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The Vikings in Scotland

"From the fury of the Northmen deliver us, O Lord."

This heart-felt prayer, although in fact completely inauthentic (having been cobbled together back in the early 1960's), nicely sums up the first official appearance of the Vikings in the history of the Islands of Britain in monastic writings, following a raid on Lindisfarne in the year 793 CE. The closest fully documented phrase appears in a Latin antiphony for churches dedicated to St. Vaast or St. Medard, which translates as "Our supreme and holy Grace, protecting us and ours, deliver us, God, from the savage race of Northmen which lays waste our realms." It is, perhaps, not quite as pithy and succinct as the invented one, and certainly labouring the point a bit. Further raids on Jarrow, Wear, Iona and several other ecclesiastical centres soon followed the initial one on Lindisfarne, and the panic started to spread that "civilisation" was about to fall to yet another wave of conquering barbarians, just as their spiritual home, Rome, had done a couple of centuries before.

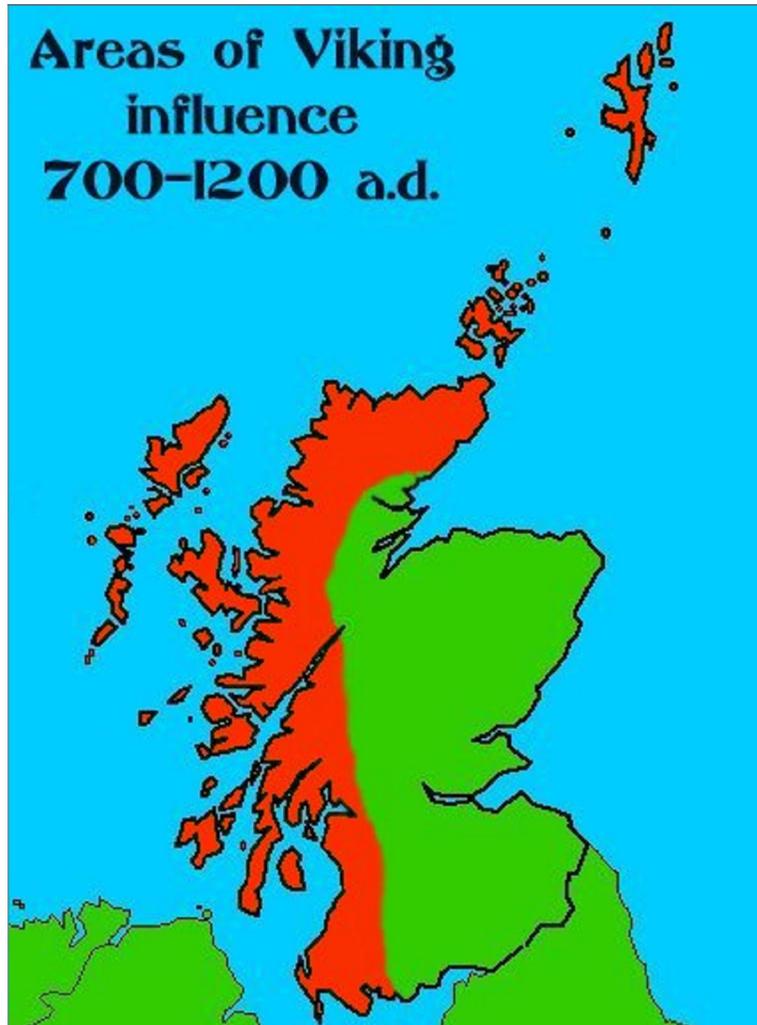
But is this really the whole truth? The classic picture of the Vikings solely as berserk killers, reivers and pillagers is not the only one available to historians nowadays, and it is also inherently flavoured by the propaganda of those who saw themselves as suffering most at that point from their depredations. Essentially, it's the same as the ludicrous horned helmet of the classic cartoon Viking – a helmet which never existed in fact, being a misinterpretation of grave goods by early archaeologists, who found a helm and two drinking horns by the head of an excavated skeleton, and somehow assumed that the horns had fallen off the helmet... This ridiculous hypothesis has now become accepted fact, and I guarantee that at least half of you reading this mentally picture the Vikings with this type of helmet on - if you think of them at all!

It's time to look a little deeper into the supposed 300 year age of the Vikings, and chart their undoubtedly widespread influence on our own Scottish nation. I will endeavour to concentrate specifically on Scotland, though the Norsemen affected many nations, including England, Ireland, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Russia and even Constantinople – and the influence of the Vikings is so widespread within this period that this is almost an impossible task even in one very short article.

Around 750 CE, the area now known as Scandinavia was suffering from a surplus population, and new arable land was becoming all too scarce. Unified kingships, a larger population and the inheritance of first sons were all factors contributing to the general unavailability of "lebensraum". Unable to support their indigenous population fully, and utilising their already well advanced skills of seamanship, roving groups of Norse, Swedes and Danes set out to prospect for new territories. It is suspected that both the Shetlands and Orkney Islands bore the brunt of this expansion initially, though concise archaeological evidence for this period is still somewhat sparse. There is, however, solid evidence that there must have been a fair degree of contact between the two communities during the Pictish occupation of the Orkneys, as several Pictish combs made out of reindeer antlers have been discovered. The early family settlement of the Orkneys is also borne out by the grave of the Westness Woman on Rousay, dating from the ninth or tenth century. She was buried in pagan fashion, and her grave goods included a silver ring-pin of Celtic ornamentation, a bronze basin, wool combs, a sickle, shears and a pair of beautiful bronze domed brooches featuring glass beads.

It is definitively known from excavations at the Brough of Birsay, in Orkney, that whilst the Picts were very active there in the seventh century, by the ninth century the Vikings had taken over completely. This may not,

however, have been altogether by the usually assumed method of genocide. Although most Viking sagas speak of various slaughters during incursions, little actual archaeological evidence for these has been discovered – which is not to say they did not take place. Against the picture of peaceful immigration must be set the stark contrast of the opposite viewpoint, best illustrated by a comment from the Orkney historian Storer Clouston, some 70 years ago; “Surely the common-sense of the matter ... is evident. The first Norsemen ... proposed to settle in these islands, whether the existing inhabitants liked it or not. They brought their swords, and if the inhabitants were numerous and offered resistance, they fought them. If they were few and fled, they took their land without fighting. They did, in fact, exactly what we ourselves have done in later centuries, in India, America, Africa, Australia ... That is the only way in which we can settle a new land – chance your luck, but always bring your gun.” A somewhat imperialistic viewpoint, undoubtedly, but one with which we are all familiar from history.



However recent DNA analysis has shown that in areas such as the Orkneys, the incomers arrived on an almost equal gender basis – as many women as men, in other words – and this does imply a relatively peaceful integration since obviously settling down and establishing farmsteads must have been their main aim. 30% of the indigenous Orcadian population displays Scandinavian ancestry, on both the paternal and maternal lines. As we have bitter experience of in more recent times, a massive peaceful influx of settlers does tend to drive the indigenous populace either out of the area or into an insignificant minority. The Sudreys (now known as the Western Isles) on the other hand, showed around half the number of the indigenous population's DNA (some 15%) directly traceable to Scandinavian ancestry and with a disproportionately high contribution from Scandinavian males – proof, perhaps, that more lone Viking males took up with local women and settled down there. The degree of intermarriage is also borne out by the mixture of Norse and Gaelic names in the various genealogies available in both the sagas and from contemporary sources. At present I regret I have been unable to find any really accurate documentation of any DNA findings in the Galloway region, though. This is a pity as the original name Galloway (or in the Norse tongue Gaddgeddlar) is derived directly from the Gall Gaidheal.

One thing that must be understood is that the Vikings actually respected those who stood up for themselves, and would quite happily treat with or trade with those whom they could not defeat militarily. But initially they all regarded

the monks and priests of the christ-god as easy prey – fools who made no attempt to protect their valuables, and who fled or stood by meekly waiting to be killed whenever a raiding party beached nearby. Sheep waiting to be shorn, they were of course frequently treated as such, and despatched without regard. Many of the religiously minded of course actively sought out this sort of treatment, in the name of martyrdom, and several examples of this can be easily found in a number of contemporary records. Sadly, religious fanaticism existed over a millennium ago, just as it still does today.

In the main, Viking Scotland comprised the Northern and Western Isles, Caithness, Sutherland and Inverness. Known severally as Lothlend, Laithlinn or Lochlainn (depending on which source you read), this area was comprehensively settled by Norse Vikings by the early ninth century. By mid-century it had created its own royal

dynasty no longer directly connected to the Vestfold in Norway, and by the end of the ninth century this dynasty had made Dublin its main headquarters, from where it waged war on the indigenous Irish kings. Tribute was also collected from Picts and Scots on the mainland of Scotland, and when they were expelled from Dublin in 902 C.E. the Vikings there returned to Scotland. Following various engagements and battles, York was conquered and the kingdom of Dublin re-founded in 917 C.E. It has been postulated elsewhere that Olaf the White, Norse king of Dublin in the mid-ninth century, was in fact of Hebridean birth or ancestry. Dublin (and other places in Ireland) were now being used as bases to loot and plunder both Irish and English monasteries and their hinterlands, but not the Hebrides. From this it may be inferred that the Scottish islands and Highland coastal regions were by now areas not seen as targets, but so settled by the Norse and their ensuing generations that they were now capable of providing the raiding parties themselves. Summer raids were regularly mounted from here to Ireland, England and the north-west coasts of the continent.

So, despite the undoubted evidence that the Vikings could often be savage and merciless, there is also a reasonable amount of evidence to show that their integration into the northern areas of Scotland and the Isles could have been relatively peaceful in places. By the time of Somerled, Lord of the Isles, the one-time Vikings in the Isles, by now the Gall-Gaidheal, were indigenous by means both of intermarriage with the local population and by adoption of not only some of the language but also the customs. The Vikings traditionally had always had a very close relationship with their kith and kin, which mixed easily with the then-developing clan system. Viking longships were evolving into birlinns, Celtic artwork and carving had adopted many of the Vikings animalistic motifs and was already becoming easily recognisable as the style we today recognise as Celtic knot work, and the language was now becoming a mixture of Gaelic and Norse. Very similar integration had taken place in north-east Scotland, particularly Kincardineshire and the Moray coast, where many previous raiders had settled and become one with the indigenous population. This integration was also taking place in the south-west and Argyll, the original mainstay of Somerled. There were undoubtedly many similarities in the styles of farming and husbandry techniques, especially with regard to the care and utilisation of commonly kept domesticated animals such as sheep, goats, cattle and pigs.

Settled they might have started to become, but some old habits died hard. The tradition of raiding was deeply ingrained by now, and an extract from the Orkneyinga saga from the early ninth century illustrates this perfectly. "This was how Svein used to live. Winter he would spend at home on Gairsay, where he entertained some eighty men at his own expense. His drinking hall was so big, there was nothing in Orkney to compare with it. In the spring he had more than enough to occupy him, with a great deal of seed to sow which he saw to carefully himself. Then when that job was done, he would go off plundering in the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his 'spring-trip', then back home just after mid-summer, where he stayed till the cornfields had been reaped and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended. This he used to call his 'autumn-trip'."

As time went on, local concerns became more important, and both in Orkney and the Isles the entrenchment as local magnates and people of influence started to show. No doubt too the church played its part in this, in encouraging the newly integrated population to conform to the needs and desires of its spiritual leaders. During this period of consolidation, raids on religious and monastic sites had now mostly tailed off – although this just may have been because these places had been plundered so often that there was realistically nothing much left worth taking. Continued contact with the new religion, and the more settled lifestyle, had led the Gall-Gaidheal to adopt several of the Christian ways and practices. Many of the now-Christians from the Hebridean Gall-Gaidheal played a considerable part in the colonisation of Iceland in the late ninth century, and there is evidence to suggest they also took part in the fairly heavy settlement of Cumbria during that period. By the time of Somerled and his sons, at the very least a token adherence to the Christian religion had taken over, indeed to the extent that Somerled started (and his son completed) a small chapel on Iona, which had suffered so badly from the earlier depredations. Ironic perhaps, but the descendants of those who first so dismayed the Christians were now fast becoming its adherents and indeed its principal benefactors.

It should be becoming obvious by now that a number of similarities between the traditions of the Viking settlers and the Gaels are apparent, and the fusion of these traditions as they interbred and became one people solidified them. A strong oral historical, poetic and genealogical focus in both traditions fused to strengthen their ways and formed the forerunners of the highland bards or seannachies. The honour codes of both peoples were very similar, and even in the pre-Christian setting could be seen to have bonded strongly to form a fairly inflexible set of "laws" by which all could abide. The strength of kith and kin connections gelled to form the precursor to the later clan system and indeed in my opinion built the foundations for the entire Highland way of life – loyalty to the tribal leader and clan members, the relatively insular self-help methods found in somewhat isolated communities, and raiding of nearby neighbours in an almost ritualistic fashion.

The archetypal Highland black house, of low stone construction, shows strong Norse influence and is typical of early Viking dwellings. Even the warfare methods show a form of cohesiveness, for although the shields slowly reduced in size to that of the targe, the Dane axe lengthened and changed shape to become the much-feared Lochaber axe. It might also quite reasonably be postulated that the feared Highland Charge developed from the seeming death-wish behaviour of the Norse berserkers. The overall notion of "honour" was very much a common factor, and to be held as being a man without honour was one of the greatest shames in both cultures. Honour led to fame, and this was always desirable – for it promised a form of immortality. As one of the sagas says;



Cattle die, kinsmen die
The self must also die;
but glory never dies,
for the man who is able to achieve it.

The moral code of the early Vikings is summed up in the sagas with examples of "praiseworthiness", which are listed in Appendix 1. It can be seen from these that, although some of their code may appear a little brutal to the modern mind, particularly to those whose adherence to political correctness is of the zealot variety, the ideals and mindset of the Vikings was well-suited to their relatively harsh environment and the flourishing of their local communities. Living by this code would not be too difficult for most people of the time, as its inherent righteousness is too easily apparent. Perhaps it may be insufficiently gender-generous for the modern feminist, but that is to examine it too closely with a contemporary mindset, and also to conveniently forget that women played just as specific a part in daily life then as they do today. At least there was little of the patronising misogyny so apparent in the laws of the Christians...

A society with a strong oral tradition, they exhibited a love of word-play and riddling, something that has been evident in many early cultures – c.f. Oedipus and the Sphinx, which dates from around 400 BCE. I have quoted an example in Appendix 2.

I have not really touched on the Viking skills of navigation and seamanship, partly because it's a full topic all on its own, and partly because it is self-evident that since their earliest incursions into what we now regard as Scotland were the out-flung islands, it's just an unspoken fact. But the design of their ships, both the raiding craft and the trading ones, influenced the native island design heavily. Most of the island craft prior to the Viking incursion was along the curragh model, a simple framework covered with animal hide – and rather unsuited to long voyages, though some were of course accomplished (St Brendan springs to mind). Once the new idea caught on, the Western Isles were rapidly denuded of trees, for in point of fact in early times they were heavily afforested. The well-known galley or birlinn of the Isles is nothing more than a late-model Viking longship, with its high curved prow and stern, the single fixed rudder, facilities for both oars and sail and very shallow draft. Whether adapted for fishing, raiding, or transporting cattle over the sounds, the design did not alter dramatically for hundreds of years, presumably following the age-old wisdom that if it works, don't change it. As the Norwegian archaeologist Brogger states: "It is a real work of art ... the ship inspires the same delight as a shapely living creature, a paragon of its kind, a system of many parts welded into a perfect unity." The MacDonald galleys of the past are reflected in the small wooden fishing boats still being built today to a recognisably Norse design.

One final thing really has to be mentioned when talking about the overall Viking culture. The monks and literati of the early church generally describe them as barbarians. However, a quick contrasting of the hygienic practices of the two may lead to somewhat different conclusions. As one of the sagas makes clear during a passage giving advice to those reading -

Combed and washed every thoughtful man should be
and fed in the morning;
for one cannot foresee where one will be by evening;
it is bad to rush headlong before one's fate

Magnus Magnusson in his book, "The Vikings", has this to say following a description of a workshop excavated which proved to have been a factory producing combs from bones and antlers;

"Indeed the Vikings, contrary to their scruffy, hairy image, seem to have been obsessed with personal hygiene. The thirteenth-century English chronicler, John of Wallingford, recorded complaints about it; he claimed that the Vikings had always been combing their hair and taking baths and changing their underwear, which gave them an

unfair advantage over their Anglo-Saxon rivals for the affections of the local maidens! ... It is surely significant that that the word for 'Saturday' in the Scandinavian languages is still based on the Old Norse form laugardagur, 'hot springs day' – in effect, 'bath night'!"

This obsession with personal hygiene is borne out by numerous finds of grooming kits, comprising tweezers, ear scoops and finger-nail scrapers, in both male and female grave goods.

It is generally held by Anglo-orientated historians that the Viking Age came to an end with the death of the English king Harold in 1066, defeated by William of Normandy, himself of Norse descent. But this is (as is usual in "British" history) looking at things from a purely Anglo-centric viewpoint. The Orkneys, Shetlands and Caithness remained under token Norse ownership for many more years. Somerled's depredations in Argyll and Dumbarton occurred during the mid-late 12th century. In 1198 King William (the Lion) quarrelled with the Earl of Orkney, and Ragnvald, Lord of the Isles, was conscripted to subdue Caithness and take it under the ownership of the Isles. This was duly done, but in 1229 King Haakon of Norway decided to retake the Sudreys and bring Somerled's descendants under his wing again. He failed in this attempt, but two decades later Harald, Lord of the Isles, whilst acknowledging Norwegian overlordship, was honoured by King Henry III of England and married the daughter of the King of Norway. Unfortunately for him he drowned on the way home from his wedding. Alexander II had already decided to trim the wings of the Lordship, but fell ill and died during an expedition in 1249. His son started negotiations with Haakon in 1261 but Haakon declined to cede the Isles to Scotland. He decided instead to invade, and this led to the Battle of Largs in 1263, and in July of 1266 a treat was made ceding Man and all the Sudreys to Alexander for the princely sum of 4,000 marks in 4 yearly instalments, and 100 marks annually thereafter.

In the 14th century, the Earldom of Orkney passed by marriage and descent to the St Clair family. Arguments over various missed payments for the Sudreys interrupted negotiations over many years, but in 1468 a treaty was signed and James III took Margaret of Denmark as his bride, part of her dowry being the Orkneys. The remainder of the dowry continued outstanding until 1472, when Christian of Denmark ceded the Shetlands to Scotland in remittance. So the date given by Anglo-revisionist historians as the end of the Viking Age is over 4 centuries out, in Scotland's case. As, to my mind, are the impressions they have given over the years of a group of people who not only were responsible for many aspects of Scottish culture, but whose pioneering spirit lives on in many Scots today.

Appendix 1:

The Praiseworthy Virtues of the North

What is praiseworthy?

 Gifting is praiseworthy.

 Generosity is praiseworthy.

 Moderation is praiseworthy.

 The maintaining of frith * in all circumstances is praiseworthy.

 Courage is praiseworthy.

 The seeking of good over ill is praiseworthy.

 Hospitality is praiseworthy.

 Courtesy is praiseworthy.

 Tolerance is praiseworthy.

 The pursuit of wisdom and knowledge is praiseworthy.

 The defence of freedom is praiseworthy.

 Industriousness is praiseworthy.

 Vigilance is praiseworthy.

 The protection, nurturing and forbearing of kin is praiseworthy.

 Showing respect for elders is praiseworthy.

 Loyalty to friends and kin is praiseworthy.

 Keeping an oath is praiseworthy.

 Honouring the sanctity of marriage is praiseworthy.

 Refraining from mockery is praiseworthy.

 Refraining from arrogance is praiseworthy.

 Making kin, honour and justice more important than gold is praiseworthy.

 Cleanliness is praiseworthy.

The maintaining of one's dignity in all situations is praiseworthy.
 Good organization is praiseworthy.
 Persistence is praiseworthy.
 The rule of law is praiseworthy.
 To try ones steel against an opponent fairly is praiseworthy.
 Respect for the dead is praiseworthy.
 For a man to never strike a woman is praiseworthy.
 To not abuse one's power is praiseworthy.

* "frith" - the joyful and carefree sense of well-being one has when all of one's needs are met - can be personal or community-based.

Appendix 2:

A Viking riddle:

I am man's treasure, taken from the woods,
 Cliff-sides, hill-slopes, valleys, downs;
 By day wings bear me in the buzzing air,
 Slip me under a sheltering roof-sweet craft.
 Soon a man bears me to a tub. Bathed,
 I am binder and scourge of men, bring down
 The young, ravage the old, sap strength.
 Soon he discovers who wrestles with me
 My fierce body-rush - I roll fools
 Flush on the ground. Robbed of strength,
 Reckless of speech, a man knows no power
 Over hands, feet, mind. Who am I who bind
 Men on middle-earth, blinding with rage?
 Fools know my dark power by daylight.

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