

Vikings in England to A.D. 1016

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Vikings had a profound impact on the history of the English-speaking people. In the period from the first recorded raids in the late eighth century, until the conquest of England by Knútr in 1016, the political geography, culture, and identities of the Anglo-Saxons were transformed. As a result of their impact, the image of vikings has loomed large in English historical literature from the Middle Ages to the present. Their historiography can be seen to reflect developments in attitudes across the centuries to various issues including regional identity, conquest, migration, and cultural assimilation.

Modern scholarly debates have tended to focus on the scale and impact of viking settlement in England (**xref Richards, Hadley**). However there have been calls for more research on the leaders of vikings and their contacts abroad (Wormald 1982: 44; Hadley 2000a: 107). Nevertheless the political history of vikings has proved controversial due to a lack of consensus as to what constitutes reliable evidence. The paradigms of viking history have been much coloured by texts which post-date the Viking Age. These include writings which emanated from the church of Durham from the eleventh century onwards and Icelandic sagas from the thirteenth century and later (Rollason *et al.* 1998: 22-27, 33; Schlauch 1949). The value of these late accounts has been increasingly called into question (McTurk 1974-77; Page 1982; Dumville 1987). The use of skaldic verse has also been problematised due to uncertainties over the date of its composition and its original context (Downham 2004; but see Jesch 2004).

An awareness of the partial nature of contemporary evidence has also been highlighted by in-depth analysis of major texts. For example, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, royal diplomas, and the chronicle of Æthelweard were each connected with the household of English kings. They are, for the most part, Wessex based accounts with less information on other parts of England and they can be seen, at times, to promote the cause of royal government. Recent reevaluations of the written evidence pose interesting questions which can challenge received accounts of Anglo-Saxon history (e.g. Keynes 1978) and reveal how the terminology used by historians has been influenced by selectivity and biases in the written evidence (**xref Dumville**).

The first recorded viking attacks on the Anglo-Saxons took place during the reign of Beorhtric, king of the West Saxons (786-802). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that three ships of Northmen arrived at Portland (Dorset) where they killed the local reeve and his followers. Another attack was led against the church of Lindisfarne and a further attack on Northumbria is reported in 794. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions no further raids until 835. However, it is clear that the Chronicle does not give the whole story. A series of diplomas issued by kings of the Mercians from 792 to 822 refer to intensive viking activity in Kent, including the existence of viking camps (Sawyer 1968: nos. 134, 160, 168, 177, 186, 1264).

From the 830s to the 850s raids appear to be more frequent. An alliance between vikings and Cornishmen against Wessex is recorded in 838, but they were defeated (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: *s.a.* 838). A major English defeat is recorded in the Frankish Annals of St-Bertin under the year 844, after which the vikings 'terra pro libitu potiuntur' (seized or wielded power over land at will; Nelson 1991). This was soon followed by a

great defeat of viking forces at *Aclea* in Greater Wessex in 851, recorded in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, The Annals of St-Bertin and in the so-called 'Fragmentary Annals of Ireland' (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: *s.a.* 851; Nelson 1991: *s.a.* 850; Radner 1978: §250). These records of battles between vikings and Anglo-Saxons in foreign chronicles demonstrate wider concern about vikings' activity in western Christendom. Contact between vikings in different areas is indicated in the composition of silver hoards deposited during this period (Blackburn and Pagan 1986), and it can sometimes be deduced by a comparison of written sources from different areas.

In 865/6, 'a great army' arrived in East Anglia. Over the next thirteen years, detachments of this army and its allies enjoyed a remarkable series of victories. York was seized in 867, and the kingdom of Northumbria was subjugated. Then in 869, the East Anglian kingdom was conquered after the defeat and martyrdom of its king Edmund. More vikings ('a summer army') arrived at Fulham in 871 and allied with vikings already active in Britain. In 873 Mercia was subjugated. Wessex fell under viking control in the early months of 878, but a victory by King Alfred that year stemmed the tide of viking conquest.

The background of the warriors active in England during these years has been debated. The original force seems to have been a coalition of different fleets. It may have included vikings active in England in the early 860s and contingents from West Francia as opportunities there were in decline (Wormald 1982: 137; Sawyer 1998: 90) as well as a contingent from Ireland (Keynes 1997: 54). Ívarr, one of the viking leaders in England, can be identified with Ívarr, king of the vikings of Ireland (Haliday 1884: 24-56; Smyth 1977; Wormald 1982: 143). His followers had been campaigning in North Britain in the early 860s and their ambitions soon extended to control of Northumbria. According to The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Ívarr's brother and successor Hálfðann shared out lands in Northumbria to viking settlers. His exploits in North Britain are also recorded in Irish chronicles (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983: *s.aa.* 874 [=875].3, 874 [=875].4, 876 [=877].5).

Three viking leaders who may have arrived in England in 871, namely 'Guthrum', 'Anwend' and 'Oscetyl', took control of East Anglia in 874. Over the next four years their followers seized control of parts of Mercia and campaigned against the West Saxons. King Alfred was temporarily driven into hiding in the Somerset marshes, but his great victory at Edington secured the independence of Wessex. As a result of this setback a fleet of vikings left England late in 878 to campaign in Francia (which they did to devastating effect: Maclean 1998). Land in East Anglia was distributed among Guthrum's followers. A boundary between areas of English and viking control (stretching from the River Thames, via Bedford, to Watling Street) was recognised in a treaty drawn up between Alfred and Guthrum some time before 890 (Whitelock 1979: no. 34).

Another major viking threat to Alfred's reign was posed in 892. In this year two large fleets arrived in Kent. They made little headway despite receiving support from vikings based in Northumbria and East Anglia. In 896 the viking army which represented the greatest menace to Alfred dispersed. Some of these troops settled in areas under viking control in England, while others travelled to the Continent. The failure of this viking campaign may be attributed to Alfred's policies, which included the construction of a network of fortresses, the reorganisation of his army, the cultivation of propaganda

aimed at unifying his subjects, as well as treaties aimed at dividing his enemies (Keynes and Lapidge 1983).

Alfred's successors developed his policies and worked to bring areas of viking settlement under their control. However the character of viking settlement during the ninth century and beyond is obscure and has been much debated. Peter Sawyer invigorated this question over forty years ago (Sawyer 1962) by arguing that the number of immigrants was much lower than had been supposed. This provoked a series of studies either supporting or attacking his thesis from a range of viewpoints. Debates have raged about the size of viking armies, the use of place-name evidence, and the nature of cultural and linguistic change. From this a new consensus has emerged largely as a result of Sawyer's theory, namely that numbers of immigrants cannot be simply deduced from their impact on the host society. Rather, the impact of vikings in the areas of England which they settled owes more to the duration of viking rule and to the nature of interaction between vikings and English (Hadley and Richards 2000a).

The viking conquests of the 860s and 870s brought large swathes of territory in eastern and northern England into Scandinavian hands. Successive kings of Wessex campaigned to seize this land for themselves. London was one of the first gains, taken by Alfred. York, which was the last bastion of viking power in England fell finally to the West Saxon royal dynasty in 954. Some areas of England therefore remained in Scandinavian control for the better part of a century. However contemporary accounts give an incomplete picture of political organisation in areas under viking control.

Initially The Anglo Saxon Chronicle linked viking settlers to pre-existing population-groups, so in the 890s different viking armies are referred to as 'Northumbrians' or 'East Angles', each under the control of individual kings and numerous jarls. Mercia at this date was divided between English and Scandinavian control. The part which was in Scandinavian hands was seemingly divided between the northern and southern viking kings. The Alfred-Guthrum treaty indicates that East Anglian vikings ruled as far north as Stoney Stratford (Bucks.), and Northumbrian viking rule is attested as far south as Stamford (Lincs.) in 894 (Campbell 1962: 50-51; cf. 40-41). Northern Northumbria remained independent throughout this period, under the control of native kings based at Bamburgh. It is not clear that Northumbrian vikings ruled as far as the west coast in the 890s, although Manchester was in Northumbrian viking control in 919, immediately prior to being taken by the English. The use of pre-existing labels by English chroniclers is not always helpful if we wish to determine the boundaries of different viking kingdoms.

Shifts in borders are frequently attested in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the early tenth century as rulers of Wessex advanced their power northwards. Alfred's son Edward acted in alliance with his sister Æthelflæd and brother-in-law, Æthelred, who ruled English Mercia, to bring East Anglia and viking Mercia into English control. Initially Edward had battled against his cousin Æthelwold who had a claim to the Wessex throne. Æthelwold enlisted the support of the East Angles and Northumbrians but he was killed in battle alongside a viking king called Eiríkr. The battle was followed by a short-lived truce. In 910 Edward defeated a viking army at Tettenhall (Staffs.) in which three kings 'Eowils', Hálfðann and Ívarr were killed. This succession of events seriously weakened viking power in England. This decline may have been exacerbated by a contemporary influx of vikings from the Gaelic world to north-western England. Political

fragmentation may be hinted at, as no king of vikings in England is clearly identified from 910 until 918, but there is reference to jarls ruling individual fortified centres. It was during this period that King Edward and his Mercian allies made significant gains.

Viking Northumbria could have fallen into English hands in 918 had it not been for a viking invasion led from Ireland by Røgnvaldr grandson of Ívarr. His campaign which culminating at the battle of Corbridge is recorded in Irish, Scottish, and English accounts. Some historians have argued that there were two battles fought at Corbridge, but this is an error based on a reading of the eleventh-century text *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (Johnson-South 1990:159). Chronicle records clearly indicate that only one battle was fought (Mac Airt and Mac Niocail 1983: *s.a.* 917 [=918].4; Radner 1978: §459; Hudson 1998: 150,157). After the battle Røgnvaldr became king of York.

It has long been argued that Northumbrian politics in the early tenth century can be interpreted in terms of rivalries between an Anglo-Danish and Hiberno-Norse faction. According to 'The Mercian Register' the people of York promised obedience to Æthelflaed of Mercia shortly before her death in 918, which has been deemed a sign of disaffection with Røgnvaldr's rule by the Anglo-Danes (Wainwright 1975: 178). However, this promise may have pre-dated the Corbridge campaign, and need not suggest that English rule was preferred to that of Røgnvaldr, grandson of Ívarr. Indeed, Røgnvaldr himself found it necessary to recognise Edward's superiority at a meeting in 920. The theory of ethnic competition between Danes and Norwegians in England seems based on over rigid translation of *Norðmann* as 'Norwegian' in English sources (Mawer 1923). A comparison of Insular chronicles suggests that familial connections between viking leaders of Dublin and York continued from the 860s until the 950s, and there was not an interchange of power between Danish and Norwegian factions (Dumville 2004).

Edward may have lost some land south of the Humber to the vikings of Northumbria towards the end of his reign. Nevertheless his son Æthelstan ousted the viking king of York in 927 and ruled Northumbria until his death in 939. Therefore Æthelstan is the first king who united England (Dumville 1992:141-71). The most famous event of his career is the battle of Brunanburh, where the English defeated an alliance between the king of *Alba* (North Britain) and vikings of the dynasty of Ívarr in 937. The site of this battle is still a matter of debate (e.g. Halloran 2005). Scottish involvement can be explained by Æthelstan's attempts to extend his authority across Britain which had provoked a war with Constantine, king of Alba in 934. There were also some Welsh sympathies for the Northumbrians in the 930s or 940s, illustrated in the prophetic poem *Armes Prydein Vawr* (Williams and Bromwich 1972).

After Æthelstan's death, the kingdom of York, and lands south of the Humber called 'the five boroughs' (**xref Hadley**) was once more taken into viking hands. The political situation in the north continued to be unstable, and the viking territories were won and lost once more before they were finally annexed by Eadred of Wessex in 954. The main historical sources for the decline of viking power are largely written from an English perspective. It is perhaps testament to the power of their rhetoric that historians often refer to the seizure of viking lands by Wessex as 'redemption' or 'reconquest' (e.g. Mawer 1923), and Alba's war against Æthelstan (which gave rise to an alliance with vikings) as 'rebellion' (e.g. Sawyer 1998: 121-2). As Wessex had no legitimate claim to rule across Britain, the appropriateness of such language is questionable. It is doubtful

that the majority of contemporaries regarded this as the natural order of things, and such interpretations may also be unduly coloured by subsequent political events.

One striking feature of events during the last decade of viking rule in Northumbria is the support given to kings Óláfr and Eiríkr by Wulfstan I, archbishop of York (Keynes 1999). This is despite Wulfstan's promotion to power by the English king, Æthelstan. The question of vikings' relationship with the Church is closely related to debates about viking impact and integration. This relationship clearly changed from the arrival of the first viking fleets in the late eighth century to the mid-tenth century. Initial contacts were characterised by destruction as ecclesiastical sites were attacked. This destruction was followed in areas of viking settlement by the seizure of some, if not all, ecclesiastical lands. This removal of resources apparently dealt a fatal blow to monastic life in areas under viking control (Sawyer 1998: 98). Pastoral care may have continued with the support of priests by the Christian population who remained after viking settlement. Dawn Hadley has demonstrated that some pre-Viking-Age church sites were used following (and perhaps during) conversion and integration of the viking population (Hadley 2000: 216-97). As conversion seems to have begun fairly rapidly, churches which had been destroyed may have been quickly revived.

Only one see is known to have persisted without relocation in areas under viking control and that was at York. This won patronage from the Scandinavian kings of York from the 890s (Campbell 1962: 51; Abrams 2001). Coins bearing the name of St Peter were produced in York in the first decade of the tenth century (Grierson and Blackburn 1986: 322-23). Although the adult baptism of a viking king of York, Óláfr, is recorded as late as 943, this need not indicate the moment of conversion as has often been thought (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: *s.a.* 943). Adult baptism was not uncommon in Christian communities in the Middle Ages. The many stone crosses erected across northern England in the tenth century indicate some enthusiasm for Christianity among an Anglo-Scandinavian elite (albeit sometimes with representations of Scandinavian deities included in their designs). The distribution of these crosses and the evidence of urban churches indicates that a decentralised ecclesiastical structure prevailed (Hadley 2000: 287-89). This may have resulted from the fragmentation of pre-viking landed estates and the growth of a merchant class of patrons (which was a corollary of urban growth in viking settled areas). It is not known what structures for pagan worship may have been in place.

From 954, kings of England sought to secure power in erstwhile viking territories. King Edgar (959-975) allowed areas of Scandinavian settlement to have a degree of legal autonomy as a reward for their loyalty, while imposing national legislation in cases of theft (Whitelock 1979: no. 41). The written sources from Edgar's reign demonstrate that inhabitants of 'Danelaw' (xref. **Hadley**) perceived themselves as being different from those of the rest of England. The intermingling of Scandinavian and English peoples gave rise to a distinct regional identity. Edgar also met other Insular kings, including Maccus Haraldsson, king of the Isles, in 973, to ensure peaceful relations, perhaps in order to prevent disaffected elements in the Danelaw from seeking their support (Thornton 1997; Thornton 2001).

The efforts made by Edgar were somewhat undone during the reign of his son Æthelred (978/9-1016). Æthelred had come to power following the murder of his brother at the age of twelve. The consequent political instability seems to have encouraged

vikings from the Gaelic world and Scandinavia to raid England. Initially attacks were focused on the west of Britain and this can be linked with the activities of Guðrøðr, king of Man and the Isles (Downham 2003: 59-60). In the early 990s a new wave attacks was led against eastern England under the leadership of Óláfr Tryggvason, future king of Norway, and Sveinn Haraldsson, future king of Denmark. Æthelred appeared unable to unite his subjects effectively against this threat. A series of peace agreements and payments of tribute to viking armies also failed to curb attacks. In 1002 Æthelred ordered his subjects to kill all the Danes in England. This was perhaps intended as a way of directing popular anger over the successive viking invasions away from the king. Æthelred's subjects were also urged to seek divine assistance against enemies through prayer (Keynes 1997: 74-81).

Nevertheless, in 1013 England was conquered by Sveinn Haraldsson. He arrived with an invasion fleet at Gainsborough (Lincs.) and quickly won local support. Niels Lund has suggested that Æthelred's efforts to curb the legal freedoms of the Danelaw encouraged the inhabitants to support this rival king (Lund 1976: 189, 193-94). London held out longest against this invasion but in Christmas 1013 Æthelred went into exile. The main Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entries for the reign of Æthelred (found in versions C, D, E, and F) were written shortly after his reign ended, probably by a single author. These retrospective reports focus on the failures of Æthelred, and the Danish conquest is presented with a gloomy air of inevitability (Keynes 1978). This provides a salutary reminder that descriptions even of the recent past in written sources can be heavily influenced by partiality and hindsight.

Sveinn only ruled for a brief time before his death in 1014. His son Knútr succeeded to rule England in 1016 following the death of Æthelred's son Edmund, and he reigned until 1035 (**xref. Lund**). From the end of the eighth century to the early eleventh century the nature of viking activity in England changed radically. What began with hit and run raids by small war bands led to a reconfiguration of regional identities in England and to conquest by the armies of a powerful Scandinavian Christian king.

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