A fresh examination of written records from Anglo-Saxon England suggests that the Vikings were raiding the country even before their infamous attack on Lindisfarne in the year 793.
In the new article “The Earliest Viking Activity in England?” Clare Downham analyzes a wide range of evidence, including chronicles, letters and charters, to look at what else can be learned about attacks by Norse raiders in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries. Once taken together, these sources suggest “a pattern of viking activity and defensive reaction along the southern margins of the North Sea leading into the English channel.”

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that in the year 793 “on 8 January the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter. After this event, which is commonly viewed as the beginning of the Viking era in England, no other raids are reported by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle until 835. Downham, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Liverpool, wanted to better understand what the Vikings might have been doing in England during this period.

She notes that several other sources can be used to show that plundering was taking place. Letters from Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon scholar living at the court of Charlemagne, include references to the Vikings. In one message dated to 797, and addressed to clergy and nobles living in Kent, he noted “A very great danger threatens this island and the people dwelling in it. Behold a thing never before heard of, a pagan people is becoming accustomed to laying waste our shores with piratical robbery.”

Kent and other parts of southeastern England seem to have been targeted by Viking raiders during this period. Downham explains that charters created during this time show that efforts were being made to take military preparations against “pagans” who were most likely the Norse. She writes about:

>a privilege granted by Offa (King of Mercia, 757-796) to Kentish churches and monasteries at Clofesho in 792. Copies of this text only survive in two thirteenth-century cartularies, but there is nothing implausible in its wording or internal dating, and it has been deemed to be authentic in the most recent study by Susan Kelly. In it, Offa confirms the liberties of the churches and grants them exemption from various dues and services owed to the royal household. However, it is perhaps significant that he excludes from this immunity the obligation of military service in Kent ‘contra paganos marinos cum classis migrantibus’ (‘against seaborne pagans with migrating fleets’) — and against the people of Essex if necessary, as well as building bridges and fortifications ‘against the pagans’. As noted by Kelly, this clause contains the earliest evidence for the presence of vikings in Kent. Indeed, it suggests a response to seaborne depredations which preceded the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 and may have pre-dated the attack on Dorset.
from efforts to ransom captives to the creation of places of refuge in more inland areas. She concludes that:

**early viking activity in England was more extensive than the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle allows. In particular, the experience of Kent seems to be comparable with that of the north-western fringes of the Carolingian empire or the coasts of Ireland during the years from 790 to 825. This material points to an alternative to the dominant narrative of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the beginning of the Viking Age in England.**

Click here to read her article “The Earliest Viking Activity in England?” which is published in the latest issue of *English Historical Review*. You can learn more about Clare Downham at her [profile page](#) at the University of Liverpool.

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