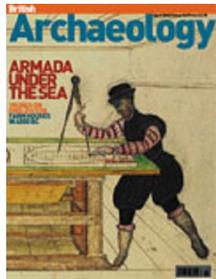


British

Archaeology



features

Invisible Vikings

How much did the impact of Viking customs change English ways of life? Less than you might think, explains Dawn Hadley

Two generations after England suffered its first recorded Viking raid - on Lindisfarne in 793 - an army of Danish Vikings attacked eastern England and settled the land from the Thames to the Tees. There, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'they proceeded to plough and to support themselves.'

Thus began in the 860s a period of English history in which about half the country - the 'Danelaw' - was, in effect, occupied territory under foreign rule. Long after the conquest of Danish areas by the kings of Wessex in the 10th century, the Viking presence remained.

But how great was the impact of the Vikings? How far did they impose unaccustomed ways of life on the native population? The popular image of Vikings remains that of archetypal hostile invaders. But recent research has begun to undermine the sense of Viking 'otherness' during their occupation of the Danelaw, revealing instead the complex ways in which the settlers accommodated themselves to English ways.

The actual scale of Viking settlement - traditionally the focus of Danelaw research - is now regarded as a largely unanswerable question. The 900 or so words of Danish origin in the English language (including egg, dirt, fellow, ill, leg, sky, skull, take and window), the numerous place-names with Danish elements (Grimsby, Scunthorpe, Fossdale), and the prevalence of Danish-style surnames ending in -son might suggest large-scale settlement. But direct evidence for Vikings, such as cremation burials with grave goods or 10th century settlements with Scandinavian-style artefacts, have always been thin on the ground.

To complicate matters, monumental stone sculpture of the 10th century - the most obvious material relic of the Viking period - has been interpreted as evidence of Viking settlement, but intriguingly much of it is found in places with English place-names such as Middleton and Weston in Yorkshire.

Some of these conundrums disappear once we realise how rapidly the settlers adapted themselves to local ways of behaviour, thus becoming largely invisible to us. Danish rule was formalised in eastern England through the signing of a treaty between the Viking leader Guthrum and King Alfred of Wessex. This, as historian Paul Kershaw of the University of Virginia has recently pointed out, in itself was an 'English' thing to do: treaties were alien to non-literate Danish societies. Guthrum then proceeded to establish his rule in East Anglia on the model of local forms of kingship, using peace-making, legal enactment, Christianity and the minting of coins - devices all unknown in the Danish homeland.

Indeed, as part of earlier negotiations with Alfred, Guthrum had been baptised, taking the baptismal name of Æthelstan, with Alfred standing as his godfather, a further indication of the lengths to which Guthrum was prepared - or more likely forced - to go in order to negotiate with the English. Guthrum's coins bore his English baptismal name, while other coins minted in East Anglia were copies of the coins of Alfred of Wessex.

Moreover, the Danes - previously without either sculpture or Christianity - adopted the

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settlers became English

local tradition of erecting stone sculpture within the Danelaw which incorporated Christian iconography; for example, crosses or grave slabs portraying crucifixes or the figures of saints or priests.

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Great sites

Peter Rowley-Conwy on the Neolithic house at Balbridie

The Danes, hard to detect in the archaeological record, are equally elusive in the documentary sources - the law-codes and chronicles of the English. But scholars have perhaps tended to assume that an individual's Viking background would always have been made explicit in these records. This may not have been the case.

letters

On Roulston Scar, small finds, grave goods and boiled bones

According to recent work by Matthew Innes of Birkbeck College, London, Danishness was only referred to in written sources in exceptional circumstances, usually during times of political and military upheaval. Ethnic affiliation may have been important, but in addition to being Scandinavians the settlers were also kings, lords, warriors, diplomats, peasants, merchants, pagans, newly-converted Christians and so on. We have treated them as if their ethnic loyalty to each other would have over-ridden any other interests; yet it is likely that the Danish rulers had more in common with English lords than with the Scandinavian peasant hordes who followed in their wake. A few years after the Danish invasion, a person's ethnic background may have counted far less than his or her status as landowner or peasant, rich man or poor, merchant, miller or monk.

issues

George Lambrick on new developments at Stonehenge

Past generations of researchers have examined the monumental stone sculpture of northern England and the north-east Midlands largely in an attempt to chart the movements of the Danish settlers. More recently, these monuments have been interpreted as forms of social and political expression, and they thus provide further insights into the interaction between the English and the Danes.

Peter Ellis

Regular column

books

Dangerous Energy by Wayne Cocroft

In parts of the Derbyshire Peak District with Scandinavian place-names, where land charters indicate Viking land-ownership, numerous stone monuments of the period survive which show no overt Scandinavian influence. Why was this so? Phil Sidebottom of the University of Sheffield has explained the phenomenon as a diplomatic response to the West Saxon conquest of the area. It was politic, he argues, for the Danish landowners to downplay their ethnic background in their funerary monuments (*BA April 1997*).

Bloody Marsh by Peter Warner

Vernacular Buildings in a Changing World edited by Sarah Pearson & Bob Meeson

The monuments of Lincolnshire may also reflect shifting diplomatic and political allegiances. David Stocker of English Heritage has pointed out that in the earlier part of the 10th century, the Lincolnshire monuments share many motifs with those produced in the vicinity of Viking York, and sometimes were even carved on stone from Yorkshire. The political links between the two regions are confirmed by the coins minted in Lincoln in the earlier 10th century (the so-called St Martin's pennies) which were modelled on contemporary coins from York.

Dying for the Gods by Miranda Aldhouse Green

In contrast, later in the 10th century, monuments in Lincolnshire show a much more southerly influence, and this may have resulted from the increasing political influence on the region from southern England following the capture of Lincolnshire by King Edmund of Wessex. Edmund's attempts to reunite the province with southern England and the diocese of Canterbury led, most significantly, to the re-establishment of a bishop of Lindsey.

The Vikings in Wales by Mark Redknap

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Gwilym Hughes on a piece of Ming china found in Africa

Who then, within the Danelaw, was responsible for erecting these monuments? A number of churches in the area have unusually large collections of stone sculpture, and research has shown that these are typically not the Minster churches - the most important churches - of the region, but churches located in trading places, whether riverine or coastal.

Examples include St Mark's and St Mary-le-Wigford in what has been dubbed the 'strand' of Lincoln, Marton-on-Trent, Bicker on the Lincolnshire fen edge, and St Mary Bishophill Senior in what has been identified as a beach marketplace on the banks of the Ouse in York. It may be that these churches may have belonged to communities with large numbers of wealthy merchants, competing with one another socially through

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funerary display. It is a far cry from the traditional image of the brutal Viking warlord concerned with nothing but rape and plunder.

Even so, a number of crosses and grave slabs from northern England do incorporate warrior imagery and scenes from Scandinavian heroic culture. Examples are found at Middleton, Skipwith, Weston, and York Minster in Yorkshire; Sockburn and Chester-le-Street in Co Durham; and Norbury and Brailsford in Derbyshire.

It appears that, in a time of constant conflict between Saxons and Danes, some Viking landowners chose to celebrate their military status and Scandinavian heritage.

The irony of this is that the Danish leaders were celebrating their Viking prowess through an English mode of expression. Stone sculpture was largely unknown in Scandinavia - beyond the island of Gotland - before the end of the 10th century. In these Viking monuments, Scandinavian motifs were incorporated into designs that used pre-existing local motifs and Christian iconography.

A form of monument peculiar to the 10th century is the so-called 'hogback' tomb, of which over 100 examples survive. Although there may be similarities between hogbacks and pre-Viking shrines of 7th to 9th century date, the burial of numerous members of the secular elite under such monuments was an innovation.

Hogbacks carry iconography which amalgamates pagan and Christian themes, and David Stocker has suggested that they may have been used to commemorate the conversion process. The hogbacks were clearly intended to resemble houses - they often have roofs, they appear like bow-sided halls, and one even has a door. Many have beasts holding on to the gable ends of the roofs, and they appear to be muzzled bears. Stocker's suggests that the house represents the lord and/or his family, and the muzzled bear was a symbol of conversion from paganism to Christianity.

Many archaeologists have attempted to use the burial archaeology of northern and eastern England to identify Scandinavian settlers. Ninth and 10th century burials containing grave-goods and evidence for cremation have been interpreted as the burials of Danes, since these forms of burial were apparently unknown in England on the eve of the Scandinavian invasion.

However, it has always been considered surprising that so few burials of this type have ever been found. James Graham-Campbell of University College, London, has recently produced a corpus of such burials, which have been found at little more than 25 sites in England.

It used to be argued that one reason for this apparent anomaly may be that burial evidence of any sort is relatively uncommon for the 9th and 10th centuries - perhaps because it lies hidden underneath medieval churchyards. But recent excavations have uncovered many later 10th century cemeteries within the Danelaw - for example at Barton-on-Humber and Fillingham in Lincolnshire, and at Addingham in Yorkshire - while the number of burials containing grave-goods and cremation has not significantly expanded.

It seems clear, then, that the Scandinavian settlers did not long retain distinctive burial practices. There may be several reasons for this. One must be that cremation and burial with grave goods were not universal in Viking Age Scandinavia. Another must undoubtedly be that Scandinavian lords appear to have rapidly adopted English styles of ruling, including a reliance on Christianity. Conversion may not itself have been the primary motive; rather, a desire to emulate neighbouring Saxon lords by burying their dead in or near churches, sometimes under stone sculpture.

On occasion, though, overtly Scandinavian forms of burial have been found. At Repton in Derbyshire, a few burials were excavated around the crypt of St Wystan's church. They contained grave goods of Scandinavian style datable to the later 9th or early 10th century, and they have been interpreted as the burials of Scandinavians.

One adult male, for example, contained a necklace with two beads and a silver Thor's

hammer, a copper alloy buckle, an iron sword, two iron knives, an iron key, the tusk of a wild boar and the bone of a jackdaw. Two others contained weapons, and a third contained a gold finger ring and five silver pennies of the mid 870s. A female burial contained an iron knife.

An even more remarkable burial - or mass-burial - was found a short distance from the church. The disarticulated remains of more than 250 individuals were recovered from a pre-existing, partly-subterranean stone 'mausoleum', which had subsequently been covered with a low cairn in seemingly pagan fashion. Radiocarbon dating has revealed that the individuals died at various times from the 8th to the 10th century.

What does this strange burial signify? Some say it was merely a charnel pit - a functional repository of massed human bone. However, the excavators, Martin and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle of the University of Oxford, argue that this was a ritual burial of Viking bones brought from elsewhere, perhaps on the orders of a Scandinavian leader. One participant in the initial invasion of the 860s was Ivar the Boneless, who is said in saga tradition to have been buried somewhere in England under a barrow. Could this tomb have belonged to him? It is difficult to be sure.

Even so, whether or not the Repton tomb represents a ruthless expression of militant anti-Christianity, burial later continued around and against the slopes of the mound, indicating that it was not subsequently shunned.

The most 'Scandinavian' burial of all has recently been excavated at Heath Wood, Ingleby, not far from Repton, by Julian D Richards of the University of York. Here a cemetery comprised 59 barrows covering the site of a funeral pyre. Sacrificial offerings of cattle, sheep, dog and possibly pig were found.

A number of metal items, some of Scandinavian type, lay inside the barrows. These included two broken swords - possibly broken in a ritual act of destruction - iron buckles, wire embroidery, a copper alloy strap-end, an iron spade, and a ring-headed pin.

This burial rite is virtually unknown in the 9th or 10th century in England. The only comparable examples are single burials, not cemeteries.

The mounds at Heath Wood were highly visible, showing up black against the surrounding red-coloured soils. Moreover ship strakes were apparently used as funerary biers, and animals and weapons were sacrificed. Julian Richards suggests that a sense of insecurity in unfamiliar surroundings may have prompted this overt statement of religious, political and military solidarity. Here, for once, we probably can see the Scandinavian settlers behaving in a self-consciously Viking manner.

Personal ornaments - strap-ends, buckles, brooches, jewellery and the like - suggest that what was true for the lordly classes was true also for the populace as a whole. Very rarely do we find enclaves of purely Scandinavian or English ornament styles. Far more common is to find artefacts representing a mixture of native and imported influences.

The significance of these mixed influences on personal dress ornaments is that these items - above all others - are reflections of personal choice. As such they seem to point quite clearly to an easy mixing of English and Scandinavian populations. For example, the strap-ends discovered at Coppergate and St Mary Bishophill Senior in York are typical in form of Anglo-Saxon designs, but are decorated with a particular type of ornamentation known as 'Borre-style' (after a place in Norway).

Mixtures of English and Danish types of metalwork from individual sites suggest that different styles and designs were in use at the same time. In addition, styles common in Wessex, especially near Winchester, have been found in the Danelaw, and a mould for making this sort of jewellery has been found at York. Meanwhile in York, many artefacts display a mixture of styles and motifs. They appear neither English nor Danish

but a mixture of both.

The inhabitants of the 9th-10th century Danelaw must inevitably have regarded themselves as either English or Danes in ethnic origin, but the materials they have left behind suggest that they worked quite hard to find ways of settling their differences.

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