

**UHTRED'S MEMORIES IN "SAXON STORIES",
BY BERNARD CORNWELL: RETHINKING THE HISTORY
OF 9TH CENTURY ENGLAND**

Isabelle Maria Soares (UENP)
isamariaes@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The reading of the literary series "Saxon Stories" (2004), by British author Bernard Cornwell, inspires discussion regarding the relations between Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons in British territory in the 9th century, as it presents an overview of this historical moment. From this perspective, the main goal of this article is to identify expressions of memory about the history of England, by means of the concepts appropriated mainly by Pierre Nora (1993), Maurice Halbwachs (2015), Michael Pollak (1992), and Jacques Le Goff (2013). Thus, we aim to emphasize in the narrative of Uhtred, the protagonist of the work, memories that bring new perspectives on the history of England in the 9th century. For this purpose, we use only the first three books in the series as an object of study.

Keywords:

British Literature. Cultural memory. History of England.

RESUMO

A leitura da série literária "Saxon Stories" (2004), do autor britânico Bernard Cornwell, incita reflexões acerca das relações entre escandinavos e anglo-saxões no território britânico no século IX, pois apresenta um panorama desse momento histórico. A partir disso, este artigo visa identificar manifestações de memória a respeito da história da Inglaterra, sob a luz dos conceitos apropriados principalmente por Pierre Nora (1993), Maurice Halbwachs (2015), Michael Pollak (1992) e Jacques Le Goff (2013). Objetivamos, dessa forma, identificar na narrativa de Uhtred, protagonista da obra, memórias que trazem novas perspectivas acerca da história da Inglaterra no século IX. Para tanto, utilizamos apenas os três primeiros livros da série como objeto de estudo.

Palavras-chave:

Memória. História da Inglaterra. Literatura britânica.

1. Introduction

Bernard Cornwell's *Saxon Stories* series (2004-present) brings to the contemporary reader new views on the history of England in the 9th century by connecting fictional and real characters. *Saxon Stories* is currently composed of thirteen volumes. It tells the history of England during the Viking Age, presenting in a fictional way how the Scandinavian

invasions in English territory occurred. The protagonist, Uhtred of Bebbanburgh, is always narrating events from his past, which are fictitiously connected to the history of England. The events told by him involve the ambition to present not only his personal memories but, mainly, living memories connected to the communities in which he participates.

In this sense, this article aims to analyze some of the stories and actions of Uhtred in the first three volumes of the series, *The Last Kingdom* (2005), *The Pale Horseman* (2006), and *The Lords of the North* (2007), through the perspectives of cultural memory as held by Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Michael Pollak, and Jacques Le Goff.

Cornwell's fictional narrative promotes the memory of the formation of England, since it describes events from the period of Alfred the Great's reign (871–899), in which, as Isabela Albuquerque (2017) suggests, a political project was initiated, aiming the union of the small kingdoms to consolidate the dream of building an "England". The English territory was not unified in the 9th century, being divided into small kingdoms. Forester (1853) explains that, for that period, clergyman Henry de Huntingdon (1088–1154) affirmed the existence of seven kingdoms: Sussex, Wessex, Essex, Kent, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria⁷⁷.

In this context, the Viking Era began in England. The first violent attack by the Scandinavians on the inhabitants of the English lands occurred during 793. A group of vikings arrived in the northwest of England, attacking a monastery. Similar attacks followed this event until 865, when the so-called Great Heathen Army, a skilfully organized Scandinavian army, landed in East Anglia, led by Ivar Ragnarsson (or Ivar the Boneless) and his brother Halfdan, sons of Ragnar Lothbrok (Loðbrók). According to João Bittencourt de Oliveira (2016), in the course of the next fifteen years, the Scandinavians took possession of practically every eastern part of England.

After the first attacks and conquests, the Great Army was divided: one part was commanded by Halfdan and went to Northumbria to maintain the conquest made earlier, and the other remained in the south, commanded by another Scandinavian called Guthrum, who conquered London and decided to invest in attacks on Wessex. In 871, Guthrum's army arrived in Wessex. The following year, King Aethelred and his brother

⁷⁷ The term "heptarchy" began to be used in the 16th century, to refer to these seven kingdoms.

Alfred organized defense from the attacks, and “after months of fighting against the Scandinavians, the king of Wessex dies, leaving his brother as his successor” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 118) (our translation). The last kingdom to resist was Wessex. This episode focuses on the first volume of our object of study, which the name indicates: *The Last Kingdom*.

King Alfred was unable to defeat and expel the Scandinavians, but he assured peace, for a short time, by signing, with Guthrum, the Treaty of Wedmore. This agreement attributed “the delimitation of the borders of an area that would be restricted to Danish leaders, leaving Wessex (...) out of the focus of Scandinavians” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 120) (our translation) and also claimed Guthrum’s baptism and his addition to the Anglo-Saxon leadership system. Thus, the English territory was divided into two kingdoms: Wessex – the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons – and Danelaw – territory ruled by the Scandinavians.

In sum, the historical context, which serves as the background of the narrative in the first book *The Last Kingdom*, deals with the first attacks by the Danes on the Anglo-Saxons (in the 9th century), until the moment when Wessex became the last kingdom to resist. The second volume, *The Pale Horseman*, tells how Wessex reached the brink of “forgetting history”, as the author himself explains in his Historical Note, stating that “for a few months in early 878 the idea of England, its culture and language, were reduced to a few square miles of swamp” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 349). *The Lords of the North*, the third volume, describes the formation of Danelaw, showing the peace agreements between King Alfred and the Danish Guthrum, on the occasion of his Christian baptism, was recognized as king of East Anglia.

2. 9th Century England as told by Uhtred: between individual and collective memories

Maurice Halbwachs (2015) emphasizes the connection between memory and society, distinguishing individual memory and collective memory: the first carries the past that is preserved and treated from the perspective of a certain individual, while the second constitutes the remembrances selected by a social group in their internal struggles over the power to remember. Halbwachs argues that, despite being a work developed by the person, cultural memory is built by a group of reference. For the sociologist, collective memory always prevails over individual

memory:

[...] to evoke their past, in general, people need to use the memories of others, which move to points of reference that exist outside themselves, established by society. More than that, the performance of individual memory is not possible without [...] words and ideas, which the individual does not invent, but borrows from his environment (HALBWACHS, 2015, p. 72) (our translation)

Regarding remembrance, Halbwachs claims it is “a reconstruction of the past with the help of data borrowed from the present and prepared by other reconstructions made in previous times” (HALBWACHS, 2015, p. 91) (our translation). In this way, memory is an image, always in transformation with the individual who activates it in the process of remembering. Hence, “memory is enriched with external contributions, that after taking root and having found their place, are no longer distinguished from other remembrances” (HALBWACHS, 2015, p. 98, our translation).

Michael Pollak (1992) agrees with Halbwachs when he understands that the collective memory influences individual memory. However, the concept of memory held by Pollak differs from Halbwachs by placing individual and collective memory on the same level, without overcoming each other. In this way, Pollak understands that events, people, characters, and places essentially constitute memory, which the individual would come into contact with directly or indirectly. Regarding the events, the sociologist points out that there are those experienced personally by the individual as well as those that were experiences of the social group he/she belongs to. These group experiences constitute what Pollak calls “inherited memory”, which is the memory transmitted from generation to generation.

In the first book, *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred begins by narrating memories that involve the childhood he lived with his family and the Anglo-Saxon community, and the arrival of the Danes who invaded and captured him. The protagonist reveals what he knows about these invaders, knowledge transmitted to him by people of his coexistence:

I did know that they were savages, pagans and terrible. I knew that for two generations before I was born their ships had raided our coasts. I knew that Father Beocca, my father's clerk and our mass priest, prayed every Sunday to spare us from the fury of the Northmen, but that fury had passed me by. No Danes had come to our land since I had been born, but my father had fought them often enough and that night, as we waited for my brother to return, he spoke of his old enemy. They came, he said, from northern lands where ice and mist prevailed, they worshipped the old

gods, the same ones we had worshipped before the light of Christ came to bless us, [...] (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 8-9)

When Uhtred tells that the events were not his experiences, it clearly exemplifies the concepts of Halbwachs and Pollak, showing that what he knows about the Danes is the result of the collective memory disseminated by the Anglo-Saxon society. Furthermore, it confirms that his memory is made by characters, as he mentions his father, Father Beocca, and the Danes, and by places, because it makes reference to his homeland and the northern lands where the enemies came from. Events constitute a memory inherited from his father, who, besides recounting that he already fought with the Scandinavian peoples, conveys what he knows about them, denoting the religious closeness that they shared with the Anglo-Saxons before the arrival of Christianity in English lands. In addition, Uhtred's father inherited his memories from his ancestors.

We know that Scandinavians lived in the far north of Europe and that, in the historical period narrated by the work we analyze, they were still followers of a polytheistic religion, similar to the religion that Anglo-Saxons worshiped before the arrival of Christianity. Analyzing *Beowulf*, the most famous and lasting Anglo-Saxon literary text, Borges observed the approximation between these two peoples:

A curious feature of the poem is it is located first in Denmark, then in Sweden, in the southern regions. That means that after 300 years of settling new lands, the Anglo-Saxons still missed their old Baltic homelands, leading to the supposition of an affinity between Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons. (BORGES, 2006, p. 15) (our translation)

This idea of the existence of cultural sharing between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians is widespread in Cornwell's narrative, which often shows Anglo-Saxon characters who pretend to be Christians but still worship the old Germanic gods, or who are Christians, but demonstrate a certain nostalgia for this culture:

My mother wanted our banner to show the cross, but my father was proud of his ancestors, though he rarely talked about Woden. Even at nine years old I understood that a good Christian should not boast of being spawned by a pagan god, but I also liked the idea of being a god's descendant [...] (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 9)

Uhtred, when talking about his Saxon family, exposes his father's pride in his pagan origins while demonstrating his awareness of the fact that they lived in a society already dominated by Christianity (that is, the Church had much influence over the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms). However, as Isabela Albuquerque (2017) points out, memories that refer to a pre-

Christian past participated in King Alfred's aspiration to establish an English identity. Thus, when investing in writing, Alfred proposed not only to focus on the "Sacred Scriptures and the heavenly world (...), but also, to adopt the vernacular language (Old English), and not just Latin" (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 119, our translation).

Pagan practices by Anglo-Saxons, and not specifically their memories, were considered transgressive, as we can see better in the dialogue between young Uhtred and his father:

'The raven is Woden's creature, isn't it?' I asked nervously.
My father looked at me sourly. 'Who told you that?'
I shrugged, said nothing.
'Ealdwulf?' He guessed, knowing that Bebbanburgh's blacksmith, who had stayed at the fortress with Ælfric, was a secret pagan.
'I just heard it', I said, hoping I would get away with the evasion without being hit, 'and I know we were descended from Woden'.
'We are', my father acknowledged, 'but we have a new God now' [...] (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 16)

Although his father shows a certain "pride" for his possible descent from a pagan god, he accepts and reaffirms the Christian God. However, another character stands out: Ealdwulf, a fan of secret "pagan" practices. Most medieval Christian documents oppose the conflict of Christians (Anglo-Saxons) versus pagans (Scandinavians): that is, every Anglo-Saxon was considered a Christian. As can be seen in the quoted excerpt, the tale in *Saxon Stories* intends to explore this belief: not all Anglo-Saxons were Christians.

Uhtred, when inserted in the Anglo-Saxon context, expresses the affection he feels for what he knows of the Old Germanic practices in contrast to the current beliefs and its consequent habits (such as the teaching of reading and writing, by Father Beocca) that his compatriots try to impose on him. The narrative highlights this feeling when Uhtred starts living and experiencing the Danish culture and religiosity.

The pride for pagan ancestry is reinforced later in *The Lords of the North* when the protagonist declares to his friends: "my ancestors were kings (...) and their blood is in me. It is the blood of Odin. My father, though a Christian, had always been proud that our family was descended from the god Odin" (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 264). The issue goes beyond religiosity. Uhtred, who shows his conflict between ethnically belonging to the Anglo-Saxon group and the identification he feels for the ancient German culture and beliefs, shares memories that preserve the origin of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, in a way similar to what happens

in the epic poem *Beowulf*, as we can see in the following excerpt:

I was raised a Christian, but at ten years old, when I was taken into Ragnar's family, I discovered the old Saxon gods who were also the gods of the Danes and of the Norsemen, and their worship has always made more sense to me than bowing down to a god who belongs to a country so far away that I have met no one who has ever been there. Thor and Odin walked our hills, slept in our valleys, loved our women and drank from our streams, [...] (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 71-2)

Among the main inheritances Uhtred receives from living with the Danes, religion is the most significant for him. Although the identification that Uhtred feels with the Norse religion is consolidated by his coexistence with the Danish people, he has brought this legacy from his Anglo-Saxon community, from the learning he had with some Anglo-Saxon practitioners of Norse religion, such as the blacksmith of his family, Ealdwulf. Since his childhood, Uhtred has had more interest in the stories of the Norse gods than in the Christian practices that Father Beocca persistently taught him.

According to Linda Hutcheon (1988), the postmodern novel is shaped from a plural language, constituted by a plurality of voices that emerge to inquire and ironize history by retelling it through literary fiction. Thus, we can discern a plurality of memories in the text because, as Pierre Nora (1993) points out, “memory emerges from a group that it unites, which means, as Halbwachs holds, there are as many memories as there are groups” (p. 9) (our translation). Therefore, memory itself is also “multiple, lingering, collective, plural and individual” (NORA, 1993, p. 9 – our translation).

Saxon Stories is certainly designed by a range of voices. Uhtred is the protagonist who tells a whole story based on his memories, acquainting us with other voices and memories from other characters essential to his story. We also encounter the voice and memories of King Alfred, the Lothbrok brothers, and other characters, historical and fictional, representing Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, and other peoples. Uhtred, himself, is a plural character. The protagonist represents the “collective memory” established by the English identity in the historical period he narrates.

To illustrate, we quote a passage in which Uhtred only narrates, but the speaker is Ivar Lothbrok and Alfred's interpreter. We also have the participation of another Lothbrok, Ubba. Beocca, a fictional character representing an Anglo-Saxon priest, and Alfred arouse the Scandinavian

Ivar's curiosity about the writing process:

Beocca then held a small vial of ink so that Alfred could dip the quill and write.

'What is he doing?' Ivar asked.

'He is making notes of our talks,' the English interpreter answered.

'Notes?'

'So there is a record, of course'.

'He has lost his memory?' Ivar asked, while Ubba produced a very small knife and began to clean his fingernails. Ragnar pretended to write on his hand, which amused the Danes. (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 88)

This excerpt brings reflections on the role of writing as a record of "reality". We observe that the Scandinavian Ivar, despite expressing his curiosity, makes fun of the writing practice of the Anglo-Saxons as a resolution to a certain "loss of memory". The self-awareness of the narrative that reverberates in this passage involves the question of writing as a Christian instrument and its function as a device of power. Christian Anglo-Saxons understand written documentation as a way of recording memories. For Scandinavians, memory would prevail through oral transmission from generation to generation, by the composition of the *skalds*.

3. *The role of writing: Scandinavians' and Anglo-Saxons' perspectives in "Saxon Stories"*

When contrasting history and memory, Nora (1993) claims that history as science aims at searching for the truth. In this sense, the impossibility of attaining a whole historical truth leads history to be penetrated by "power games", resulting in manipulations that intend to serve the interests of historiography, whether at the individual level (of a particular historian, for example) or in the collective sphere. On the other hand, Le Goff (1996) points out that memory is also capable of obeying certain interests:

[...] collective memory had an important role in the struggle of social forces for power. Becoming masters of memory and oblivion is one of the main concerns of classes, groups, individuals who dominated and dominate historical societies. Oblivion and silence reveal these mechanisms of manipulation of collective memory. (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 390) (our translation)

Following this perspective, Le Goff enhances the importance of understanding memory in two historical periods and/or social groups: the memory of oral and written societies. The author explains that the transition

from orality to writing in different societies triggered the transformation of collective memory.

The non-literate societies, as is the case of 9th century Scandinavian society, transmitted collective memory through narratives, mainly mythological, from generation to generation. This mythology consisted of the search for “origin”, and thus, memories were built with “more freedom and more creative possibilities” (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 394) (our translation). Since the transfer in these societies without writing does not happen from word by word, “the collective memory seems (...) to function (...) according to a ‘generative reconstruction’ and not to a mechanical memorization” (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 393, our translation).

In the first moments of living with the Danish Ravn, Ragnar's father, the old blind man, explains to Uhtred and the readers what a *skald* is:

[...] ‘I speak your language and the language of the Britons and the tongue of the Wends and the speech of the Frisians and that of the Franks. Language is now my trade, boy, because I have become a skald’.

‘A skald?’

‘A scop, you would call me. A poet, a weaver of dreams, a man who makes glory from nothing and dazzles you with its making. And my job now is to tell this day's tale in such a way that man will never forget our great deeds’.

‘But if you cannot see’, I asked, ‘how can you tell what happened?’

Ravn laughed at that. ‘Have you heard of Odin? Then you should know that Odin sacrificed one of his own eyes so that could obtain the gift of poetry. So perhaps I am twice as good a skald as Odin, eh?’ (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 33)

Skald was the designation for Scandinavian poets. According to Langer (2015), these poets, who had great social prestige, needed “excellent memory, great knowledge in Norse mythology and cosmogony, refined language and sophisticated oratory” (p. 166) (our translation). The *skaldic* poetry technique was “transmitted from the most advanced generations to the youngest, through oral and individualized means” (LANGER, 2015, p. 166, our translation). The *skalds* aimed “to report by oral tradition – verbal telling, ancient traditions, poems, heroic narratives, historical narratives, tales, folklore, aspects of religiosity” (LANGER, 2015, p. 166, our translation). Based on Le Goff (2013, p. 393), we understand *skalds* as “specialists of memory” or “men of memory”.

Understanding that “the celebration of individual glories was the foundation of life for a Nordic warrior (...)”, the *skalds* sought to transmit

to society the main characteristics of the Scandinavian people: “(...) courage, bravery, boldness, abandonment to love, contempt for death, generosity, the strength of mind, fidelity, cunning” (LANGER, 2015, p. 167, our translation). These memories led by Scandinavian poetry define most of the Nordic characters in the narrative we analyze, especially the protagonist himself, who expresses how proud he feels of being a “warrior” in Viking style.

As we can see, the reader of “Saxon Stories” becomes aware of the oral culture of Scandinavians, the existence and importance of poets and their relationship with religiosity. In addition, we identify a meta-narrative tone when Ravn states that a *skald* is a “man who builds the Glory from nothing”, which can explain the “invention” that is endowed to the memory of the poet and/or fictionist. When the character references the story of the god Odin, who receives the gift of poetry when he goes blind, we identify the myth that surrounds oral memory: the search for the origin of the fictional creation itself.

In *The Pale Horseman*, when Uhtred meets his friends and a group of Danes, he tells about how Ubba Lothbrok died, at the request of his friend Ragnar:

[...] so I had to describe Ubba’s death and the Danes, who love a good story of a fight, wanted every detail. I told the tale well, making Ubba into a great hero who had almost destroyed the West Saxon army, and I said he had been fighting like a god, and told how he had broken our shield wall with his great ax. I described the burning ships, their smoke drifting over the battle slaughter like a cloud from the netherworld, and I said I had found myself facing Ubba in his victory charge. That was not true, of course, and the Danes knew it was not true. I had not just found myself opposing Ubba, but had sought him out. But when a story is told it must be seasoned with modesty and the listeners, understanding that custom, murmured approval.

[...]

“He died well?” a man asked anxiously.

“As a hero,” I said, and I told how I had put the ax back into his dying hand so that he would go to Valhalla [...] (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 224)

Uhtred builds his narrative in the style of poets, who illustrate the reputation of a hero by raising “glory from nothing”, as the *skald* Ravn said. Furthermore, it elucidates the importance of stories told orally in the Danish culture.

Concerning memory in societies with writing, Le Goff highlights the ascendancy of Christianity, reinforcing the involvement between ideology and religion:

While “popular” social memory, or folklore”, escapes us almost entirely, collective memory formed by different social strata undergoes profound transformations in the Middle Ages. The essential comes from the spread of Christianity as a religion and as the dominant ideology and from the almost monopoly that the Church conquers in the intellectual domain. (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 404) (our translation)

This statement fits perfectly into the historical context of English territory in the 9th century, considering that “in addition to the victories in the military campaigns, the Alfredian period was also characterized by a cultural flourishing, especially concerning written production” (ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 119) (our translation), which was confined to confined to the priestly and ruling class. Undoubtedly, there are representations of this characteristic in *Saxon Stories*, as can be seen in the example we cited, in which the Scandinavian Ivar questions about the purpose of writing by relating it to a possible “memory loss”.

When discussing memory in the medieval context of the Western culture, Le Goff points out that, at that time, writing developed alongside orality, “at least in the group of clerics and scholars, there is a balance between oral memory and written memory” (2013, p. 411) (our translation). Thus, the practice of writing performed a function of “memory support”. We observe the following dialogue between Alfred and Uhtred:

[...] Alfred insisted on waiting until the eighth day of February, because that was the Feast of Saint Cuthman, a Saxon saint from East Anglia [...].
“Are you familiar with Saint Cuthman?” Alfred asked me cheerfully.
“No, lord.”
“He was a hermit”, Alfred said. We were riding north, keeping on the high ground with the swamp to our left. “His mother was crippled and so he made her a wheelbarrow.”
“A wheelbarrow? What could a cripple do with a wheelbarrow?”
“No, no, no! He pushed her about in it! So she could be with him as he preached. He pushed her everywhere.”
“She must have liked that.”
“There’s no written life of him that I know of”, Alfred said, “but we must surely compose one. He could be a saint for mothers.”
“Or for wheelbarrows, lord.” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 205)

The story of Saint Cuthman is an example of memory transmitted orally within the narrative we analyzed. Albuquerque indicates that many of the texts produced during the Alfredian period “have traces of orality, reinforcing only the thesis that they were compiled after their circulation” (2017, p. 119, our translation). The researcher also mentions that a good part of this production “was probably already known to the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, because it transmitted the values of a warrior tradition”

(ALBUQUERQUE, 2017, p. 119, our translation).

The role played by Alfred in “Saxon Stories” focuses especially on his love for Christianity, and the spread of his faith throughout British territory, aiming at the places of the establishment of the Scandinavian “invaders” as well. Certainly, the real and historical Alfred had these characteristics. As Albuquerque (2017) presents, however, the King of Wessex supported a project for the propagation of writing that also compiled memories of war from the pre-Christian past of England.

The discussion around memory and its interfaces between societies without and with writing is a relevant point in “Saxon Stories”, which proposes the premise that collective memory is “an instrument and an object of power” (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 435). It is remarkable how writing, by revising orality, becomes a support for the power of a people or a group, when selecting which memories to remember, which to forget and which to recreate.

Lastly, Le Goff stresses that collective memory must be improved to serve “for liberation and not for the servitude of men” (2013, p. 437). Bernard Cornwell seems to have used this conception, considering that his work, in particular the books of “Saxon Stories”, brings about this “emancipation” of collective memory, as well as individual memories, for suggesting different trajectories for the history of the formation of England, through the particularities of each character, especially the narrator and protagonist Uhtred.

4. *Uhtred’s identity: between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians*

Uhtred is a character divided between Danish culture and Anglo-Saxon culture, becoming a representation of the relations between these two peoples. All the memories that this character presents to us, both the memories lived by him and the inherited memories, are decisive in the construction of his identity. In this sense, we understand when Jöel Candau states that “memory, at the same time that it shapes us, is also shaped by us” (2011, p. 16, our translation). Therefore, this idea “perfectly summarizes the dialectic of memory and identity that come together, nurture each other, support each other to produce a life trajectory, a story, a myth, a narrative” (CANDAU, 2011, p. 16, our translation).

Le Goff argues that “memory is an essential element of what is often called identity, individual or collective” (2013, p. 43, our translation).

Accordingly, Pollak suggests that if “memory is a socially and individually constructed phenomenon, regarding inherited memory we can also say that there is a very close phenomenological link between memory and the feeling of identity” (1992, p. 5, our translation).

We can understand this idea by contrasting the following two excerpts from the first two books of *Saxon Stories*:

I should, by rights, be dead, yet Ragnar had saved me and Ragnar spoilt me and treated me like a son, and he called me a Dane, and I liked the Danes, yet even at that time I knew I was not a Dane. I was Uhtred of Bebbanburg and I clung to the memory of the fortress by the sea, of the birds crying over the breakers, of the puffins whirring across the whitecaps, of the seals on the rocks, of the white water shattering on the cliffs. I remembered the folk of that land, the men who called my father ‘lord’, but talked to him of cousins they held in common. It was the gossip of neighbours, the comfort of knowing every family within half-day’s ride, and that was, and is, Bebbanburg to me; home. (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 65)

I had learned their language and worshipped their gods until I no longer knew whether I was Danish or English. Had Earl Ragnar the Elder lived I would never have left them, but he had died, murdered in a night of treachery and fire, and I had fled south to Wessex. But now I would go back. (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 14)

The excerpts dialogue in a certain way. In the first, from *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred, who is already living with the Danes, shows recognition for Ragnar, the Dane who captured him, raised him, and considers him a Dane too. However, even though he likes the Danes, Uhtred recognizes he does not belong to their group, and begins to feel attached to his native land, his Anglo-Saxon land: Bebbanburgh (located in Northumbria). Eventually, Candau claims “family memory is our land” (2011, p. 141). This “family memory” resembles, in a way, the “inherited memory”, conceived by Pollak (1992). In other words, the family is the foundation of the principles of identity formation, as it is with family that a person experiences and builds his/her first memories. In this case, Uhtred has part of his identity attached to the Anglo-Saxon land, where he was born and raised by his blood family.

The second excerpt is from the second book, *The Pale Horseman*, and confirms that Uhtred conflicts his identity: he does not know whether he is Danish or English. Throughout the narrative, Uhtred clarifies that he wants to reclaim his Anglo-Saxon homeland, which, according to him, was stolen by his uncle, after the killing of Uhtred’s father by the Danes. Uhtred spent most of his childhood and adolescence with the Danes,

identifying culturally with them. However, as he said, Ragnar, his “Danish father”, and his entire group were also murdered.

Because of these events, Uhtred gets directly involved with the Anglo-Saxons who lived in the region of Wessex, with King Alfred, and becomes a decisive character in the political events of the English territory, even helping in the expulsion of the Scandinavians (first, the Danes, later Norwegian invaders). Therefore, Uhtred’s identity is the result of conflicts between “inherited memories”, which he bequeathed both from his Anglo-Saxon blood family and from his Danish adoptive family.

When we remember anything it is as if we are narrating ourselves. The connection between memory and identity occurs through discourses and, in the case of Uhtred, through the literary discourse, which confers new meanings both for the life of this character and for the history and memory of England. Uhtred demonstrates how his memories transform him. Furthermore, the protagonist shares the collective memory of both central peoples of the story he narrates: Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. In other words, collective memory shapes Uhtred, encompassing the entire historical context regarding the contact between these peoples. As Le Goff complements, based on Pierre Janet, “the fundamental mnemonic act is ‘narrative behavior’” (LE GOFF, 2013, p. 389) (our translation). Memory, therefore, “results in a report, in a speech, since it takes shape as it is narrated” (SOUZA, 2014, p. 110) (our translation).

Therefore, through “self-reconstruction work, the individual tends to define his/her social place and his/her relationship with others” (SOUZA, 2014, p. 111) (our translation). The construction of Uhtred’s identity is an intersection of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian culture and also delineates the process of formation of England in the 9th century.

5. Final considerations

This article discussed how some excerpts from the first three books of “Saxon Stories” present cultural memory, which guides Uhtred’s fictional narrative. History, literary fiction, and memory are discursive constructions, that is, we materialize them through language. By reading Uhtred’s narrative, we find that, when telling his story, the protagonist of “Saxon Stories” shows memories that refer to a feeling internalized by the character and also by what is external to him, presenting private and intimate memories, and, mainly, living memories related to

the collective environment. Uhtred is, above all, a plural character.

Our discussion showed that memory is much more than a dialectic between past and present, since it is an instrument for “reassessments, reviews, self-analysis, self-criticism, self-awareness” (SOUZA, 2014, p. 109) (our translation). To remember is also to evaluate the past in relation to the present. We analyzed the memories of the protagonist of *Saxon Stories* because he is the one who tells the story. Uhtred’s individual memories and, consequently, his identity manifestations emerge from the collective memory.

In this way, Uhtred’s identity is a result of the memories that he shares with the different groups, the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians. By analyzing “Saxon Stories”, we understood that the consolidation of memory and its relationship with the principles of identity happens through literary discourse. Hence, by understanding the relationship between memory and identity, conveyed mainly by Uhtred, we perceive new meanings of English history, memory and identity in contemporary times.

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