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## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING PAGAN KINGS OF THE DANES IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

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# Alban Gautier

## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING PAGAN KINGS OF THE DANES IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

### Diverging Choices Within an Early Christian Dynasty

*In eleventh-century Denmark, the memory of the pagan kings of the Danes of the previous centuries was treated in many different ways: practices and choices of oral and written memory, oblivion and reinterpretations can be identified. We illustrate those varied strategies in three main contexts: oblivion, as exemplified by the work of Ailnoth; the use (or lack of use) of genealogy in the reign of Knud the Great and his sons; reinterpretations of past reigns by King Svend Estridsen, as described in the work of Adam of Bremen.*

**Keywords** Adam of Bremen, Denmark, Knud the Great, memory, Svend Estridsen

In the early seventeenth century, the historian Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Peruvian princess and a Spanish conquistador, wrote a history of his own people and ancestors, the Inca. In that context, he remembered (or feigned to remember) how, as a child, he had heard stories told by his uncle, the Christian Inca Paullu, who had reigned for about a decade under Spanish rule in the fifteen-forties. In his *Comentarios reales*, he recalled the questions he used to ask his uncle about the past of his own people and lineage:

Inca, my uncle, since you have no writing to keep a memory of things past, what do you know about the origins and beginnings of our kings? For see how Spaniards and other neighbouring nations have stories about gods and men, and through them they know when their kings began to reign, when their empires were formed and transformed, and they even know how many thousand years have elapsed since God created heaven and earth. All this, they know through their books. But since you have no books, which memory did you keep of your own antiquities? Who was the first Inca? What was his name? Whence did his lineage come? When did he begin to reign? With which troops and which arms did he conquer this great empire? What was the origin of our deeds?<sup>1</sup>

Of course, under Garcilaso's pen, this flourish of questions was only a kind of apophasis. Even if the Inca had no books, they did have a memory of things past, and the following chapters provide us with a very detailed and vivid account of a history that, according to the author, had indeed been transmitted through exclusively oral means; yet, his inquiries remain as a testimony of the differences between oral and written transmission, and of the shock any society imbued with a deep sense of orality could have felt when it encountered literate means of telling about the past. Different techniques of memorialization, different logics and different strategies were bound to collide.

In some ways, Scandinavian Christian rulers were in a similar position in the first generations after their conversion. Of course there were huge differences with the later Andean situation, one of them – and an important one – being that they had been converted without any conquest by a foreign Christian power. In other parts of medieval Northern Europe, for example in Saxony or Frisia, conquest and Christianization went hand in hand and resulted in an almost total eradication of historical memory about so-called pagan times: almost no stories, and even very few actual names, survive about the history of those areas before they fell under Frankish domination.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, a lot of stories survived from both Ireland and Scandinavia, two regions whose conversion was conducted without a conquest. But those Irish and Scandinavian stories – those which are recorded in the Irish so-called 'sagas', in the actual Icelandic sagas or in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* – were composed and written long after the conversion, and they were the result of a wholesale reconstruction of the pre-Christian past.

The question that I want to ask here is whether the first generations of rulers after conversion kept a memory of those ancestors and predecessors who could be remembered as 'good pagan kings' – that is, heroic, glorious, virtuous, and, in a broader sense, important figures. And if they did, how did they do it, and how can we know about it? In this paper, I will take the example of the pagan kings of the Danes, whose memory was transmitted by several early sources, most of all Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*. In a few chapters and scattered notations, Adam provides fascinating insights on how the memory of pagan predecessors of the Danish kings was kept and maintained in Denmark in his own time. But before turning to Adam and his testimony, we must look at how and why pagan kings of old were usually *not* remembered in texts written before the early twelfth century in Scandinavia and in the entourage of Scandinavian kings.

### Forgetting pagans

In fact, not only were pagan kings of old seldom remembered in early Scandinavian texts, but it seems that Christian decision-makers actually decided to forget them. As many works in the field of memory studies have argued, forgetting plays as crucial a role as remembering in any process of memory construction: just as with individual memory, the dynamics of collective memory consist in 'a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting', in which not only 'passive', but also 'active' forgetting is paramount.<sup>3</sup> To quote Ernest Renan's dictum, pronounced in his famous 1882 lecture on the nature of nations, 'Oblivion, even (I would say) historical error, are an essential factor in the creation of a people'.<sup>4</sup> If that is true of a modern nation, I believe it is also valid for medieval peoples and dynasties, and one of the interesting things about early

Christian Denmark is that some elements of this process of building a common memory through ‘erasing traces’<sup>5</sup> of the past can be tracked and observed.

The injunction not to remember pagan rulers and heroes was a very old one, and it was well known in the whole of early medieval Northern Christendom. Alcuin’s oft-quoted sentence on the incompatibility between ‘Ingeld and Christ’ bears precisely on that topic: some Christians, especially monks and clerics of high rank – that is, the very ones who were primarily in charge of writing and the keeping of records – were invited to divert their attention from ‘damned kings’ (*reges perditii*), and to concentrate on Christian figures.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in the hierarchies of attention and as subjects of legitimate literary composition, biblical characters (including kings such as David and Solomon) and saints (including royal martyrs such as St Oswald of Northumbria or St Olaf of Norway) were to replace pagan heroes (including royal figures such as Ingeld, Beowulf or Ragnar Lodbrog), who were burning in hell.<sup>7</sup> Of course, that injunction was not consistently obeyed by clerics, and some of them did write stories about pagan kings of old; but in the first generations, when a living memory was still active, those clerics who would have been inclined to remember the pagan past – and who surely did in oral ways now almost lost to us – probably felt less urgency. The fact is that, in Denmark at least, indigenous clerics did not write anything of interest for our topic before well into the twelfth century.

This would explain why, at first, if some Danes remembered the pagan kings of pre-Christian times, it was clearly not through writing. In the conversion period and the century that followed – that is, until the end of the eleventh century – virtually no historiographical works were produced in Scandinavia, and very few were in the Viking diaspora. And even the earliest texts say almost nothing about pagans and their times. In Denmark, the first ‘national’ history-cum-hagiography is Ailnoth’s *Gesta et Passio*, written around 1110.<sup>8</sup> For this Englishman writing in Denmark, the history of the kingdom really began with the accession of the dynasty founded by the Christian king Svend Estridsen (1047–74), and it culminated with the reign and martyrdom of his son St Knud the King (1080–6).<sup>9</sup> It means that the pagan past of the kingdom and of the ancestors of its kings was completely eclipsed by Ailnoth’s writing, which does not include a single allusion in that direction: not only did Ailnoth actively forget about pagan deities – some of whom were very probably seen as royal ancestors – but he forgot all that concerned the people who lived in that period.<sup>10</sup> This attitude is even more significant if we ponder the fact that Ailnoth had been well-educated in classical Latin culture, and that he was not shy at all as far as comparisons with Greco-Roman mythological fables were concerned: classical deities and heroes were very present under his pen.<sup>11</sup> We must also observe that, in his proem, Ailnoth took great pains to excuse the Danes from the accusation of belonging to the infamous North (*aquilo*) and its negative connotations inherited from the Bible: only the Norwegians and Icelanders – who, when the work was written, had been Christians for at least three generations – were denounced as true ‘Northerners’ (*Aquilonales*).<sup>12</sup> Ailnoth deployed a wealth of efforts to draw a clear line between the Danes and other Scandinavians: for him, Danes differed from other ‘barbarians’ and pseudo-Christians of the North because they had been Christians for a very long time; in this way, they could appear as a legitimate Christian people among many, on a par with the English, the author’s own

people, or even with the Franks and the Romans.<sup>13</sup> In such a context, dwelling at length on pagan kings of old would have been counter-productive.

Clearly, writing history was *not* a way to remember the pagan 'national' past and its kings in early Christian Denmark. To use Lars Boje Mortensen's phrase, it was only in a second time that those 'sanctified beginnings' gave way to 'mythopoetic moments' that could safely include pre-Christian heroic figures.<sup>14</sup> In Scandinavia as in Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, or indeed Poland, Bohemia and Hungary,<sup>15</sup> history and hagiography developed in a twofold sequence: the first Christian authors mainly wrote about local saints and the story of conversion; only later authors dared go back to the pagan past, and in the process, they reconstructed it. In Denmark, the second phase only began in the mid-twelfth century. The *Roskilde Chronicle*, which was the second historical work written in Denmark after Ailnoth's, probably in the late eleven-thirties, was also the first to mention pre-conversion kings; even though, it evacuated the question of their religious identity, which at that time seems to have remained problematic.<sup>16</sup> And even that timid opening happened more than one century and a half suppress after Harald Bluetooth had 'officially' converted the Danes: in the meantime, no written accounts of pre-Christian Danish history and kingship were composed in Denmark. One consequence of that long delay was that, to use a distinction Jan Assmann developed from his own study of Ancient Egypt, those narratives that were finally written were a product of what he calls 'cultural', not 'communicative', memory<sup>17</sup>: in other words, they were rebuilt and reinvented for the uses of the present, and not pristinely transmitted over suppress generations.

In medieval Scandinavia, the stories about pagan kings and heroes, as told by Svend Aggesen, Saxo Grammaticus, or the anonymous *sagnamenn* of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were the result of a 'cultural' reconstruction of an idealized past. Lars Lönnroth explained how Icelandic *sagnamenn* devised the literary character of the 'noble heathen': an unbaptized pagan, but whose behaviour was already Christian in many ways except in explicit belief<sup>18</sup>; some of the heroic and virtuous rulers described by Saxo belong indeed in the same category. That was clearly a kind of 'cultural memory', developed in a much later context, when the elite of Christian Denmark and Iceland had become secure enough about their own identity as the leaders of Christian peoples, and decided to impress continuity with what they now perceived as their own past. Indeed, such stories aimed to create an impression of seamlessness with the present, for example in order to legitimize existing political and social dominations, be they the power of Danish kings or the influence of Icelandic *höfðingjar*. Of course, the paganism of ancient kings and heroes was a problem for Christian writers, but both Irish and Icelandic vernacular literature, along with Danish Latin writing, show that many authors devised solutions that allowed them to speak of that past and of its pagan characters without having to condemn them systematically.<sup>19</sup> Only, it is important to note that they did not do it in the first generations after the conversion: time had to elapse before it was really safe to do so, and for a long time oblivion prevailed over memory, at least as far as written evidence is concerned.

We may now turn to the main existing written source about eleventh-century Denmark (and even Scandinavia): Adam of Bremen's *Gesta*, a work which was completed around 1075 by a canon of the Church of Hamburg-Bremen, an archbishopric which claimed to be at the heart of the whole process of conversion in Scandinavia, and particularly in Denmark. Even if Adam could be very critical about the North and its

‘barbaric’ inhabitants, resorting to the same kind of Biblical imagery about the *gentes aquilonales*,<sup>20</sup> it seems at first glance that he was not as negative as Ailnoth would be a few decades later: by all means, he does provide some historical discourse about pagan kings of the Danes. For example, Adam wrote three chapters about two Danish kings of the mid-ninth century, a grandfather and a grandson called Horik the Old and Horik the Young. But in his first book, Adam relied mainly on a written source which was already two centuries old: *Vita Anskarii* was a hagiography of Archbishop Ansgar of Hamburg-Bremen (834–65), composed in the late ninth century by his disciple and successor Rimbert (865–88). Indeed, Adam’s story is more or less a retelling of Rimbert’s narrative. It means that, if Rimbert had not mentioned them, it is very likely that Adam would have ignored them. Interestingly, in those particular cases, Adam modified Rimbert’s words to the effect that the two Horiks appear to have been Christian rulers, and not (like in *Vita Anskarii*), benevolent pagan rulers<sup>21</sup>: Horik the Old is said to have been ‘made Christian’ by Ansgar,<sup>22</sup> and as for Horik the Young, we learn that ‘he adopted Christianity himself, and ordained by way of an edict that all his subjects become Christians’.<sup>23</sup> Was Adam embarrassed by Rimbert’s presentation of nice pagan rulers who actually acted in favour of Christianity? Did he want to extoll Ansgar’s merits by claiming for him the conversion of those fierce barbarian rulers? The second explanation fits very well with Adam’s whole project: the two Horiks are logically depicted as gained for Christianity by the Hamburg-Bremen mission, even though everything seems to prove that they never really converted: the younger one even received a letter from Pope Nicholas I, who scolded him for not having taken the plunge of baptism.<sup>24</sup> Even though, the first reason should not be dismissed: Adam seems to have had difficulties to conceive the possibility of a pagan’s virtuous behaviour, an idea which did not really bother Rimbert two centuries before.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, Adam did profess disinterest in, and even oblivion of, pagan kings of old. About the kings who reigned before the time of Svend Estridsen (that is, before his own days), he wrote that their chronology and genealogy were much too complicated, and that it was impossible to ascertain whether many of the former ‘kings, or rather tyrants, of the Danes’, reigned in succession or simultaneously: his sources were scarce and, for his standards, inadequate. But he added that it was no real problem, for the simple reason that ‘it is enough for us to know that all of them until then were pagans’, and that despite ‘so considerable regime changes and barbarian raids’, the Church founded by Ansgar in Hamburg and Bremen had persisted and flourished.<sup>26</sup>

Later on, as Adam told the story of the mission Archbishop Unni (918–36) led into Sweden, he acknowledged the fact that he knew very little of the actual events: but just as ‘it is considered useless to examine the deeds of unbelievers’,<sup>27</sup> it would have been wrong not to evoke the conversion of those who finally believed. Through those two petitions of principle, Adam was not merely dodging the issue of his lack of written sources. As I said, there was a long tradition that insisted on the necessity to forget pagan figures of the past, because they were in hell, and because they could not provide models of behaviour for today’s Christians. Adam’s use of the word *tyranni* shows that he was actually trying to denigrate pagan rulers of old and to undermine their reputation, whatever it actually was in eleventh-century Denmark.

## Knud the Great, Hardeknud, and their ancestors: an absence of genealogical depth?

But what of an even earlier period, when pagan times were still within the scope of ‘communicative’ memory – that is, when the ‘old ways’ and those who had adhered to them were still being remembered through live communication between generations? In early post-conquest Peru, Inca Garcilaso was able to interrogate his uncle about the story of their ancestors: do we know that the first Christian kings of the Danes, who were in a position to do so, told similar tales about their pagan ancestors?

Of course, we do know that Harald Bluetooth (c. 958–c. 986?), who boasted that he had ‘made the Danes Christian’, did not shy from commemorating his pagan parents, Gorm the Old (c. 936–c. 958?) and Thyre, on the inscription of the famous Jelling rune-stone.<sup>28</sup> We can be sure that, whatever the interpretation we choose to give to the particular layout of tombs, buildings, stones and mounds at Jelling, some form of commemoration by a Christian Harald of his non-Christian father and mother took place at least once, on the occasion of the erection of the stone. Stories must have been told then about Gorm and Thyre, about their virtues and valour, and there was some active remembrance of them, already along with some kind of reconstruction of what they had been and what they had done. Unfortunately, we do not know what those stories were. Was Gorm presented as ‘in fact a Christian’, protecting and founding churches, even desiring or undergoing baptism? Indeed, he had known about Christianity and may have been rather sympathetic to missionaries: there were stories in Hamburg about Archbishop Unni’s stay at his court, which had supposedly paved the way for Harald’s later conversion.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, was Gorm described as a kind of pre-Christian ‘noble heathen’, not knowing about God but feeling in his heart a longing for another religion and a greater truth? Or was he indeed remembered as a true pagan king, justly superseded by his boastful Christian son? That is, of course, pure speculation, because we do not know the tales that were told in mid- and late-tenth century Denmark: we only suspect they must have existed.

Another reason why we know nothing of those tales is because the next generations of Danish kings were even less loquacious than Harald about their non-Christian ancestors. Svend Forkbeard (c. 986?–1014), Knud the Great (1018–35) and Hardeknud (1035–42) are actually much more well known in their capacity of kings of the English than as kings of the Danes, and this is reflected strongly both in eleventh-century and modern historiography. A striking feature of the two main works with a historical dimension produced in early eleventh-century England – that is, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* – is the very positive presentation of Knud and his lineage. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* shows Knud as an archetypal king of the English, that is as a patron of churches and a stern judge and ruler<sup>30</sup>; as for the *Encomium*, written late in the reign of Hardeknud, it aims to legitimize the king’s regime in difficult political circumstances.<sup>31</sup> It does so by exalting the virtues of his mother Emma, his father Knud and his grandfather Svend, but also by rewriting history through what Elizabeth Tyler has called ‘fictions of family’ – famously, its author fails to mention Emma’s former marriage with Æthelred II, and he recasts Hardeknud’s half-brothers as the offspring of a low-born servant.<sup>32</sup>

Bolstering the Anglo-Danish regime was clearly a goal of those two works, and yet it is striking that none of them did so by invoking a long and glorious genealogy.



It is rather surprising, because writers of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were familiar with such a device: the earliest version of the *Chronicle*, composed in the reign of Alfred the Great (871–99), already included a long genealogy of Alfred's father Æthelwulf (839–58), which went back to important pagan figures of the West-Saxon past such as Cerdic (the founder of the kingdom) and Ceawlin (a conqueror of the Britons and a *bretwalda* in the late sixth century), and beyond them even to English and Scandinavian kings and heroes of old (some of them mentioned in *Beowulf*), such as Woden, Geat, Scyld and Heremod.<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, the question of the origin of what we call the Jelling dynasty is completely avoided by both the *Chronicle* and the *Encomium*, where not only the names of Gorm and his ancestors do not appear, but even Harald's name is ignored. The *Chronicle's* legitimisation of Knud's English reign is carried out on purely English grounds: he is presented as a natural and able successor of previous West-Saxon kings, and in the whole the *Chronicle* minimizes the breach created by the double conquest of 1013 and 1015–6.<sup>34</sup> As for the Flemish monk who wrote the *Encomium*, his story begins with an emphatic praise of Svend Forkbeard, about whom he only mentioned that 'he had his origin, one that is paramount among humans, in the noblest of people'.<sup>35</sup> The name of his father, the Christian king Harald, is omitted: the author only tells us that the young Svend, beloved by all but hated by his father, was forced to raise an army and drive his father out of power, thus securing the kingdom for himself.

So, in the eyes of authors writing in England for the Anglo-Danish regime in the early eleventh century, genealogical depth was virtually of no value. The kings of the Jelling dynasty had 'the noblest' origins, but they still seem to appear out of nowhere in order to reign over the English: the only continuities that were stressed were with Cerdic's lineage or through Queen Emma. Interestingly, the skaldic poems known as *Knútsdrápur*, composed in honour of Knud in the same period (and some of them certainly were composed in England),<sup>36</sup> do not mention Knud's ancestry, except for a few cryptic allusions to his father. Even if such an omission is rather typical of the genre of Norse praise poetry,<sup>37</sup> here again memory was not promoted further than one generation, and definitely not back to pagan ancestors.

This also appears through the anthroponomy of the Anglo-Danish kings, which does not reach beyond the first Christian ruler of the dynasty: Knud called his three sons Harald, Svend and Hardeknud. It is true that the very name 'Knud' already existed in his lineage before the conversion: Saxo Grammaticus mentions another son of Gorm called Knud,<sup>38</sup> and Adam of Bremen himself tells us of Danish kings whom he calls 'Hardeknud son of Svend', 'Hardeknud Gorm', and simply 'Gorm',<sup>39</sup>: they were probably all the same person, that is Gorm the Old. But these mentions are rather late, and anyway the name 'Hardeknud' (in Old Norse *Hörða-Knútr*), is only a variation meaning 'battle-Knud': I think it probable that Knud the Great named and had his sons christened in honour of his (Christian) grandfather, his (Christian) father and himself (a Christian). Similarly, we must ponder the fact that, even though the funerary complex in Jelling was probably created by Gorm as memorial centre for his lineage, it was not retained in such a capacity, and no single dynastic necropolis emerged.<sup>40</sup>

By all means then, Knud the Great, his wife Emma, and their son Hardeknud did not try to bolster their dynastic power through an elaborate genealogical discourse going back to the pagan past of their lineage, as Alfred and his successors had done;

they even ignored the first Christian king, Harald Bluetooth, Knud's own grandfather. Of course, one reason for that was a rather troubled dynastic history, with a civil war between father and son no so far in the past,<sup>41</sup> but another reason may be that they did not feel that their pagan ancestors were 'presentable', that is fit to be commemorated. Anyway, the glory of military conquest, Emma's bridging *persona*, the staging of a continuity between the West-Saxon and Anglo-Danish regimes, the patronage of churches and, as a rule, the 'style' of kingship equally (if differently) displayed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, in the *Knútsdrápur*, and of course in Knud's diplomas, law-codes and letters to his subjects, seem to have been sufficient in terms of legitimation. Knud and his immediate successors did not *need* a long line of ancestors, let alone pagan ones.

Interestingly, a similar position had been adopted only a few decades earlier on the other side of the Channel, in Normandy. There also, there was very little use of genealogical depth. Dudo of St Quentin's *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, written in the decades before and after 1000, was full of the glory of half-forgotten 'Danish' – or, more exactly, 'Dacian' – ancestors, but it failed to mention any actual name beyond that of the first convert duke: Rollo's father was indeed praised in a short sentence but, like Harald in the *Encomium*, he remained anonymous; only an obscure brother of Rollo's, called Gurim, was both named and (briefly) praised; and the only pagan character really developed, called Hasting, was described as a brutal and vicious barbarian whose viking depredations clearly function as a foil to Rollo's proto-Christian virtues.<sup>42</sup> The Norman dukes' power, just as that of their Anglo-Danish counterparts, was not founded on a long genealogy and the memory of pagan ancestors, but on Christian rulership and the exercise of Latin literary patronage. Guillaume of Jumièges, who rewrote Dudo's account half a century later, even shortened it and abandoned all that concerned Rollo's father and brother, the only 'good pagan rulers' in the original story. For the dukes and their monks, those two characters were completely useless: Trojan origins were much more prestigious and desirable.<sup>43</sup> In the first half of the eleventh century, both in Southern Scandinavia and the Viking diaspora, the time had not come yet for Assmann's 'cultural' memory, or for Mortensen's 'mythopoetic moments'.

### **How Svend Estridsen remembered his predecessors**

If written history was not developed yet in Denmark, and if what existed in other countries with a 'Danish' leadership did not make use of genealogical depth, does it mean that, even among lay rulers and their entourages, oral remembrance was also curtailed by the necessity to 'forget' pagans? Of course, members of the Danish Christian elite born just after the conversion of their own group would have been able to ask their older relatives about the history of their peoples and their families, just like the young Garcilaso would interrogate his uncle Paullu six centuries later. Unfortunately, we have almost no testimony of that mode of transmission.

Orality is notoriously difficult to trace in medieval written sources, but there is a hint of such a practice in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta*.<sup>44</sup> Adam, who was a well-trained and careful historian, albeit with an agenda, used all sorts of sources in the writing of his four books. As becomes a Latin historian with a sense of the importance and value

of his own work, they were overwhelmingly written, and written in Latin. Just like Ailnoth, Adam was never shy in his use of classical pagan metaphors and allusions, but he did mention several pagan Scandinavian rulers, and not always in order to criticize and disparage them. Still, as we saw, if several of them were mentioned, it was not because Danes or Swedes remembered them, but because they were already mentioned in Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*.

Even if written sources dominate Adam's account, another source he regularly quotes is the oral testimony he got from Svend Estridsen, king of the Danes, who told him many stories about his pagan ancestors. We mentioned above that Adam professed not to be interested in pagan rulers of old: it was 'useless' (*inutile*) to 'examine' (*scrutari*) their actions. But in fact, Adam can be caught red-handed in apophasis: he does tell us about some of them. Similarly, Anglo-Saxon writers who professed a lack of interest for 'damned kings' still told stories about them: Aldhelm of Malmesbury explained around 700 that it was not worth 'sweating' (*sudescere*) to 'examine' (*scrutando*: Adam used the same word) the exact links of kinship between heroes of Greek mythology such as Hermione, Orestes and Neoptolemus; yet, at the same time, he displayed his knowing of the subject.<sup>45</sup> And Alcuin himself, who told his correspondent that 'Ingeld' had nothing in common with Christ, did provide his name; and Mary Garrison's close study of the passage showed that he knew the stories quite well.<sup>46</sup>

Then, far from being completely uninterested in pagan kings of the Danes, Adam took the trouble to interview one of his contemporaries about the history of his pre-conversion *antecessores*. During what was probably a long conversation (or even over several sessions), he took good note of their names, of who succeeded whom, and of how they were related – that is, the very facts he confessed he would not bother ascertaining. In other words, despite his protestations, he *was* interested. Of course, he primarily did so in order to tell the half-forgotten story of the Hamburg-Bremen mission, especially in the times of Unni, the bridging figure who could connect the heroic times of Ansgar (well-documented by Rimbert) with the recent episcopate of Adalbert (1046–72): Unni's life and work, which Adam placed in a time when the peoples of the North, converted at first by Ansgar, had reverted to paganism, allowed him to show that the Church of Hamburg-Bremen had never abandoned its missionary field, since Unni had died in Birka, in the very place where Ansgar had preached.<sup>47</sup> But this cannot be the only reason why Adam made his enquiries: on his own account, Svend delivered his information 'when at our own request he enumerated his ancestors'.<sup>48</sup> It was indeed on the 'damned kings' themselves that Adam's interest bore, and not only on their contacts with his archbishopric. The author of the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* was not only writing a political and apologetic work: he was a historian, he was curious about the past as such, and he tried to compensate for the scarcity of his written sources.

Svend Estridsen was probably born too late (perhaps in the early ten-twenties) to have known many people who had a living memory of the pre-conversion past, a period which (as far as his dynasty was concerned) had ended almost a century before his conversations with Adam took place; but he did tell him some stories about his pagan predecessors. Clearly, Svend and his entourage did not agree with Adam's petition that it was 'useless' to remember them. The way he spoke when they met (maybe in the ten-sixties) shows that in the mid-eleventh century, the court of this pious Danish king

did keep a memory of past rulers, even pagan ones, and that they did not try to forget them all. Their names were remembered, and some of them were the object of particular, more developed stories: since Adam wanted to say as much as possible about the North, and since he trusted (or wanted to trust) Svend's testimony, he briefly wrote something of those stories, and from them he even gathered 'a large part of the matter of this small book'.<sup>49</sup> The king of the Danes appears indeed as a very reliable source of knowledge on the North: he is called 'a very truthful king'.<sup>50</sup>

Of course, in Adam's eyes, Svend's reliability was a result of his good relationships with Hamburg-Bremen: during his reign, the king had met Archbishop Adalbert several times, and he had been listening to his advice (not always heeding it, actually, and Adam glossed over the fact that the king had wished for a Danish archbishopric).<sup>51</sup> But that was not the only reason. Svend's information was first-hand, for example concerning Sweden where he had lived for twelve years,<sup>52</sup> and he was famous for his memory: he was a man 'who will be remembered long, and who kept in his memory everything that concerned the deeds of the barbarians, just as if they had been written'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Svend's memory extended far beyond the history of Denmark, since he remembered facts about past Swedish and Slavic rulers – even if, in the last case, only Christian ones.<sup>54</sup> His memory could be described as a 'regnal memory': it went beyond the borders of his own kingdom, culture and language, embracing several connected dynasties, Christian or not; it also extended into ecclesiastical history, that is the history of bishops and saints,<sup>55</sup> and it included information of geographical nature.

Also, Svend's memory appears to have been a fundamentally oral matter: 'from his mouth',<sup>56</sup> Adam heard 'a true and very pleasant narrative'.<sup>57</sup> The reason why Svend's narrative was 'very pleasant' was probably twofold: it must have included stories of conversion, which would have pleased Adam, but the superlative may also have an aesthetic dimension, meaning that the stories were well-composed, pleasant as works of oral literature. Svend appears here as a well-informed ruler, and it points to the existence, within the kingdom of the Danes, of means of remembering former kings. Those means did not consist in any form of written chronicle or genealogy, which Adam could have consulted or copied: the king and his entourage resorted to oral memorization, maybe in the form of regnal lists artfully organized, perhaps with appended short narratives.

Most of the Danish kings the *Gesta* mention after Svend's testimony were not exactly described: only their names were given, often without any kind of judgment. What was told was, when they were known, their ancestry and the circumstances of their accession – generally by succession or conquest. This is the case with the Danish king Olaf and his sons Gnupa and Gurd,<sup>58</sup> or with Sigerich and his competitor Hardegon son of Svend.<sup>59</sup> A handful of individuals are presented in a positive or a negative way, but generally that happens in Adam's own commentaries, glossing on top of Svend's report: for instance, the mention of Sigerich and Hardegon is followed by the observation I quoted earlier, that those 'kings, or rather tyrants of the Danes' were rather difficult to sort out, and that anyway 'it is enough for us to know that all of them until then were pagans'. To illustrate those rare occasions when Svend and/or Adam seem to have steered away from the neutrality of a pure regnal list, I will retain four cases, which all concern kings who were said to have reigned in Denmark: Helgi (before 900), Gorm the Old, Erik Segersäll (d. c. 995?), and Svend Forkbeard.

The Danish king Helgi (*Heiligo* in Adam's Latin) receives much praise. He was 'a kind man for the people because of his justice and his holiness'.<sup>60</sup> He was the first ruler Svend was able to remember, and this detail is not trivial: it could well be that, in the third quarter of the eleventh century, the Danish monarchy was deemed to have begun with Helgi. This would explain why, even if he had been a pagan, he was remembered as a positive and even a sacred figure, recognized for his 'kindness', his 'justice' and his 'holiness'. In fact, it is very unlikely that Adam himself came along the notion of Helgi's *sanctitas*; more probably, it was Svend who provided this particular idea. There was indeed a strong echo in the 'Danish tongue' (that is, in Old Norse) between the (masculine) name 'Helgi' and the (feminine) noun *helgi*, which precisely means 'holiness'. Of course, any speaker of a Germanic language could have come up with such a pun: Adam himself, who came from a more southerly region of Germany, could have contrived it, especially since he used the form *Heiligo*, which is very close to the German adjective *heilig* ('holy'). But what kind of 'sanctity' was meant if Helgi was a pagan? I offer no answer, but it seems that at the Danish court around 1070, an ancient pre-Christian king was remembered in very good terms indeed. More probably, the pun and the discourse hailed from Denmark, and Adam's *Heiligo* just shows that he understood them.

Gorm the Old was described on the other hand by Adam as a horrible person, an arch-pagan and a persecutor: 'a most cruel vermin, I say', 'the most cruel Gorm' displayed a great deal of 'savagery'.<sup>61</sup> But it is interesting to note that Gorm was the one pagan Danish king whose characterization explicitly did *not* derive from Sven Estridsen's testimony. Indeed, the judgment on Gorm was Adam's own, who added the word '*inquam*', 'I say'. Maybe he was remembered in better part at Svend's court? After all, the king could have described himself as Gorm's descendant, more precisely his great-great-grandson.

The case of Erik Segersäll is also interesting, but for the opposite reason. Here Adam explicitly placed the criticism in Svend's mouth: Erik (Adam's *Hericus*), a Swede, was 'himself a pagan, and a fierce enemy of Christians'.<sup>62</sup> Even though, Adam's narrative continued with Erik's conversion to Christianity under the auspices of the missionary Poppo.<sup>63</sup> But then Adam went on to say:

I heard myself from the very wise king of the Danes [that is, from Svend Estridsen] that after having received Christianity, Erik relapsed again into paganism. But it was through others that I learnt how he fought against Otto III and was beaten. On that point, the king was silent.<sup>64</sup>

Those two passages tell us a lot about how, at the court of Svend, Erik Segersäll was remembered, six or seven decades after he had briefly ruled Denmark. He was seen as an arch-pagan and an enemy of Christians, whose conversion had only happened because he was in Denmark, and at the instigation of that typical figure of Danish conversion, Bishop Poppo (apart from this brief extract, Poppo was mainly known for having brought out the conversion of Harald Bluetooth)<sup>65</sup>; and of course, he had later reverted to paganism. The other aspects of Erik's biography, which are known to us thanks to a scholia of Adam's *Gesta* – his campaign against the emperor, his wedding to a Christian Polish princess –<sup>66</sup> had not been retained as relevant aspects of his story. In mid-eleventh century Denmark, Erik had been memorialized as an apostate:

the king and his entourage found it relevant to remember such a bad thing – whether it was true or not – about a ‘usurper’.

Finally, I will dwell a little on the case of Svend Forkbeard. Of course, he should not be included in the first place in this paper, since he was not a pagan. But Adam does say he was an unworthy son, who had driven his worthy father Harald from power, before reverting to the paganism of his ancestors.<sup>67</sup> As we saw above, that was not the story remembered by Knud and Hardeknud in the early eleventh century: in the *Encomium*, Svend Forkbeard was himself a valiant king and a worthy figure, and it was rather Harald who was blamed for the confrontation between father and son. But Adam has a very interesting story to tell us about Svend Estridsen’s attitude to his grandfather and namesake. Quite evidently, the king of the Danes did not share the canon of Bremen’s vision of Svend Forkbeard: whether or not his version of the story was similar to that his uncle Knud and his cousin Hardeknud had known, he preferred not to dwell on the possible responsibility his grandfather might have had in the precipitous end of Harald Bluetooth’s reign:

Concerning his end, when I tried to question his great-grandson Svend, who now reigns in Denmark, he would not say anything, just like another Tydeus,<sup>68</sup> about his grandfather’s crime; but when I insisted on the fact of the parricide, he said: ‘This is indeed the crime for which we his descendants are still paying, and the parricide himself atoned for it with exile’.<sup>69</sup>

Adam seems to have driven his royal interlocutor into a corner in order to make him admit that his grandfather was not a completely exemplary figure, such as the one depicted in the *Encomium*. Svend Estridsen probably preferred recalling – and telling Adam and others – stories about his grandfather’s adventures in exile, his victory over the Norwegian Óláfr Tryggvason in 1000, and of course his conquest of England in 1013, a deed the younger Svend would himself try to replicate in 1069 and 1074. Indeed, for all those episodes, the author of the *Gesta* provided us with an interpretation which was not in the older Svend’s favour, and that did not come from the court of Denmark.<sup>70</sup> For all those reasons, it is very improbable that Svend Forkbeard was actually an apostate: his hostility to the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and his patronage of English bishops are far better explanations for Adam’s animosity. Indeed, the author of the *Gesta* never went so far as to mention that Svend Estridsen admitted his grandfather’s rejection of Christianity: only his responsibility in his father’s end may have been conceded.

Those few examples show that, in the mid-eleventh century, the Christian kings of the Danes were prone to embellish the history of their kingdom and predecessors, and to remember with much less benevolence the kings who hailed from neighbouring kingdoms and rival dynasties: that much is shown by what Svend Estridsen told Adam about Helgi on the one hand, and Erik Segersäll on the other. Conversely, the king seemed to balk at the idea of remembering ‘bad things’ about his direct ancestors, as is shown by Adam’s rewriting of Gorm’s history and Svend’s own reluctance to admit that his grandfather and namesake could have had major flaws. It shows also that their understanding of the history of former Danish kings differed radically: Svend rejected some of the kings Adam regarded as acceptable, and vice versa.

The study of Irish and Anglo-Saxon genealogies has shown that dynastic memory was always being reconstructed in the early Middle Ages,<sup>71</sup> and there is no reason to believe that things were different in Denmark. If, as I tried to demonstrate here, earlier kings like Knud and Hardeknud had felt no need to made use of genealogical depth in order to legitimize their rule, Svend Estridsen seems to have decided to do so. He probably needed it, given the fact that he was not a direct descendant of Knud, whose conquests and ‘style’ of kingship had been, in themselves, sufficient props for his regime. As his unusual nickname shows – ‘Estridsen’ is a matronym – it was through his mother Estrid, Knud’s sister, that he was connected with earlier kings of the Danes such as Svend Forkbeard, Harald Bluetooth and Gorm the Old. He probably needed to reach beyond the glorious deeds of Knud’s reign – deeds he could not tap from as directly as Emma and Hardeknud had done in the *Encomium*. He needed to reach into the origins of the kingdom and its ruling dynasty.

The interest of Adam and Svend’s conversation also lies in the fact that, by reading it, we are witnessing two processes of memorialization, oral and written, both ‘in the making’: to use Aleida Assmann’s words, they were both trying to build a ‘canon’, that is an official list of items (here, kings) that were good to remember.<sup>72</sup> The collision between their agendas and the incompatibility of their ‘canons’ were downplayed by Adam, who chose to praise the king for his memory; but they are nonetheless very conspicuous once we begin to read between the lines. Surely, the Christian king of the Danes would have preferred keeping a simple (and simplified) memory of his predecessors, (re)built through orality, a memory which put them in two main categories: ‘good kings’ (be they pagan like Helgi and Gorm, or Christian like Harald Bluetooth and Svend Forkbeard), and ‘bad kings’ (of course described as both foreign and pagan, like Erik). But through his interview with Adam, he was put in contact with another way to reconstruct the past. For the canon of Bremen operated from another viewpoint, he sorted former kings of the Danes into different categories: ‘good kings’ and ‘bad kings’ were not ancestors or foreigners, but friends or enemies of Hamburg-Bremen, the former being labelled as ‘Christians’, the others as ‘pagans’ or ‘apostates’.

But because Adam was also a trained historian and hagiographer, his own technique of memorialization also relied on written documents and comparisons between both written and oral sources: to use Aleida Assmann’s words again, he also believed in the legitimacy of ‘archive’,<sup>73</sup> that is of dormant data which – though it was very little developed and not as reliable as what modern institutions allow – could be retrieved in order to know the truth about the past. Helgi was the oldest king Svend could mention, but there was no written evidence about him, which Adam could compare and confront with what his royal informer had told him – he was not mentioned, for instance, by Rimbert. That is probably why Helgi made it into Adam’s ‘canon’ and remained a ‘good king’ under his pen: having no other source, he just made use of the tradition, as it existed at the Danish court, and he did not decide to censure it. On the other hand, Svend had nothing to say about the two Horiks: but here Adam had a written source, and he could build on that, even if he finally said something quite different from what Rimbert had expounded two centuries before. Finally, Gorm the Old and Svend Forkbeard, who were more recent and better documented, had to endure the sustained fire of his criticism: they did not come out unscathed.



In early Christian Denmark – and also, to a rather large extent (but not wholly) in neighbouring lands such as Northern Germany, England and Normandy – there were no ‘institutions of passive cultural memory’,<sup>74</sup> no developed archives in which written traces of the past could be kept and from which some of them could be reactivated should the need appear. Most memory – whether supported by oral or written media – was ‘active’, it had to be useful or at least meaningful for the present. That is why it was highly selective, choosing to remember this or that pagan king from the ‘national’ past, either as a good king or as a bad king, but also choosing to condemn others to oblivion: because they had no particular relevance for their current discourse, they could be cut from Ailnoth’s, Knud the Great’s, Svend Estridsen’s or Adam of Bremen’s ‘canons’.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Quesada, *Inca Garcilaso* (I, I, 15), I, 37. All translations in this article are mine.
2. Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, especially chap. 3. Some of the matter of the present article is translated and adapted from chap. 9 of the same book.
3. Assmann, “Canon and Archive”, 97–9.
4. Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”, 891: ‘L’oubli, et je dirai même l’erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d’une nation.’
5. The principles of this process are outlined by Ricœur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, 543–53.
6. Dümmler, *Epistolae* (124), 183. See also Garrison, “Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?”.
7. On Anglo-Saxon England, see Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, chap. 4.
8. Isager and Conti, “Ailnothus”.
9. All dates provided here are regnal dates (when they are known with some degree of certainty). Dates for the kings of the Danes are those of their Danish reign, and they are named in modern Danish, even if some of them were also kings of the English or Norwegians.
10. Gelting, “Two Early Twelfth-Century Views”.
11. Foerster, *Vergleich und Identität*, 91–2.
12. Gertz, *Ailnoth*, 83–4.
13. Münster-Swendsen, “Educating”, 166.
14. Mortensen, “Sanctified Beginnings”.
15. *Ibid.*, 257–60: the author applies the same phased model in the case of Hungary. For a comprehensive view over Northern Europe, see Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*.
16. Gelting, “Chronicon Roskildense”; Gelting, “Two Early Twelfth-Century Views”, 54.
17. Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, especially chap. 1.
18. Lönnroth, “The Noble Heathen”.
19. For Ireland, this vision is strongly defended by the ‘non-nativist’ school of study of vernacular Irish material: see for example McCone, *Pagan Past*. On the ‘later wave’ of Christian writing about pagan kings in Scandinavia, see Mortensen, “The Status of the ‘Mythical’ Past”.



20. On Adam's work and its vision of Scandinavia and its past, see Scior, *Das Eigene und das Fremde*; Fraesdorff, *Der barbarische Norden*; and Goetz, "Constructing the Past".
21. Waitz, *Rimbert* (24 and 31–2). For an analysis of Rimbert's description of benevolent pagan rulers who welcome Christian missionaries, see Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 201–5.
22. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 15), 31: 'christianum reddidit'.
23. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 29), 35: 'ut christianitatem ipse susciperet, suisque omnibus, ut christiani fierent, per edictum mandaret'.
24. Perels, *Nicholas I* (27), 293–4. Commentary by Wood, "Christians and Pagans", 52.
25. Other passages where Adam visibly struggles with that idea are his chapter on the island of *Sambia* (that is, Old Prussia), and his half-hearted praise of the *Sueones*: Schmeidler, *Adam* (IV, 18 and IV, 21–22). Commentary by Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 474–80.
26. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 52), 53: 'reges, immo tyranni Danorum'; 'nobis hoc scire sufficiat omnes adhuc paganos fuisse'; 'tanta regnorum mutatione vel excursione barbarorum'.
27. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 61), 59: 'inutile videtur eorum acta scrutari, qui non crediderunt'.
28. The inscription is DR 42 in the 'Scandinavia Runic-texts Database'. The bibliography on the Jelling site and rune-stones is huge. I address it in Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 539–46. Other interpretations are to be found in Andersen, "The Graves"; Roesdahl, "Cultural Change"; Randsborg, "King's Jelling"; and Holst et al., "The Late Viking-Age Royal Constructions".
29. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 59).
30. Dumville and Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 1013–1042.
31. John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, 152–3; Tyler, "Talking about History".
32. Tyler, *England in Europe*, 57.
33. Dumville and Keynes, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms B and C, s. a. 857 [recte 855]. See Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 238–43 and 284–93.
34. Hobson, "National-Ethnic Narratives", 274–6.
35. Campbell, *Encomium*, 8: 'a nobilissimis, quod primum est inter homines, duxit originem'.
36. Townend, "Contextualizing", 160–1.
37. Heslop, "Fathers and Sons".
38. This is Knud Danaast, mentioned by Friis-Jensen and Fischer, *Saxo Grammaticus* (IX, xi, 4–7).
39. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 52), 53: 'Hardegon, filius Suein'; *ibid.* (I, 55), 56: 'Hardecnudth Vurm'; *ibid.* (I, 59), 57: 'Worm'.
40. Randsborg, "King's Jelling".
41. See the discussion of this episode in Bolton, *Cnut the Great*, 50–1.
42. Tyler, "Talking about History", compares the *Encomium* and Dudo's *De moribus*. On Gurim, see Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 458–68. On Hasting, see Bouet, "Hasting".
43. van Houts, *Gesta*, 6.
44. Mortensen, "From Vernacular Interview to Latin Prose".
45. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi*, 479.
46. Garrison, "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?".
47. Schmeidler, *Adam* (I, 61–2).

48. *Ibid.* (I, 48), 48: ‘cum nobis stipulantibus numeraret atavos suos’.
49. *Ibid.* (III, 54), 198–9: ‘magnam huius libelli materiam’. On how Adam proceeded from (probably vernacular) interview to (Latin) written account, see Mortensen, “From Vernacular Interview to Latin Prose”.
50. *Ibid.* (I, 48), 48: ‘Audivi autem ex ore veracissimi regis Danorum Suein’.
51. *Ibid.* (III, 21).
52. *Ibid.* (IV, 21).
53. *Ibid.* (II, 43), 103: ‘Narravit nobis diu memorandus rex Danorum et qui omnes barbarorum gestas res in memoria tenuit, ac si scriptae essent’.
54. *Ibid.* (II, 26).
55. *Ibid.* (II, 26, II, 43).
56. *Ibid.* (I, 48), 48: ‘Audivi autem ex ore’.
57. *Ibid.* (III, 54), 199: ‘verax et dulcissima narratio’.
58. *Ibid.* (I, 48).
59. *Ibid.* (I, 52). As we saw, this ‘Hardegon’ is probably Gorm the Old.
60. *Ibid.* (I, 48), 48: ‘virum populis amabilem propter iustitiam et sanctitatem suam’.
61. *Ibid.* (I, 55), 56: ‘crudelissimus, inquam, vermis’; *ibid.* (I, 59), 57: ‘crudelissimum Worm’, ‘saevitia’.
62. *Ibid.* (II, 35), 95: ‘et ipse paganus, christianis valde inimicus’.
63. *Ibid.* (II, 35; II, 38).
64. *Ibid.* (II, 38), 99: ‘Audivi ego a prudentissimo rege Danorum Hericum post susceptam christianitatem denuo relapsum ad paganismum. Quod vero cum Ottone tertio pugnaverit et victus est, ab aliis comperi; rex tacuit.
65. This is at least what appears in the narratives of Widukind of Corvey, Thietmar of Merseburg, and later Ailnoth of Canterbury. See Demidoff, “The Poppo Legend”.
66. Schmeidler, *Adam* (scholia 24). The Polish princess was Świętosława, or Sigrīð ‘the Haughty’ (stórráða), daughter of Duke Mieszko I, who later married Svend Forkbeard: she was the mother of Knud the Great, and probably Svend Estridsen’s grandmother.
67. *Ibid.* (II, 27–30).
68. Tydeus is a character from Statius’ *Thebaid*.
69. Schmeidler, *Adam* (II, 28), 87–8: ‘De cuius fine, cum istum pronepotem suum, qui nunc in Dania regnat, interrogare maluerim, velud alter Tideus crimen avi reticuit, me veor parricidium exaggerante: “Hoc est”, inquit, “quod nos posterii luimus et quod ipse parricida suo piavit exilio.”’
70. Schmeidler, *Adam* (II, 34, 40, 51).
71. Dumville, “Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists”.
72. Assmann, “Canon and Archive”, 100–1.
73. *Ibid.*, 102.
74. *Ibid.*

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