

Insight: Time and Place

Ramblings Through History, Archaeology and the History of Early Christianity
Posted by: **Galghaidhil** | November 10, 2009

Miscellaneous Thoughts About the Vikings

(The themes brought up in this post will be expanded in subsequent posts – in a recent response to a friend’s questions about Norway’s fjords, I returned a somewhat random brain dump of talking points about the Vikings, which follow:)

The Norse vikings (my PhD dissertation was “The Norse Viking Settlement of Southwest Scotland”, so I have a number of tidbits for cocktail party conversation – which are probably only interesting if you’re talking with a bunch of archaeologists or historians – think “Ross” on “Friends”, so be careful!) sacked and burned their way through much of Ireland in the 800 and 900s (with the help of some of the Irish, who were always warring among themselves) and eventually settled in parts of Ireland, setting up trading establishments that are now the major cities of Ireland: Cork, Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, Limerick.

Towns with names like “Waterford” and “Wexford” incorporate the Old Norse word “fjord”, such as the fjord you see in the opening slide of the presentation (a fjord is “a long body of water extending into the land from the sea, with steep hillsides coming down to it along its length” or something like that). The first element of those names incorporates a person’s name, e.g., “Wexna fjord” (or the fjord of Wexna) and have persisted as trading establishments since their foundation in the 800s.

The Norse Kings of Dublin and Man were as powerful in their day as the King of England and actually controlled a vast stretch of real estate reaching from Norway to Iceland to Ireland and up / down the west coast of Scotland + the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

(Danish Vikings, primarily, sacked and conquered the southern part of England; the Norse Kings of Dublin conquered most of the northern part of England and took over the city of York [“Yorvik” in Old Norse] as their capital in the north of England. Swedish Vikings mainly headed east and down the major rivers of what’s now western Russia to Constantinople [now Istanbul] which was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire – known at the time as the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine Emperor’s personal bodyguard was known as the Varangian Guard [real bad ass characters] and were exclusively Vikings, mainly from Sweden.

As a point of information, the Swedish Vikings were known as the “Rus” to the local Slavic populations along the rivers they traveled and conquered, in what’s now western Russia and the Ukraine; they set up trading establishments in places that grew into cities over time, such as Kiev; yes, the word “Russia” comes from the word for the Swedish Vikings – the Rus. More than you probably ever wanted to know.)

The same element (“fjord”) is also found in Scotland – where the Norse vikings also settled, primarily

among the western islands and along the western / southern coasts – in the word “forth” or “firth”.

If you look at a map of Scotland and look at the notch of sea above the Isle of Man (another major Norse settlement and center of the Kingdom of Man) between the Southwest coast of Scotland and the Northwest coast of England, you’ll see it’s named “The Solway Firth” – that’s directly from Old Norse “sula vatn fjord”, meaning “muddy water fjord” – much of the Solway Firth is tidal and becomes a muddy plain when the tide is out.



Solway Firth, Scotland - The Tide is Out

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