels and the adaptation, Aethelwold is depicted as a throne claimant and a drunk, and everyone ignores him. It is in the later novels and series where he joins the Vikings and fights against Uhtred and Edward (son of Alfred).

Lady Aelswith – wife of Alfred, mother of Edward, Aethelflaed. In both the TV adaptation and the novels, she loves Alfred and supports him very dearly; she is also very pious and thus biased towards the Danes and Uhtred himself.

Lady Aethelflaed – daughter of Alfred. She marries Lord Aethelred of Mercia; Cornwell himself believes that “the marriage was not made in heaven.”⁸⁴ When Aethelred falls ill during his late reign, Aethelflaed takes over and rules Mercia instead of him.⁸⁵ In the novels and the adaptation, she is described as a young girl with a passion for warfare and politics, she is very fond of Uhtred. In the later novels and seasons of the TV adaptation, she becomes the ruler of Mercia.

Guthrum – a real-life Viking who attacked Wessex and lost the battle of Ethandun. He was baptized afterwards and signed the treaty of Wedmore. Therefore, creating the Danelaw and became the king of East Anglia.⁸⁶ He is referenced but does not make an active appearance in the second season of the series.

Lord Aethelred of Mercia – Marries Lady Aethelflaed, King Alfred’s daughter to bond the kingdom of Mercia with the kingdom of Wessex.⁸⁷ In the books, he introduces as Uhtred’s cousin, but this is not mentioned in the adaptation at all.

Osferth – Bastard of Alfred. According to Nelson, Osferth’s name is referenced in Alfred’s will, where he mentions him as a kinsman.⁸⁸ She further argued that Osferth had to hold an important position in the court, and he was possibly his bastard.⁸⁹ In the TV adaptation and novels he is depicted as a scared young monk who wishes to serve in Uhtred’s household guards. In the books, Uhtred accepts him out of spite to agitate Alfred; meanwhile, in the series, he accepts him into the household guard thanks to the memory of Leofric, who was Uhtred’s good friend.

⁸⁴ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 363.

⁸⁵ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 256.

⁸⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 381.

⁸⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 382.

⁸⁸ Nelson, Janet L. *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others*. 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

4.2.2 Inspired characters:

Uhtred of Bamburgh (the Bold) – Cornwell states that he is a descendant of Uhtred, the bold, who was a real historical figure; an ealdorman of Northumbria, who lived in the 10th century.⁹⁰ According to Wiley, Uhtred the Bold truly owned Bebbanburg Castle and was killed in a feud thegn Thurbrand.⁹¹ Therefore, Uhtred of Bebbanburg in the novels and adaptation is a fictional character inspired by Uhtred the Bold. Uhtred is a Saxon raised by Danes, which is the main reason why Uhtred is often seen as an outcast, not being accepted by one or the other side. He eventually finds his place among Alfred's most loyal lords, settles down and starts a family. He never gave up on his birthright to rule Bebbanburg Castle, but that is a story of later novels and seasons.

Ivarr Lothbrok – Cornwell drew inspiration from the real-life Ivarr Ragnarson, a son of Ragnar Lothbrok. "There was Ivarr, but I have taken vast liberties with his life. He is chiefly notable for his successors who will cause much trouble in the north."⁹²

Bishop Erkenwald – In the book, he is the one performing a dirty water ritual, appointed as a civil governor of Lundene by Alfred. He may have been inspired by Saint Erkenwald, a bishop of London.⁹³

4.2.3 Fictional characters:

King Guthred – A pagan slave chosen by an abbot to be the king of Northumbria. He is easily persuaded, especially by Abbot Eadred.

Abbot Eadred – In his dream, Saint Cuthbert shows Eadred that Guthred is to be the king of Northumbria. It is Abbot Eadred who convinces King Guthred to enslave Uhtred.

Haestan – A Viking who first appears in York, where Uhtred saves him from an angry mob of peasants. He is a lieutenant of Eric and Sigefrid. In the *Sword Song*, he betrays them and wants to kidnap Lady Aethelflaed for himself.

Hild – A nun saved by Uhtred from being raped. In the books, she is a lover, but in the series, she is a very good and trusted friend.

⁹⁰ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 356.

⁹¹ Lapidge, Michael, John Blair, Simon Keynes, and Donald Scragg, *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*. (Wiley Blackwell, 2014.), 56, 188.

⁹² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 383.

⁹³ Whatley, Gordon. "Heathens and Saints: St. Erkenwald in Its Legendary Context." *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (April 1986): 330–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2854043>.

Stiorra – Stiorra appears in both the book and series; she is the daughter of Uhtred. She is a fictional character and plays a more important role in the next books and seasons.

Steapa – Steapa appears in both book and series; he is a warrior, loyal to Alfred and, to a degree, a friend of Uhtred.

Brida – Brida, a Saxon raised by Danes, shares her childhood with Uhtred. She eventually becomes his first lover and a trusted friend. She is mentioned in *The Lord of the North* only, saving Uhtred from slavery with Ragnar.

Kjartan and Sven (books and series) – These two are the main antagonists in the book *The lord of the North* (2006). In the Last Kingdom novels and adaptation, Kjartan served Ragnar (Ragnar's father – same name) as lieutenant, but young Sven offended Thyra by stripping her naked in the very first book and season. When Ragnar, the father, learns about this, he takes Sven's eye. Later, Kjartan sets fire to Ragnar's home, killing the entire family except for Thyra, who is taken captive. Uhtred and Ragnar are away at the time, causing a blood feud. Both are fictional characters.⁹⁴

Aelfric of Bebbanburg – Uhtred's uncle, who wants Uhtred dead so that Bebbanburg has no other claimants than Aelfric's son. Most likely a work of fiction. I have not found any historical evidence about him.

Sigefrid and Erik – The main antagonists in the book *Sword Song* (2007). The brothers reside in Lunden and later in Beamfleot, where they take the captured king's daughter. Their timeline in the book differs from the series. In my opinion, the brothers appeared sooner in the adaptation due to budget constraints of casting additional actors. Both are fictional characters.

Gisela – Wife of Uhtred, sister of Guthred. Even though she is Guthred's sister (who has a real-life counterpart) fictional character.⁹⁵

Thyra – Sister of Uhtred. She has been held captive by Kjartan at Dunholm since his act of betrayal against Ragnar, the father of Thyra and Ragnar. After her rescue, she marries Beocca.

Father Pyrlig – a warrior priest, an envoy and a spy for Alfred.

⁹⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 383.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Ragnar – Brother of Uhtred, who will take the Dunholm fortress for himself. Fictional character.⁹⁶

Sihric – bastard of Kjartan, will become one of Uhtred's household guards and a good friend.

Finan – the Irishman, Uhtred met Finan during slavery. Finan joins Uhtred's household guard and a good friend.

Clapa – in *the North of the North*, he is being trained by Uhtred, meanwhile in the *Sword Song*, he becomes Uhtred's household guard and dies on the battlefield.

Halig – Uhtred's first house guard; Dies on the slave ship.

Rypere – In comparison to the books, Rypere appears very rarely in the adaptation. On the other hand, in the books, he plays a more prominent role. He is a member of the Uhtred household guards.

Sverri Ravnson – slave master residing in Iceland.

Aldhelm – A commander of the house guard of lord Aethelred of Mercia, plays an important role in the TV adaptation as an advisor to Aethelred.

4.3 Geography of The Last Kingdom

This chapter will introduce the prominent places of the books and the adaptation, providing historical context where applicable. Cornwell provides a list of places with their historical names. "Doubtless some readers will prefer other versions of the names listed below, but I have usually employed whichever spelling is cited in either Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names for the year nearest or contained within Alfred's reign, 871-899 AD."⁹⁷

Wintanceaster - Winchester, Hampshire. King Alfred's capital city of Wessex.

Lundene – London. Occupied by the brothers, Uhtred lays a siege to Lundene, possibly inspired by the real siege of London in 886 AD.

Bebbanburg – Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland. The land on which Uhtred has a claim of ownership due to his birthright. Nowadays, Bamburgh Castle is one of the biggest and oldest castles still inhabited in the United Kingdom.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 383.

⁹⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, Place Names.

⁹⁸ "Castle" Bamburgh Castle, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.bamburghcastle.com/castle/>

Cumbraland – Cumbria. King Guthred's capital city of Northumbria.

Coccham – Cookham, Berkshire. Uhtred's estate, given to him by King Alfred after the battle of Ethandun. This took place in the book *The Pale Horseman* (2005) and the first season of *The Last Kingdom*.

Beamfleot – Benfleet, Essex. Beamfleot fortress truly existed, and the battle of Beamfleot happened later on during the reign of Alfred the Great. This battle happens in the third season of the adaptation, which is not in the scope of this thesis.

Eoferwic – York, an important place for the start of the book *The Lords of the North* (2006), which starts with the Anglo-Saxon rebellion of Eoferwic. According to Schama, Eoferwic fell into the hands of the Vikings in 867, and by 876, Northumbria was divided by numerous Viking Jarls.⁹⁹

4.4 Storyline fidelity and historical context

The whole *Last Kingdom* tells a story of Uhtred of Bebbanburg, who was raised by his captive Danish family who raided Northumbria and killed his Saxon family when he was little. This created a personality disorder since he is having a hard time being accepted into one of the other social groups – Saxons versus Danes. The books serve as a referential point, from which I will then connect how the TV adaptation dealt with the given segment of a plot.

4.4.1 The Lords of The North

The beginning is the same as in the series. Uhtred, Halig and the nun Hild go North because of destiny, and their first steps lead to Eoferwic, previously occupied by Ivarr Lothbrok, a Danish warlord who went to fight Scots who were threatening to take all of Northumbria.¹⁰⁰

Here is the first plot deviation. In the adaptation, the city of Eoferwic is occupied by the brothers, Erik and Siegfried, who leave the city to fight off the Scots. However, the first appearance of the brothers is in the fourth book, *Sword Song*. They depart, leaving Heaston in command of the remaining forces in the city. From the historical point of view, Eoferwic

⁹⁹ Schama, Simon. *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World 3000 B.C.-1603 A.D.*, 56.

¹⁰⁰ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 18.

(nowadays York) truly belonged to the Vikings, and it was led by Ivarr the Boneless.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Ivarr was indeed raiding not only Ireland, but Northumbria as well.¹⁰²

In the book, after Ivarr leaves, a local priest named Hrothweard incites a rebellion, leading the citizens to kill the remaining garrison. Uhtred wants to get furthest from the city as possible before “Ivarr’s wrath descends on it.”¹⁰³ Later on, he meets with Bolti, a Danish merchant who survived the onslaught thanks to his wife being Saxon, at a tavern called Crossed Swords. Bolti talks to Uhtred about escorting him and his family through Kjartan land for a price. Uhtred agrees and escorts Bolti and his family north. Until they came across a slave fair near a village, where the passing citizens had to pay a toll to Kjartan’s men. Before reaching the place, Uhtred comes up with a disguise. He finds a skull of an animal and attaches it to his helmet, making him look like a shadow-walker. “I am Thorkild the lepper and you will now go and deal with them”¹⁰⁴ Uhtred says to Bolti while they go into the slave fair where Sven the one-eyed (Kjartan’s son) is collecting the toll for passing. Uhtred, disguised as a Shadow-walker lepper, strikes one of Sven’s men and overpowers Sven, taking him as a hostage. “‘he dies if you attack,’ I said to Egil, touching Sven with Serpent-Breath.”¹⁰⁵ (Here is the first mention of Uhtred’s swords, the Serpent-Breath. In the series, names of swords and ships are not mentioned at all. This is another deviation in fidelity.) Uhtred then goes on, “I am Thorkil the Lepper, and I died a long time ago, but Odin has sent me from the corpse-hall to take the souls of Kjartan and his son.”¹⁰⁶ With this deception, Uhtred commands the rest of Sven’s men to go back to the village and await Sven. Uhtred then releases all the slaves, and among the many freed slaves was Guthred, son of Hardicnut, a legitimate descendant of the previous king before Ivarr. Guthred asked Uhtred to serve under his command.

This whole passage is told differently in the Netflix adaptation. Firstly, when Uhtred is in Eoferwic, he meets Father Beocca at the tavern instead of Bolti. Father Beocca then tells Uhtred that he is travelling with brother Threw and lepper men who are sitting on a cart which is filled with a chest full of silver from Alfred, and that this silver is to be used as a ransom for Guthred.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, similarly to the book, they travel North but deliberately to

¹⁰¹ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 262.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 1, 19:35

that slave fair, where Uhtred takes on the deceptive role as well with the help of the lepper men who came in riding horses, striking fear into Sven's men all around them.¹⁰⁸ Then a fight starts, Uhtred cuts down a few enemies, catches Sven and pins him to the ground. Then orders the rest of the men to leave the place.¹⁰⁹ Uhtred knocks Sven unconscious and leaves him to wander into the forest. Meanwhile, they release the slaves and find Guthred.

From a historical perspective, as mentioned in the 1.1.2 Hierarchy of Power chapter of this thesis, slaves were an important commodity. Furthermore, the Shadow-walker aspect played an important role in the Old Norse religion, and they struck fear in the hearts of the Danes. Guthred, the same as Ivarr, could be a possible character inspired by real-life counterparts. Both have been mentioned in chapter 4.2.2.

The book continues describing how Kjartan sends Tekil to attack Uhtred and Guthred. He takes them to Shingle Island, where Uhtred gained consciousness. Tekil tells Uhtred how he was instructed by Sven to take Uhtred's eye as revenge.¹¹⁰ Uhtred and Guthred are then saved by Clapa and Guthred's House guard troops. Leaving three survivors, including Sithric and Tekil. Tekil is later interrogated by Uhtred, who wants to know about Dunholm's weaknesses, and apparently, there are none. Tekil at first does not want to talk at all, but under the threat of dying without a sword (denying him entry to Valhalla), eventually he does speak and tells him everything, including Thyra (Ragnar's and Uhtred's sister), who is still alive.¹¹¹ He also asks Uhtred to spare Sithric, who is merely a boy and the son of Kjartan, even though there is no affection between them. Abbot Ealdred insists on executing the survivors by hanging or drowning, but Uhtred disapproves of this approach. Instead, he vows to kill Tekil and the others in combat, with a sword in their hands, within the confines of a fighting square. The only survivor is Sithric, whom Uhtred initially interrogates, questioning both his loyalty and whether he is indeed the illegitimate son of Kjartan.¹¹² Sithric admits but adds that there is no love between them.¹¹³ After this chat Uhtred recruits Sithric into his household guards.¹¹⁴ Abbot Ealred does not approve of this practice of a fighting square as it is seen as a religious clash. This further deepens the hate which is brewing inside of him towards Uhtred.

¹⁰⁸ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 1, 33:15

¹⁰⁹ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 1, 33:30

¹¹⁰ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 85.

¹¹¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 96.

¹¹² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 103.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 104.

Once again, there is a deviation in the Netflix adaptation, where Tekil arrives at the camp during midday and attacks in the evening near the stable. He attacks only Uhtred, and it is Halig who notices that Uhtred and the heavily armed men have gone missing from the feast. Therefore, it was Halig and Uhtred's house guard troops who saved him.¹¹⁵ When Halig saves Uhtred, Uhtred commands that he needs one of the attackers alive, and it is Sithric who is left alive to later deliver a message to Kjartan, while the rest of the men are to be decapitated. Sithric is taken as a prisoner demanding to talk to Uhtred, but his demands are ignored until the next day when Sithric surprises Halig during chamber business.¹¹⁶ When Halig and another guard are not looking, he skillfully overcomes them and holds a sword to Halig's throat, demanding to see Uhtred. With Uhtred come Abbot Ealred, King Guthred, and Gisela as well. Sithric then starts negotiating on how he wishes to join Uhtred's household guards.¹¹⁷ Uhtred firstly objects that he is just a Kjartan son. To that, Sithric replies: "No, I am Kjartan bastard son who whelped on a slave girl. And you are Uhtred Ragnarson, and I wish to serve a warrior and a lord, a true lord."¹¹⁸ Uhtred then takes him into his household guard.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the background, Abbot Ealred objects that they should kill Sithric, this request is met with Uhtred's resolute no.¹²⁰ This whole incident is provoking Ealred and further deepening his hate towards Uhtred. At the same time, Uhtred indirectly challenges Guthred's authority. This fact is later used against Uhtred when Abbot Ealred convinces King Guthred to enslave Uhtred.

From a historical point of view, we can see how important it was for Tekil to die with a sword in his hand so that he could enter and feast in Valhalla. This is the most important aspect of the Old Norse religion, and it was discussed in chapter 1.2.2. Furthermore, there is a clear disagreement based solely on the religious dispute between Paganism and Christianity. This whole scene shows the rivalry between religions. Where Uhtred and Sithric represent the old Gods, meanwhile Ealred represents Christianity; in my opinion, since many raids had already happened, Ealred has a strong aversion towards heathens for murdering his brethren. These hate biases have already been explored in chapter 1.2 Religion in the 9th Century England.

¹¹⁵ *The Last Kingdom*, season 2, episode 2, "episode 2," Directed by Peter Hoar, aired March 23, 2017, on Netflix, Netflix, 11:12.

¹¹⁶ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 25:29.

¹¹⁷ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 26:55.

¹¹⁸ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 27:20.

¹¹⁹ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 27:35.

¹²⁰ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 27:55.

The story of the book then continues with Guthred and his army discovering that Ivarr has won the war against the Scots and comes back to Northumbria. He lost most of his men and was wounded. While hiding in the hills, he faced two choices: either be captured by Kjartan or give himself to Guthred. He chose the latter.¹²¹ Uhtred further advice to kill Ivarr but Guthrum refuses under the influence of abbot Ealred.¹²² Guthred then takes care of Ivarr tending to his wounds and promising him Dunholm as a price for alliance.

This is yet another deviance, in the Netflix adaptation there is no Ivarr, instead they find a beaten-up war party belonging to the brothers Erik and Sigefried coming back from Scotland. Uhtred insists on attacking them in the night, yet king Guthred decides to negotiate with the brothers; Guthred says: “The brothers and their men, are useful addition to our own numbers.”¹²³ This is the very first time that the brothers and Uhtred meets. In the books they meet in the following book *Sword Song* (2007). During the negotiations Guthred promises the brothers Kjartan’s fortress – Dunholm. They accept. From the historical point of view. This piece of a plot is pure fiction in both novel and series. The fortress of Dunholm is fictional as well. It could be located in Durham County. Cornwell remarks: “There is no record of a ninth-century fortress at Durham. Though it seems to me unlikely that such an easily defensible site would have been ignored.”¹²⁴ The brothers are also a work of fiction.

Returning to the events of the book, once Ivarr has recovered from his wounds, the entire war party sets out to scout Dunholm. Guthred and Ivarr then meet Kjartan at the gates of Dunholm, where they attempt to negotiate his surrender.¹²⁵ These negotiations were useless and Guthrum orders to go back to Gyruum in order to hunt.¹²⁶ On that same night, Gisela throws runes to ask the three faith spinners about the future – this can be taken as foreshadowing since she attacks her brother Guthred, slapping him for the upcoming betrayal – Guthred sells Uhtred into slavery the next morning, something Gisela had seen in the runes the day before. Guthred takes Uhtred to the beach, tells him to hand over his sword, and go speak to the sailors.¹²⁷ He was sold for spearmen by his uncle Aelred, who had originally demanded Uhtred’s head. This marks the beginning of Uhtred’s slavery.”¹²⁸

¹²¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 128.

¹²² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 130.

¹²³ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 37:53.

¹²⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 383.

¹²⁵ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 147.

¹²⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 148.

¹²⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 155.

¹²⁸ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 159.

There is a small deviation from the story in the adaptation. Gisela does not know about Uhtred's upcoming arrest, and there is no scene in which she performs any kind of pagan ritual. Uhtred is woken by force, put into a cage, and taken away, begging Guthred to kill him rather than sell him into slavery.¹²⁹ This moment marks the end of the second episode.

From the historical side, the three spinners of faith are mentioned. They are also known as the Nornir, who play an important role in the Old Norse religion. They are believed to be responsible for predicting a certain destiny for individuals. This has been explained in chapter 1.2.2 Old Norse religion. Also, the practice of rune casting is mentioned, which also played an important role in the Old Norse religion, but it has been heavily frowned upon by the Christian clergy.

The book continues with the story of what Uhtred goes through during his slavery. Firstly, Uhtred mentions the name of his slave master called Sverri Ravnsen. Secondly, Uhtred then goes on and explains what he was given for attire, how he was shackled to the boat, and talks about the crew and mentions an Irishman called Finan for the first time.¹³⁰ Later, Uhtred has a chance to speak with a slave girl, who tells him how she was first sold to Kjartan and then into slavery. With this information, Uhtred begins to piece everything together.

“Guthred and Ivarr joined my uncle Aelfric, had tried to starve Kjartan into submission, but the winter was hard, their army was struck by diseases, and Kjartan had offered to pay a tribute to all three and they accepted his silver.”¹³¹

This sequence does not occur in the Netflix adaptation. When Uhtred's uncle Aelfric learns that Uhtred is still alive, he simply departs and returns to Bebbanburg. The brothers Sigefried and Eric leave as well and start raiding Northumbria. “Guthred, by saving Uhtred, what you now have is chaos of your own making,”¹³² says Eric. “Chaos,”¹³³ Adds Sigefried. Eric then continues: “If Aelfric is not with us, then the ground has shifted. We will take no part in the siege of Dunholm.”¹³⁴ With that, Guthred stands all alone without his commander

¹²⁹ Hoar, *The Last Kingdom*. Season 2, episode 2, 55:00.

¹³⁰ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 172.

¹³¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 175.

¹³² *The Last Kingdom*, season 2, episode 3, “episode 3,” Directed by Jon East, aired March 30, 2017, on Netflix, Netflix, 6:50

¹³³ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 7:00.

¹³⁴ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 7:14.

or allies and blames Abbot Aelred. Abbot tries to redeem himself, coming up with the idea of giving Gisela's hand in marriage to Aelfric.

The plot then continues, mentioning how on one of the trading voyages, an unknown red warship starts to chase Svarri's trading ship. Svarri thinks that this ship belongs to pirates and successfully avoids her and loses her in shallow waters.¹³⁵ The book then describes two more meetings with this red ship, but Svarri always manages to escape. One day, Sverri returns to Northumbria for a slave fair held on a beach. There, Sven is waiting for him and discovers that Uhtred is among the slaves. It is at this moment that Uhtred gathers the last of his strength and attempts to escape, but fails.¹³⁶ All of a sudden, the red ship appears, and Vikings come ashore, and a skirmish begins.¹³⁷ After the skirmish, the readers get to know that the leader of the red ship was Ragnar, Uhtred's brother, with Steapa (Alfred's trusted warrior). Therefore, Uhtred is saved by Steapa, who gets rid of his shackles. Uhtred mentions, "I've worn them for more than two years."¹³⁸ They free Finan as well from the shackles, and Uhtred carves the letter S into Sverri's bare chest. After that, he embraced Ragnar and spoke with him. This moment marks the turning point in which Uhtred and Finan are rescued from slavery, while Sverri, in turn, becomes a slave himself. After a brief conversation between the brothers, Finan proposes taking Sverri's ship along with a group of men to sail back to Sverri's home, to rob him of his wealth, and ultimately kill him.

This is largely changed in the Netflix adaptation, in comparison to the book, the attempt to escape happens when Uhtred, Halig, Finan and other slaves are cutting down a tree when they are in Iceland. This escape ends up with them being caught, and Halig, who gets shot by an arrow, gets tied up to the prow of the ship, dying slowly. Svarri then instructs Uhtred to pull so that he can grant Halig the peace of death.¹³⁹ After that, the beach slave fair remains mostly the same, but there are no signs of the red ship. Uhtred does not try to escape from Sven at the slave fair. Instead, Sven gives Uhtred a sword and wants to fight him. Uhtred is far too weak to be any danger to him, and after an attempt to swing the sword, he falls onto his knees. Sven then gets ready to swing when suddenly, a cavalry charge happens. After a small skirmish, Uhtred recognizes Ragnar and embraces him. Ragnar then orders the slaves to be freed. When Finan is freed, he notices how Svarri wants to quietly leave when Finan

¹³⁵ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 181-182.

¹³⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 196.

¹³⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 198

¹³⁸ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 199.

¹³⁹ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 36:32.

grabs a sword and runs it through Svarri's throat with the word: "Pull."¹⁴⁰ There are no historical events to point out; this whole plot is a fiction to attract the audience. From the fidelity point of view, we can see the minor changes, which I suspect were done for a dramatic effect.

Continuing with the book story, Finan goes for Svarri's wealth, and Uhtred goes back to Winchester, where he is supposed to meet with Alfred, but he first finds Hild, who is now an abbess with a nunnery and keeps his gear.¹⁴¹ Uhtred breaks down in tears when he receives all of his gear, especially his two swords, Wasp-sting and Serpents-breath. Hild asks Uhtred not to take revenge on King Guthred, and Uhtred then makes an oath that he will always protect and support Hild and her nunnery. Hild then encourages Uhtred to go and see Gisele in Northumbria. Uhtred tries to show no empathy, thinking that she is already married. "She swore to wait for you."¹⁴² Hild replies.

In the adaptation, this sequence is altered. Firstly, Hild is included as a member of the rescuing party. The following day, she cares for Uhtred by washing him, trimming his beard, and giving him a haircut. She then returns his belongings to him. "How did Alfred come to know of my fate? ... You?... I will not forget. You will always have my protection."¹⁴³ Therefore, achieving a small degree of fidelity with the oath of protection.

From now until the end of the fourth episode, the adaptation plot differs in the sequence of the story, this creates a time gap where the adaptation took creative license and, for the first time, they have altered the continuity of events. Due to a matter of simplicity, an extensive part of the book will be explained, and the examination of changes will follow.

The book moves on to the actual meeting of Ragnar, Uhtred and King Alfred, who wants to free Ragnar after the celebration of the opening of a new church that was built. When they are dismissed, Uhtred runs into Offa, a Mercian who has news from Northumbria. He tells how his uncle Aelfric wants peace and sees Guthred as the King of Northumbria. Kjartan still lives in Dunholm and thrives.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, although Ivarr appears to be on good terms with Guthred, he is secretly building an army intending to eventually overthrow him. Upon hearing this news, Uhtred inquires about Gisela, who has taken refuge in a nunnery, despite being a pagan. It is Kjartan who wants her hand in marriage for his son, Sven, since this

¹⁴⁰ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 42:02.

¹⁴¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 213.

¹⁴² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 215.

¹⁴³ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 48:05.

¹⁴⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 229.

would mean a claim on the throne of Northumbria for Kjartan.¹⁴⁵ After hearing the news from Offa, Uhtred participates in the opening of the new church with Ragnar and Brida. They meet Father Beocca, who tells them that they will be summoned before the king.¹⁴⁶ King Alfred wants to send an emissary to Guhtred and someone to advise him. Alfred asks Uhtred to be the escort, and Uhtred will oblige, thinking of saving Gisela. It is at this point that King Alfred demands an oath from Uhtred, using the fact that he ordered the expedition which ultimately rescued Uhtred from slavery as leverage.¹⁴⁷ Although Uhtred agrees reluctantly, King Alfred then instructs him to assist Guthred in removing Ivarr. Following this, Alfred discusses the future of Ragnar, to which Uhtred responds that Ragnar wishes to fight Kjartan. Subsequently, Uhtred and Beocca embark on a journey to Northumbria. During their travels, Uhtred learns from the monk Wulther that Gisela has married his uncle Aelfric in a proxy marriage ceremony.¹⁴⁸

This part is altered in the adaptation from the first moments of Uhtred being freed from slavery. He goes to save Gisela immediately after his recovery, in a church where the priests had married her to Uhtred's uncle Aelfric via proxy. Uhtred saves her, but Abbot Ealred insists that she is already married, making Uhtred lose his temper and kill Abbot Ealred.¹⁴⁹ Afterwards, Uhtred, Ragnar, Gisela, Finan, and Hild return to Wessex, where King Alfred presents Uhtred with an ultimatum regarding Ragnar's captivity: either Uhtred must swear an oath, or Ragnar will be held accountable for the death of Abbot Ealdred. "You are a great warrior, Uhtred. You are a Saxon who is also a Dane. The very embodiment of the England that must emerge. I request that you enter my service."¹⁵⁰ Uhtred agrees, and with that the episode 3 ends.

Coming back to the story of the book, now Ragnar's army is marching to help Guhtred, who is held captive in Eufoerwic. They free him of his captors, and with him, there is Gisela as well. It is now where Uhtred finally meets her again after years of slavery.¹⁵¹ Later on, Uhtred goes with Gisela to a church where brother Jaenberth (Aelfric's man who orchestrated Uhtred's slavery and the proxy marriage) gets killed.¹⁵² After this, the united

¹⁴⁵ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 230.

¹⁴⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 241.

¹⁴⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 246.

¹⁴⁸ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 252.

¹⁴⁹ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 53:45.

¹⁵⁰ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 3, 57:10.

¹⁵¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 281.

¹⁵² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 290.

forces of Uhtred, Ragnar and Guthred move on to attack Dunholm, which is occupied by Kjartan.

This is a key moment where adaptation takes a creative license again. The book continues with Uhtred first defeating Kjartan at Dunholm, after which he encounters Ivarr in battle. In contrast, the adaptation reverses this sequence: Uhtred eliminates the brothers first and then, together with Ragnar, attacks Dunholm.

As the narrative progresses, Uhtred prepares to launch an assault on Dunholm.¹⁵³ With Sithric's assistance, he devises a plan that relies on accessing a door situated in front of the well supplying the fortress with water. Reaching this entrance requires passing through a river and climbing a steep slope.¹⁵⁴ Uhtred's strategy involves a small group sneaking into Dunholm via the well door to open the main gate for the main attacking force. Gisela participates in the initial phase of clearing the well, wearing armor, but is then instructed to remain behind for her own safety.¹⁵⁵ This differs from the adaptation, where it is Hild who helps them get inside Dunholm and joins all the fights. When they get inside and are unnoticed, Uhtred mentions a planted ash tree near the main hall, which is there to symbolize Yggdrasil¹⁵⁶ (This detail is not shown in the adaptation at all), the cosmic tree mentioned in chapter 1.2.2 Old Norse religion of this work. Shortly after this observation, Kjartan's men notice their presence, and a fight breaks out. Uhtred and his group are outnumbered, but dogs emerge from the main hall and come to their aid. It is Thyra, Ragnar's and Uhtred's sister, who commands them. Meanwhile, two shield walls clash in the courtyard while Finan fights on the ramparts, where Sven is directing the remainder of Kjartan's men. Finan intends to kill Sven but stops when he hears Thyra scream that Sven is hers to kill.¹⁵⁷ At that moment, Sven is torn apart by Thyra's dogs. Kjartan, upon hearing Sven's screams, steps out from the shield wall and challenges Ragnar to a duel, "I've killed your father, and I will kill you."¹⁵⁸ The duel begins, and Ragnar manages to strike Kjartan's sleeve, severing the tendons in his sword hand.¹⁵⁹ This becomes the turning point that leads to Kjartan's death. Before delivering the final blow, Ragnar disarms Kjartan completely, thereby denying him entry to Valhalla.

¹⁵³ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 305.

¹⁵⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 307.

¹⁵⁵ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 330.

¹⁵⁶ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 332.

¹⁵⁷ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 343.

¹⁵⁸ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 345.

¹⁵⁹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 347.

With this, the battle for Dunholm is over. In the aftermath, Thyra reproaches Ragnar for leaving her and tries to kill him in her anger. It is Father Beocca who intervenes.¹⁶⁰ grabbing and shaking her while praying to God to drive out the demon tormenting Thyra. She calms down and weeps, while Guthrum decides to give Dunholm to Ragnar as a thank you for his help.¹⁶¹ The next morning, they go on a journey to find Ivarr. They find Ivarr leading a big army, and a meeting happens. Uhtred and Ivarr exchanged insults, but when Uhtred reminded Ivarr of his lost battle with the Scots, he turned his horse and rushed to attack Uhtred.¹⁶² Uhtred wins the duel and grants Ivarr an honorable death with a sword in his hand, which would allow him to enter the halls of Valhalla.¹⁶³ With Ivarr's death, Uhtred turns to his men, shouting that their leader is dead so that they should join their forces to avoid death. With that, the book *The Lords of the North* (2006) ends.

From the historical and religious perspective, the tree Yggdrasil is mentioned, as well as the entry to Valhalla. Both of these aspects of the Old Norse faith were discussed in chapter 1.2.2 Old Norse religion. According to Cornwell himself, Dunholm is a fictional place¹⁶⁴ and so is the battle itself. To sum it up, *The Lords of The North* (2006) covers how Uhtred became a kingmaker who will later betray him and sell him into slavery. Historically, there are not that many events which would be accurate or which would happen. It is mostly a work of fiction. In contrast, there are plenty of details which played an important role in both religious and cultural aspects of the era.

As previously mentioned, the adaptation exercises creative license by presenting certain events in a different sequence. Specifically, Uhtred confronts the brothers before the siege of Dunholm. Accompanied by a small group of men, he attacks the brothers' open camp. Uhtred's objective is to find and kill Sigefried; although he partially succeeds by severing Sigefried's hand and taking him hostage, the camp is quickly alarmed. When Eric arrives to investigate the commotion, negotiations begin for his brother's life,¹⁶⁵ while Sigefried demands that Uhtred be killed.¹⁶⁶ Ultimately, the negotiations are successful, and

¹⁶⁰ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 348.

¹⁶¹ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 353.

¹⁶² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 369-370.

¹⁶³ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 374.

¹⁶⁴ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 383.

¹⁶⁵ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 23:20.

¹⁶⁶ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 23:25.

Uhtred's squad is allowed to leave.¹⁶⁷ This development serves as a narrative connection to the upcoming episodes.

Following this attack, Uhtred returns to Guthred and presents him with Sigefried's severed hand as proof that the brothers no longer pose a threat. After a brief argument concerning Uhtred's prior enslavement, Uhtred demands that the men attack Dunholm. Guthred responds with an apology.¹⁶⁸

After that, Guthred leaves, and Ragnar comes to check on Uhtred, asking what Guthred had said. Uhtred then tells him that Guthred agreed to leave Dunholm to Ragnar.¹⁶⁹ The story of the adaptation then continues onto the siege of Dunholm. Where just as in the book Uhtred with small squad infiltrates Dunholm by the water spring gate, one small detail is that it is Hild who is in the squad instead of Gisela.¹⁷⁰ The siege of Dunholm follows the story of the book very closely except two minor differences, firstly Thyra does not leave the main hall with the dogs until the fights are over, but she does kill Sven when he visits her inside the hall.¹⁷¹ Secondly, during the duel, Ragnar does not sever Kjartan's tendons but instead pierces his arm when he manages to kick him to the ground.¹⁷² During this scene, the adaptation uses the same lines which were used in the book, when Kjartan is provoking Ragnar into attacking, he says: "I've killed your father, and I will kill you."¹⁷³ and "your sister was a good whore."¹⁷⁴ These lines are used before the duel fully starts.¹⁷⁵ Coming back to the duel, Ragnar takes Kjartan's sword away from him, denying him access to Valhalla. After Kjartan's death, Thyra emerges to kill Uhtred and Ragnar exactly as described in the book.¹⁷⁶ It is Father Beocca who steps into Thyra's way, stops her and calms her down. This whole scene shows very detailed fidelity. With the death of Kjartan, the emancipation of Thyra and Dunholm being captured, the fourth episode ends.

From historical and religious perspective, the Norse society allowed women to fight alongside men, these women warriors were regarded as shield sisters and often viewed ss

¹⁶⁷ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 24:15.

¹⁶⁸ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 31:00

¹⁶⁹ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 33:06.

¹⁷⁰ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 37:15

¹⁷¹ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 46:26

¹⁷² East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 48:42.

¹⁷³ Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 345.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 48:00.

¹⁷⁶ East, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 4, 51:01.

the Valkyries from the Old Norse faith. The task of Valkyries was to take the soul of dead warriors into Valhalla.¹⁷⁷

4.4.2 Sword Song

Shifting over to the second book, *Sword Song* (2007). It starts with a prologue where Uhtred describes how they are laying an ambush for the Danes. Uhtred waits, since he did not want anyone to escape and orders his men to take off their helmets so they would not be spotted.¹⁷⁸

In the adaptation, this ambush and dialogue happen as well. From a historical point of view, here we can read the description of armor which was usually worn in the 9th century.¹⁷⁹ Helmet played an important part of the armor as well. In the adaptation helmets are used scarcely by the main characters since they would obscure the actor's faces, faces play an important role in almost every movie or series.

The book, after this prologue, continues with a dialogue between Uhtred and Aethelwold where Aethelwold is surprisingly sober (for once)¹⁸⁰ and visits Uhtred at his estate, Coccham and tells Uhtred about a dead man who spoke to him and said that he is to be the King of Wessex and Uhtred is supposed to be the King of Mercia.¹⁸¹ Aethelwold then goes on and explains how Bjorn (the dead man) heard it from the three sisters themselves.¹⁸²

Here, the adaptation follows exactly the book "Bjorn heard it from the three spinners."¹⁸³ Achieving fidelity and therefore, the adaptation is staying true to the novels. From a historical perspective, the three spinners of fate played an important role in the Old Norse religion. They are believed to be responsible for predicting a certain destiny for individuals. This has been explained in chapter 1.2.2 Old Norse religion. They are never depicted in the adaptation, nor are they described in visual detail in the novels. Nevertheless, their purpose in both the novels and the adaptation remains faithful to that of their mythical counterparts.

The narrative continues. The following day, a Danish trader named Ulf, who serves as Uhtred's spy, arrives in Coccham to deliver news from Lundene and Beamfleot. Uhtred

¹⁷⁷ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "The Culture of Old Norse Religion" in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Routledge, 2008), 238.

¹⁷⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 6.

¹⁷⁹ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 342.

¹⁸⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 19.

¹⁸¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 22.

¹⁸² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 23.

¹⁸³ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 8:50.

inquires whether Ulf has heard any reports of the dead rising again, but Ulf has heard nothing of the sort, remarking, “The dead are best left in Nifelheim, lord.”¹⁸⁴ When they were discussing the news, Alfred and his envoy came to visit Uhtred to check on the progress of a task he had given him of building burhs.¹⁸⁵ Alfred also enquires about the fyrd not willing to work on the burh, and Uhtred explains how he kept them motivated by hanging some men, then further explains what the fyrd is. “The fyrd was the army, raised from a shire, and the fyrd not only help build the burhs, but formed their garrisons.”¹⁸⁶ Alfred then scolds him for hanging men without proper trials since there are laws, then asks about his nephew Aethelwold visit, Uhtred tells him the truth, leaving the dead man part and how he is supposed to be crowned as a King of Mercia, to himself. Alfred then moves on to another topic of how he wants to make Aethelred the true lord of Mercia as a part of a wedding gift and instructs Uhtred to be Aethelred’s adviser when taking Lundene from the Danes.¹⁸⁷ This marks the end of King Alfred’s visit.

From the historical aspect, firstly, “*Nifelheim*”, the realm of the dead, has been discussed in chapter 1.2.2 Norse religion, just under a different spelling, *Niflheimr*. Secondly, the system of burhs truly existed and largely contributed to Alfred the Great.¹⁸⁸ Cornwell himself comments on the Burhs in the historical note at the end of the book. “The Burhal Hildage, as the document is known, prescribe how many men would be needed in each burh, and how these men were to be raised, and it reflect an extraordinary defensive effort.”¹⁸⁹ Thirdly, the system of fyrds is very well explained by Uhtred and it was explained in the chapter 1.1.1 Armies.

In the adaptation, several differences are evident. First, Alfred visits Uhtred and reprimands him for disregarding the law after hearing that Uhtred hanged a man without a proper trial.¹⁹⁰ Alfred emphasizes the importance of adhering to established laws and insists that there should be no trespassing in the Danelaw.¹⁹¹ He then mentions that his nephew, Aethelwold, was seen crossing into Danish territory and asks Uhtred if he knows anything about it, as well as the reason for Aethelwold’s visit to Coccham. Uhtred responds truthfully but omits any mention of the dead man and the fact that he is supposed to be crowned King

¹⁸⁴ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 28.

¹⁸⁵ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 24.

¹⁸⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 31.

¹⁸⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 35.

¹⁸⁸ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 225.

¹⁸⁹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 364.

¹⁹⁰ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 14:30.

¹⁹¹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 15:23.

of Mercia.¹⁹² Uhtred then takes Alfred for a walk around the Burh when they are interrupted by a messenger saying that there is a trader that Uhtred needs to see. Uhtred leaves the King so that he has time for prayers in the local church, which was established by Hild.¹⁹³ The trader is not Ulf (as in the book), but a man named Godwind, coming to Coccham, and he is transporting Eric, who comes to Coccham to see Uhtred. Uhtred asks Erik why he has come to Coccham, and Erik responds that he is there to meet a dead man.¹⁹⁴ Erik continues, explaining that after this encounter, he will return to Frankia to join his brother, and what happens next will depend on Bjorn, the dead man.¹⁹⁵ Erik then elaborates, describing how Earl Guthrum betrayed the gods, and now they seek revenge.¹⁹⁶ Erik then takes his leave, finishing with “Uhtred Ragnarson. You will always have my respect. But do not forget, you were raised as a Dane.”¹⁹⁷ With this sentence, Erik makes Uhtred think about himself and on which side he stands on. This is one of the main themes of all the books and the whole adaptation, and the movie as well.

From a historical perspective, the battle of Ethandun truly happened around the year 878 AD. In the battle, Alfred the Great won against Guthrum's bigger army, which led to Guthrum's baptism and the creation of Danelaw.¹⁹⁸

With Eric being the one who reminds Uhtred of the dead man's appointment in the adaptation, in the book, it is a random petitioner who demands to be heard alone, he delivers an invitation to Uhtred that it is time to visit Bjorn.¹⁹⁹ The book continues with how Uhtred accepts this invitation, and he and his men go to see Bjorn, the dead man. Huda takes them to a farmstead where they are supposed to rest, and when the time is right, the meeting will happen. Uhtred meets Eilaf and Heaston there.²⁰⁰ Those two bring Uhtred to a graveyard not far from the farmstead. With them they bring a captured thief, who will serve as an offering to the dead.²⁰¹ They put a harp string into the mouth of the thief, slit his throat and let the blood drip over the disturbed grave of Bjorn.²⁰² A man rises from the grave and spits out a harp string.

¹⁹² Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 16:05.

¹⁹³ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 17:34.

¹⁹⁴ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 20:51.

¹⁹⁵ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 21:28.

¹⁹⁶ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 22:24.

¹⁹⁷ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 22:30.

¹⁹⁸ Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England, 400-1066*, 254.

¹⁹⁹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 37.

²⁰⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 43.

²⁰¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 47.

²⁰² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 49.

This part of the plot happens a bit later in the adaptation. After both Alfred and Erik leave, Uhtred gathers his household and goes to Winchester to be a part of the royal wedding of Alfred's daughter Aethelflaed with Uhtred's cousin Aethelred. During the journey to Winchester, Sithric asks Uhtred again for permission to marry the girl, Gisela helps to soften Uhtred.²⁰³ Uhtred then meets Father Beocca and Father Pyrlig. Father Beocca introduces Father Pyrlig as a former warrior. Pyrlig replies, "Shield and spear, Lord, but a man tires of sticking ironware into the bellies of other men."²⁰⁴ Meeting father Pyrlig is another deviation from the book since Uhtred meets father Pyrlig much later. Pyrlig leaves, and Beocca is left with Uhtred and tells him that he has fallen in love with Thyra. Uhtred advises him to marry her and bed her.²⁰⁵ After this meeting, Guthred comes across Aethelwold, who is the messenger who is supposed to take Guthred to the meeting with Bjorn (instead of Huda from the book). This meeting is interrupted by Sithric "Don't speak! Don't move! ... You will be glad to hear that I have made my decision: you may marry this girl."²⁰⁶ Sithric is overjoyed but Uhtred calms him down.²⁰⁷ With that, Uhtred leaves Winchester accompanied by his men and Aethelwold to the farmstead where Bjorn resides, there he meets with Heaston and Eilaf, just like in the book. But with a small detail, Uhtred sends Sithric to observe the rise of the dead from far and hidden.²⁰⁸ Except for this small difference, the adaptation follows the story of the book. They kill the thief and spill his blood over the grave²⁰⁹ Bjorn then rises from the grave, spits out the harp string and starts talking.

In both the book and the adaptation, the scenes are the same. Bjorn tells Uhtred and everyone around how the brothers Sigefried and Eric attacked Lundene, and how Uhtred is to be the King of Mercia.²¹⁰ In the adaptation, Eilaf orders his men to bury the body again, and everyone goes back to the farmstead hall to eat and drink. Uhtred discusses with Clapa and Finan what they have just witnessed and if they believe it. Meanwhile, Sithric, who is still hidden, sees how Bjorn wakes up from his grave and leaves.²¹¹ This is how episode 5 ends.

²⁰³ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 32:15.

²⁰⁴ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 34:18.

²⁰⁵ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 36:45.

²⁰⁶ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 39:14.

²⁰⁷ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 39:24.

²⁰⁸ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 41:37.

²⁰⁹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 53:16.

²¹⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 54-55.

²¹¹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 5, 56:55.

Episode 6 starts with the wedding of Father Beocca and Thyra²¹² and then moves onward to the royal wedding of Aethelflaed and Aethelred.²¹³ In comparison, these weddings happen later in the book.

Meanwhile, the book continues with the description of how Uhtred and his company go from the farmstead to Lundene to meet the brothers Sigefried and Eric. Uhtred meets both of them in an old Roman arena. The brothers discussed how they wanted to conquer Wessex, Mercia and East Anglia with the help of Uhtred and, more specifically, with his brother Ragnar. Later, Sigefried mentions that he has some prisoners, all of them are priests, and Sigefried is curious about the death by crucifixion.²¹⁴ Then Sigefried turns to the priests and asks them who they are. One of them says that he serves King Aethelstan. This drives Sigefried mad, and he brutally beats the priest.²¹⁵ Uhtred and his brothers then go on discussing Guthrum's betrayal of the gods and how he threatens them to go away from Lundene. Sigefried wants to kill all the priests, but Uhtred protests and wants to give the fat one a fighting chance, lending him his sword Serpent-Breath.²¹⁶ With that, a fight happens, where to everyone's surprise, the priest maims Sigefried's hand, cutting his wrist mid-way through and severing Sigefried's thumb off.²¹⁷ The priest was Father Pyrlig, who was not yet mentioned in the compared books to this point, but Uhtred already knows him from before.²¹⁸ With this victory, Father Pyrlig earns his freedom and leaves. Uhtred, his company and father Pyrlig leave Lunden by ship. During the voyage, it is Father Pyrlig who tells Uhtred that the dead man rising was a nonsense.²¹⁹ Until this point, Uhtred has been at a crossroads between joining the brothers and staying loyal to King Alfred, whom Uhtred has sworn an oath to.²²⁰ Uhtred swears to Pyrlig that he will hold onto his oath. After this, Uhtred returns to Coccham.²²¹

The book then moves on to Winchester for the royal wedding.²²² Uhtred goes to talk to Steap to discuss the Lundene situation. After that, Aethelwold finds Uhtred and wants to

²¹² *The Last Kingdom*, season 2, episode 6, "episode 6," Directed by Jamie Donoughue, aired April 20, 2017, on Netflix, Netflix, 6:55.

²¹³ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 8:30.

²¹⁴ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 67.

²¹⁵ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 68.

²¹⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 75.

²¹⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 76.

²¹⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 74.

²¹⁹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 84.

²²⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 85.

²²¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 87.

²²² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 91.

discuss the entire dead man situation. Uhtred tells him that he knows that it was all a charade, and Aethelwold does not seem to be surprised, instead, he continues that this is an opportunity for both of them to become kings.²²³ The wedding ends, and Uhtred meets with Osferth, a bastard from King Alfred, a nephew of Leofric, who was a very dear friend to Uhtred in previous books and the first season of the adaptation.

In the adaptation, these events happen in different sequences. The wedding itself follows the book quite closely but happens after Uhtred visits the farmstead where he meets up with Bjorn, then he comes back to Wessex for the royal wedding, and after that, he leaves for Lundene. During the wedding, Aethelwold enquires about Uhtred's decision, but Uhtred lies and tells him that he is undecided.²²⁴ Once the wedding ends, Uhtred moves outside the palace with his men, where they relax but are pestered by Aethelwold's speech about how they should fight against Alfred.²²⁵ Uhtred pays little attention to him, and it is now that they get approached by Osferth.²²⁶ Osferth wishes to join Uhtred's house guards. However, they are interrupted by Steapa, who orders Uhtred to go and see the king at the wedding feast. Before Uhtred leaves, he tells Osferth to find him later.²²⁷ At the feast, King Alfred tells Uhtred that he was seen crossing Watling Street²²⁸ into Daneland, wondering what he was doing there. Uhtred tells them how the brothers have seized Lunden.²²⁹ Aethelred does not believe it, nor does the king and Aldhelm, who is still questioning Uhtred's true motives, together with Lady Aelswith. Uhtred confesses about the invitation and how the brothers asked him to join their side.²³⁰ Lady Aethelflaed then joins the conversation, asking about the brothers' plans. Alfred interjects and orders Uhtred and Aethelred to go to Lundane and negotiate with the brothers.²³¹ This also shows the deviation in the plot of the previous episode from the book. In the book, Uhtred meets the brothers for the first time in the following scene in Lunden, yet in the adaptation, he has already met them when fighting for Guthred, the King of Northumbria.

²²³ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 95.

²²⁴ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 7:41.

²²⁵ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 10:15.

²²⁶ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 10:35.

²²⁷ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 11:31.

²²⁸ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 12:00.

²²⁹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 12:40.

²³⁰ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 13:15.

²³¹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 14:10.

From the historical point of view, Lady Aethelflaed was indeed married to Lord Aethelred of Mercia to bind the two kingdoms together.²³² And according to Nelson, Osferth could indeed be King Alfred's bastard son.²³³

The story of the adaptation then continues, Uhtred arrives in Lundene and meets up with the brothers at the old Roman arena where they are just nailing a man to a cross and Sigefried comments on it, "I do not understand how this kills a man."²³⁴ This is an exact line from the book yet in the book they never started the act itself. Erik does not adore Sigefried's experimenting and wants to cut the head off this man. It is Father Pyrlig, who is in shackles, explains the torture and death of crucifixion.²³⁵ Then Uhtred appears and is welcomed by Sigefrid.²³⁶ Uhtred proceeds to introduce Aethelred, who explains that they are there to negotiate the terms for the brothers' departure from Lunden. "We have just arrived, why would we want to leave?"²³⁷ Eric answers. The two brothers then tease Aethelred, asking for his bride Aethelflaed to be the price for their leave.²³⁸ A discussion begins about how crucifixion kills a man. Uhtred suggests that the priests should fight for their freedom.²³⁹ Sigefrid is enthusiastic about the idea and calls for Bolton, who will face the priest in combat. this is yet another deviation since in the book it is Sigefrid himself who fights the priest and Uhtred in the adaptation does not give father Pyrlig his sword. Pyrlig wins the fight and wants to leave with Uhtred.²⁴⁰ The brothers will not accept silver nor gold; Uhtred and Aethelred return to Wessex where they give the news to Alfred.

In the book after the wedding and meeting Osferth, King Alfred, Uhtred and Aethelred ponder how to defeat the brothers who are encamped in the city of Lunden, which is hard to capture. They make up a plan of two attacks, one from the front gate and the second one, a surprising one, from the river. Uhtred does not approve of this plan since it is risky and will cost many lives, but he does not show his concerns since they would not be heard. He comes up with his own later on. With the official plane, they move to Siege Lunden. When the plan is made, Uhtred realizes that Lady Aethelflaed came with Aethelred, which he does not approve it since it puts her into danger. Nonetheless, it is thanks to her that he

²³² Cornwell, *The Lord of the North*, 382.

²³³ Nelson, Janet L. *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald and Others*. 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), 60.

²³⁴ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 22:56.

²³⁵ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 23:05.

²³⁶ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 24:24.

²³⁷ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 25:12.

²³⁸ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 25:30.

²³⁹ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 27:35.

²⁴⁰ Donoghue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 30:22.

can accomplish his plan of taking Lunden from the brothers. Uhtred wants to take one ship full of men but does not have enough of his own, so he asks her, and she gives them to him under an oath.²⁴¹ Uhtred complies with that; Uhtred gets into the town with a ship, flying, disguising themselves as Danes. Once they are inside, they launch a surprise attack.²⁴²

This aspect is changed drastically in the adaptation, as there is no actual fight. Instead, the brothers are informed that the enemy army has set up camp a mile away.²⁴³ Uhtred and Aethelflaed assault the town and find it completely deserted. They meet up at the Roman arena, where suddenly, a fire starts burning, sending a signal to the brothers. The brothers are attacking the camp, taking Lady Aethelflaed as a prisoner.²⁴⁴

From historical point of view the battle of Lunden truly happened; with this victory Alfred the Great started to be called the “King of Anglo-Saxons.”²⁴⁵ Captivity of Aethelflaed; on the other hand, it never happened, according to Cornwell himself from the historical note chapter provided at the end of the book. “If Aethelflaed ever was captured by the Vikings then the chroniclers were curiously silent about the incident, so that strand of the story is my invention.”²⁴⁶

Back in the book, the story of fighting for Lunden continues. Uhtred managed to defend against Sigefrid's men, and the city is almost theirs. Sigefrid is badly wounded, and Eric comes to negotiate.²⁴⁷ To these negotiations, Uhtred replies that Bjorn lied, and Eric confesses they should not have tried to trick him.²⁴⁸ In the negotiation, Uhtred agrees to let Eric, his brother and their remaining men leave by the ship of his choosing. That marks the end of the siege of Lundane. King Alfred appoints Uhtred to be the commander of the garrison and to repair Lundane, meanwhile, Aethelflaed is appointed as the civilian governor. Thanks to this, Uhtred, his family and his house guard move into Lundane, the same as Lady Aethelflaed with Aethelflaed. The book mentions how Uhtred spends his day rebuilding the city walls and hunting Danish raiders on the river.²⁴⁹ Uhtred then learns that the Danes are gathering at Beamfleet.²⁵⁰ The story goes on and mentions how Aethelflaed gets suspicious

²⁴¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 136.

²⁴² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 143.

²⁴³ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 51:47.

²⁴⁴ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 55:55.

²⁴⁵ Schama, Simon. *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World 3000 B.C.-1603 A.D.*, 59.

²⁴⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 363.

²⁴⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 179.

²⁴⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 180.

²⁴⁹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 222.

²⁵⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 227.

that Lady Aethelflaed has been unfaithful to him and requires the local priest to perform a ritual which would tell whether she was unfaithful to him or not by drinking dirty water.²⁵¹ She drinks it and survives it unscathed; Uhtred interrupts this ritual saving the lady Aethelflaed's dignity and threatening Aethelred.²⁵²

This in the adaptation is mentioned briefly and without Uhtred completely. Back in episode 6, towards the end, when Uhtred and Aethelred gather their army at Coccham to attack Lundane, Aethelred asks Father Beocca to perform said ritual. He complies but, in the end, does not believe Aethelred and drops the cup of dirty water before serving it to Lady Aethelflaed, but accidentally spills the liquid on the ground.²⁵³

From the historical and religious aspect, the bitter water ritual truly existed and functioned the way it is described in the book and the adaptation. As Tomasz Siemieniec mentions, “This is a ritual performed to reveal the guilt of the sinners...”²⁵⁴ On the other hand, according to Cornwell himself, there is no evidence that would suggest Aethelred forced his wife to undergo the ritual.²⁵⁵

The narrative continues as Aethelred takes his ship and lady Aethelflaed to pursue Gunnkel- a new Viking invader whom the brothers are assisting²⁵⁶ They won, but at a great cost, losing half of Aethelred's fleet and with Lady Aethelflaed being captured. This is how Lady Aethelflaed is captured by Sigefrid in the book.²⁵⁷ Uhtred is then sent to Beamfleot to negotiate the price of Lady Aethelflaed.²⁵⁸

In the adaptation, Uhtred refuses to go to Winchester, instead, he returns to Coccham and sends Sithric and Rypere to Beamfleot as spies.²⁵⁹ During Uhtred's stay in Coccham, Osferth comes to see him and is officially accepted as a part of Uhtred's Household. Uhtred wants to go to Winchester when he gets news from Sithric, which comes the next day when Sithric spots Lady Aethelflaed and sends Rypere back to Uhtred.²⁶⁰ When Rypere arrives,

²⁵¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 245.

²⁵² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 249.

²⁵³ Donoughue, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 6, 49:40.

²⁵⁴ Siemieniec, Tomasz. “Numbers 5:11–31 as the Old Testament Background for Revelation 8:11.” *The Biblical Annals* 14, no. 1 (January 30, 2024): 93–113. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.14947>.

²⁵⁵ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 364.

²⁵⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 259.

²⁵⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 259.

²⁵⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 278.

²⁵⁹ *The Last Kingdom*, season 2, episode 7, “episode 7,” Directed by Richard Senior, aired April 27, 2017, on Netflix, Netflix, 7:30.

²⁶⁰ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 21:09.

Uhtred embarks on a trip to Winchester. Where he attends the Witan meeting, afterwards, he is sent to negotiate the price of her ransom.²⁶¹

The plot continues when Uhtred arrives at Beamfleot, but only he and two other men are allowed inside, and they are required to continue on foot rather than on horseback. Once inside Beamfleot, they are initially mocked by the men, but later are accepted by the brothers.

In the adaptation, this happens almost identically except that Uhtred demands that he continue with half of his men, including Aethelred, who is not present during the negotiation in the book, and Heaston agrees but points out that they cannot go on riding.²⁶²

The book continues, they meet the brothers at the courtyard of Beamfleot, where Sigefrid demands that Uhtred win a wrestling match against Weland.²⁶³ It was Steapa who accepted the challenge and won.²⁶⁴ After that, the negotiation started. “By midafternoon they had settled for three thousand pounds of silver and five hundred pounds of gold.”²⁶⁵ After the negotiation, Uhtred stays for a feast where he gets into a talk with Eric. Eric asks about the details of the limits of price limits from Alfred's side. Erik then confesses that he fell in love with Aethelflaed and wants to kill Aethelred, for he does not deserve her and beats her.²⁶⁶ He goes on about how both are in love and how he wants to leave with her alone, betraying his brother during the process and finding shelter at Ragnar's Dunholm.²⁶⁷ Later, Uhtred gets the chance to speak to Aethelflaed as well, and she confesses to him, too, that she loves Eric and wants to run away with him.²⁶⁸ In the end, Uhtred agrees to help them.

In the adaptation, a lot of this is altered. Firstly, Aethelred is the only one being humiliated by Eric. Aethelred offers the first sum of one hundred silver to which Sigefrid cannot believe, and asks Uhtred if he speaks for Alfred. Then Sigefrid calls out for Weland (just like in the book), but there is no wrestling match; instead, Weland knocks out Aethelred.²⁶⁹ They settle at the price of three thousand pounds of silver and five hundred pounds of gold (the same as in the book). During the evening feast, Eric meets with Uhtred and just as in the book, he confesses to him that he is in love with her and cannot let her

²⁶¹ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 28:25.

²⁶² Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 42:35.

²⁶³ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 290.

²⁶⁴ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 295.

²⁶⁵ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 300.

²⁶⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 304.

²⁶⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 306.

²⁶⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 316.

²⁶⁹ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 48:40.

go.²⁷⁰ After this, Uhtred visits Lady Aethelflaed, she confesses, as well as asks for his help.²⁷¹ This is how episode 7 ends.

The book continues, Uhtred and his delegation return to Winchester to bring the news to King Alfred. King Alfred takes this news with relief that she lives, and a discussion about the price starts. To bishop Erkenwald, the price seemed nonsensical. This angered the king, who was considering what to do next.²⁷² In the end, Alfred agrees to pay the ransom and starts collecting the toll from everyone in the kingdom.²⁷³

In the adaptation Uhtred and Aethelred give the news to Alfred and the scene is faithful to the book.²⁷⁴ But without the presence of bishop Erkenwald and the fact that Lord Odda does not support the idea of paying the ransom at all this will later on lead to a plot twist which is not mentioned in the book at all.

The book continues with how Uhtred prepares his household guards and explains to them his plan on how to rescue Lady Aethelflaed. The plan was to free the river Theme of a blockade formed by a ship in the middle of the river, so that Eric could leave with Aethelflaed on his ship and his attempt at escape.²⁷⁵ Uhtred with his household guards want to attack the docks and break free from the blocking ship. Their ship had dropped them off not far from the blockade and hid itself in another channel. All of a sudden, a great fire starts in Beamfleit fortress, and some unknown men start to run into the docks, fighting the guards of the blocking ship. Uhtred joins the guards and fends off the unknown warriors who are led by Eilaf the Red, a Dane who was there for the raising of the dead man Bjorn. With that, Uhtred figures it out. "Heaston set the fire. And Heaston must have taken Aethelflaed. And now he wanted the channel opened so that his ships could escape."²⁷⁶

In the end, Heaston's men manage to break the blockade, but they are stopped by Finan, who commands Uhtred's ship, which then attacks the side of Heaston's ship, and a boarding battle begins.²⁷⁷ The fight drags on long enough that the brother's ship catches up as well and joins the ongoing boarding battle, where Heaston is surrounded. Erik men join up with

²⁷⁰ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 54:10.

²⁷¹ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 7, 56:04

²⁷² Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 324.

²⁷³ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 326.

²⁷⁴ *The Last Kingdom*, season 2, episode 8, "episode 8," Directed by Richard Senior, aired May 4, 2017, on Netflix, Netflix, 4:20

²⁷⁵ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 331.

²⁷⁶ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 339.

²⁷⁷ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 337.

Finan's shield wall on Uhtred's ship, meanwhile Sigefrid attacked from the other side.²⁷⁸ Heaston realizes that he has lost and jumps overboard, climbs onto another ship that made it from the docks and escapes.²⁷⁹ Sigefrid finds Aethelflaed, and Erik demands her.²⁸⁰ Erik tries to negotiate and suggests that he will pay a share of the ransom. Sigefrid ignores it, and Erik attacks him. Erik dies at his own brother's blade. With that, Uhtred and the rest of Eric's men charge them. Uhtred ordered them to keep Sigefrid alive. Uhtred then kicks out Sigefrid's sword and orders Osfert to kill Sigefrid. Therefore, denying him Valhalla. After that, he embraces weeping Aethelflaed. "No ransom would be paid. Wessex was safe. Northman had fought and killed each other, and their ships were burning, and their dreams were ashes."²⁸¹ With that the book *Sword Song* ends.

In the adaptation, there are deviations from the story of the book. Firstly, there is no ship fighting. Uhtred infiltrates the docks of Beamfleot, where he is waiting for Eric and Aethelflaed. Meanwhile, Alfred and Aethelred are marching their army to meet with Odda's Fyrd, who wants to attack Beamfleot on his own.²⁸² Secondly, Uhtred grows tired of waiting and goes to the fortress²⁸³ The situation in the fortress has changed; Aethelflaed is in a cage in the center of the main hall so that everyone can see her. Sithric is sent for Eric who is happy that Uhtred arrived.²⁸⁴ Erik then explains what has changed, and they come up with a new plan to set fire to the fortress and flee among the chaos with Aethelflaed. The plan goes well until Sigefrid notices Erik's absence and rushes to the main hall.²⁸⁵ After a quick exchange of words, a fight breaks out. Uhtred and his household guards then have a chance to slip away when Eric delays Sigefrid, dying in the process.²⁸⁶ Uhtred and the rest of his company leave the fortress running off to the woods, where Uhtred meets up with King Alfred, who seeks Lord Odda. Sigefrid ready to die orders to attack the much larger army.²⁸⁷ Heaston, on the other hand, deserts him and runs away. Sigefrid rushes the shield wall on his horse with a single aim to kill Aethelflaed. He fights his way to her through countless guards and Aethelred as well. It is Uhtred who saves Aethelred's life and interrupts

²⁷⁸ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 335.

²⁷⁹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 355.

²⁸⁰ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 356.

²⁸¹ Cornwell, *Sword Song*, 359.

²⁸² Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 36:43.

²⁸³ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 37:08.

²⁸⁴ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 38:12.

²⁸⁵ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 41:33

²⁸⁶ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 43:00

²⁸⁷ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 48:08.

Sigefrid's path. The two of them fight until Aethelflaed stabs Sigefrid from behind.²⁸⁸ With that, the battle ends. And the scene shifts to Winchester Palace, where Lady Aethelflaed is talking to Uhtred alone. She thanks Uhtred and tells him that Erik is still with her and inside of her. She is pregnant and asks for Uhtred's protection when she will need it against Aethelred.²⁸⁹ Episode 8 ends with King Alfred explaining what will happen with Odda after the treachery, but Odda kills himself in prison.²⁹⁰ This is how Episode 8 and the season 2 of *The Last Kingdom* ends.

From the historical perspective, Beamfleot fortress truly existed and a battle of Beamfleot happened later during the reign of Alfred the Great. This battle happens in the 3rd season of the adaptation which is not in the scope of this thesis. To sum it up, *Sword Song* (2007) covers how Uhtred must decide which side he will fight for, in the end he takes the city of Lundun for Alfred the Great, and how he saves his daughter from captivity. From a historical perspective, the battle of Lundun truly happened, and is one of the few historical events that happened, same as the wedding between Wessex and Mercia. There are religious and cultural details scattered across the entire story, but a large proportion of the plot is a work of fiction.

²⁸⁸ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 51:09.

²⁸⁹ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 53:18.

²⁹⁰ Senior, *The Last Kingdom*. season 2, episode 8, 57:11.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this thesis was to give an insight into historical representation included in Bernard Cornwell's novels *The Lord of the North* (2006) and *Sword Song* (2007), as well as in the Netflix TV adaptation *The Last Kingdom* (2017). It established what the historical and religious background of 9th-century England looked like and then further analysed the utilization of it in novels and TV adaptations. Furthermore, it established what adaptation is and how important fidelity is when creating TV adaptations.

It concluded that both Bernard Cornwell's novels utilize not only historical aspects but also historical religious aspects of the era very well. Cornwell uses a plethora of historical figures (such as King Alfred), historical and religious aspects (such as Danelaw and the ritual of bitter waters). He deviates from history by creating fictional characters and incorporates them into subplots (for example, the creation of Sigefrid and Eric, who captured Lady Aethelflaed; this plot is pure fiction) to create a captivating story which attracts the readers. After all, Bernard Cornwell's *The Last Kingdom* novels are associated with the Historical fiction genre.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the TV adaptation, it took some creative liberty, especially with the sequence order of events, then using different characters instead of those used in the book (such as Ivarr being exchanged by Sigefrid and Erik), which I suspect was due to budget constraints. Except for these small deviations, the adaptation follows the story, historical and religious aspects, authentically to the novels, reaching fidelity very often. Even though the adaptation does portrait the historical and religious aspects, it does it without properly introducing them; this fact devalues the informativity of the adaptation. In contrast, Cornwell did his research and introduced the historical aspects very well devoting few pages towards the end of each book as "Historical note". It seems like the series creators put larger emphasis on entertainment value. This can be interpreted in various ways; for me personally, the TV adaptation is very attractive and thanks to that it made me read the novels. Thus, fulfilling the main goal of a good TV adaptation.

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