
CHAPTER 1

Viking raiders, Scandinavian kingdoms and the wider world

This book begins and ends with the Scandinavian kingdoms reacting to a Roman Empire. We take as our starting point the way in which the Roman defeat at Teutoburg in AD 9 encouraged the formation of states and royal dynasties in Scandinavia. We end with the manner in which these Scandinavian dynasties and states became the thirteenth-century champions of Christianity in northern Europe. The Scandinavian kingdoms thus effectively bypassed the Holy Roman Emperor and established a direct line of communication with the Roman papacy. This book is the first study in English to take the discussion of the origins of the Scandinavian states back to the first century AD. It combines the approach of the archaeologist with that of the documents-based historian. The latest archaeological studies of Scandinavia (most recently in connection with the construction of a pipe-line across Denmark, which effectively put an 800-kilometre test trench through the country) and recent technological advances (such as earth radar, which allows the identification of submerged defensive structures) have caused a revolution in our understanding of the early history of Scandinavia. The sudden appearance of Scandinavian raiders in the written sources can now be shown to be the logical extension of political, cultural and economic contacts established in the pre-Viking Age.

A key feature of this book is the historical narrative which it provides for the whole of the Scandinavian westward colonisation. This narrative forms a spine upon which the analytical and discursive sections of the book are built. Past studies have focussed on comparatively short time-spans, mainly the so-called First or Second Viking Ages, or on geographically discrete or specialist subject-oriented studies, such as Viking Orkney or

Viking Age art. Here, however, we offer a structured overview which traces the over-arching continuities in the histories of the Scandinavian diaspora and its impact on western mainland Europe, the British Isles and the other North Atlantic islands through thirteen centuries. This central narrative places the Viking Age firmly into its wider historical context and enables its origins, development and end to be viewed as part of a single process, freed from the artificial constraints of modern geographical or chronological parameters. No previous modern study has attempted such an ambitious chronological range.

The argument advanced is that Scandinavia saw an early centralisation of power around the first and second centuries AD which allowed its magnates to wage war at a level of intensity and sophistication previously unknown. They did this by employing Roman military technology and strategy (which some may have learned while serving as members of the Roman army). As a consequence, a professional class of warriors had developed by the third century. The third to the sixth centuries saw an increasing concentration of authority, which is demonstrated by the fortifications and arsenals found in connection with wars waged in this period. The emergent aristocracy of Scandinavia made and broke alliances from northern Norway to the Black Sea. The seventh and eighth centuries witnessed a simultaneous professionalisation of the military and a decreased military activity which is evidenced by the lack of social stratification in sixth- to ninth-century graves in Denmark. The relative peacefulness safeguarded by the successful fortification of southern Scandinavia, combined with the improvements in the design of ships, allowed the Scandinavians to re-focus their attention overseas and become what we now call ‘Vikings’.

That period of European history traditionally called ‘the Viking Age’ (most generally taken to run from c. AD 800 to c. 1050) saw the formation of the outlines of the political map of the Europe with which we are now familiar. At the beginning of this period it is only possible to recover the names of kings and construct an outline history of Scandinavia. However, it is not possible to talk about Scandinavian kingdoms with well-defined borders until the Christianisation of the north around 950, which we have therefore taken to be a convenient breaking point in our narrative. When we resume the story of the Scandinavians and Europe

we argue that although the new religion preached that it was the duty of every Christian to maintain the peace, the Danes and Norwegians still continued hostilities. These conflicts adversely affected the Scandinavian response to the conquest of England by William of Normandy and necessitated a restructuring of Scandinavian empire-building which saw them concentrate more on crusading in the Baltic. The integration of the Scandinavians into the wider community of Christendom and their enthusiastic embrace of the ideology of crusading and Christian reform made them less of a threat to their neighbours to the west and south-west, and these two factors mark the passing of the era of the Vikings.

The ‘Vikings’ are imbued with the romance of sea travel and land conquest. One can hardly find anyone in the northern hemisphere who has not heard of and does not admit to a degree of admiration for the exploits of the Vikings. The discovery and settlement of the North Atlantic archipelago launched from the Scandinavian homelands and bases abroad – itself a feat only made possible by a highly developed maritime technology far in advance of that found in other contemporary northern European societies – is one lasting consequence of the era of the Viking Empires. The stirring tales associated with their voyages and the dangers that they faced as they braved the waters of the North Atlantic have left an indelible mark on the European psyche. From the badges of British cars to the Germanic operas of Richard Wagner, from the Hollywood epics of the 1950s to the personal history of Anya, the ex-vengeance demon in *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*, the image of the Viking and his love of freedom, individualism and predisposition towards violence have become an integral part of Western consciousness and culture.

The term ‘Viking’ is of course problematical. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first appearance in the English language to 1807 and its second appearance to 1827. It is not until the 1840s that it gains widespread currency.¹ This does not mean that the term cannot be found in contemporary sources. Indeed, it is used before the Viking Age, in the late seventh-century Old English poem *Widsið*, where it refers to a Germanic tribe, the ‘Viking

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. C. Soanes, A. Stevenson, J. Pearsall and P. Hanks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. s.v. Viking.

kin *Heoþobeardan*'.² Tenth-century glosses on Ælfric's work also refer to 'pirata, uel piraticus, uel ... wicing' and to 'archipirata: yldest wicing'.³ Although the term is commonly found in Norwegian and Icelandic sources, and more rarely in Danish and Swedish writings, the phrase was evidently used throughout the Viking Empires, and it even survives in Frisian law codes regulating trade and maritime activity in the eleventh century. In this book we use the term in recognition of the fact that the word has such common currency. However, when we use the word it should be understood as referring to a Scandinavian who participated in the settlement – peaceful or violent – of northern Europe and the Atlantic Islands during the period outlined above. Throughout this book we do not lose sight of the fact that the sea-faring capability of the Scandinavians was transmitted to the peoples native to the areas where they settled. Thus they extended an invitation to those peoples and their descendants to participate in the North Atlantic adventure.

This book also considers the end of a 'Viking Age'. There are many dates given for this event: English historians put it around the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, Danish historians prefer 1085, when King Canute IV assembled an invasion fleet of 'a thousand ships' off the coast of Jylland (Jutland). In Scotland, Scandinavian earls continued to rule the islands and some of the mainland for hundreds of years. They were driven from the mainland in the mid-twelfth century but remained in the Northern Isles for another 300 years. Scottish historians date its demise to the Battle of Largs in 1263 and the subsequent Treaty of Perth in 1266. Historians' accounts therefore have one thing in common: they focus on a single military event which is taken as the convenient breaking-off point for their narrative of the Scandinavian domination of northern Europe. This book puts forward the argument that there is no such conveniently dramatic end to the Viking Age. Instead, it is our contention that its end came about as a slow process of acculturation and integration of the Scandinavian kingdoms into the wider body politic of

² *Wicinga cynn*. A modern English translation of the entire poem can be found in S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. London: Dent, 1982 (http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/middleages/topic_4/widsith.htm).

³ F. Hødnebo, Viking. In *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, ed. O. Olsen, P. Skautrup, N. Skyum-Nielsen and A. Steensberg. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1959–77.

European Christendom. The Christianisation of Scandinavia in the tenth century brought the area to the attention of the Western Church and the Holy Roman Empire. The Scandinavian kingdoms were subject to the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen from the time of the earliest missions in the early ninth century. Therefore, tenth- and eleventh-century Scandinavian kings traditionally regarded as Vikings, such as Svein Forkbeard and his son Canute, both kings of England and Denmark/Norway, were major players in European politics and clearly saw themselves as such. They were not aware of themselves as Scandinavians; nor did they seek to impose specifically Scandinavian customs or institutions on the peoples they conquered. Indeed, they used the reform of the national Scandinavian churches to assert their independence from their old enemy, the Holy Roman Empire. They did so by means of English appointments to ecclesiastical offices in Scandinavia in contravention of the privileges of the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, which had become a major player in imperial politics.

From its inception it was the purpose of this book to trace the history of Viking expansion both in the east and in the west. With the recent fall of the Iron Curtain there is a need for a re-evaluation of Scandinavian influence across eastern Europe, in particular in terms of the Scandinavian contribution to the region's military, commercial and dynastic development. However, this in itself would require a monograph, and early on in our work we decided that the time was not yet right to embark upon such a venture. Consequently, this book is westward-looking in its orientation. We cover the impact of the Viking Empires in their Scandinavian homelands, Francia, Scotland, Ireland, England and the islands of the North Atlantic archipelago – the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland (Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides), the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland – and Vinland.

It has been our intention throughout the book to demonstrate that what is commonly called 'the Viking Age' was a truly international phenomenon and that what happened in one area of Viking hegemony could and did influence events in other regions. For the early period up to the mid-tenth century this is a difficult task, owing to the scarcity of reliable sources. It is easier to do for the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which provide much more information both in terms of quantity and quality – from the

information about Danish history supplied to Adam of Bremen by the Danish King Svein Estridsøn, through the diplomas of King Canute IV, to the papal letters of Alexander III and the political histories that can be recovered from the saints' lives of the period. However, this analysis must be done with circumspection. Despite the increased volume of evidence, the later period is not without its pitfalls. Indeed, the twelfth century saw the composition of two of the truly great pieces of medieval literature masquerading as history: the *Gesta Danorum* or the *Deeds of the Danes* by the Danish cleric Saxo Grammaticus, and *Heimskringla* by the Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson, both of which formed the basis of much of the early scholarship on Vikings, but whose value as historical reporting has now been thoroughly undermined.

CHAPTER 2

The beginnings

For two centuries after the great era of Germanic migration across the North Sea in the late fifth and sixth centuries the waters around Britain held few horrors for the inhabitants of those islands. The sea was regarded, it would seem, with varying degrees of neutrality or indifference by the Anglo-Saxons, whose sea-faring ambitions appear to have largely withered away as they settled down as farmers in southern and eastern England. Amongst the Celtic peoples in Ireland and what was to become Scotland, there was a vibrant maritime tradition, although their sea-faring skills were not matched by their ship-building technology. For the Irish, Picts and Scots, ship-building technique appears to have developed little beyond the level attained in the late prehistoric era. Likewise on the continent, in the Frankish Empire built up by Charlemagne, there was little interest in the seas to the north and west. To the Franks, this was a secure frontier, unlike their long and exposed land borders to the south with Muslim Spain and to the east with the Slavs. It was only traders, missionaries or pilgrims who came across the unpredictable waters. There was, then, no awareness that these same waters would soon become the means of delivery of a cataclysmic storm that would tear apart the fabric of northern European society.

The shape of things to come was expressed in two brief annals: the first dated generally to the reign of King Beorhtric of Wessex (789–802), which recorded an incident at Portland; and one for 793, which recorded an assault on the holiest sanctuary of Northumbria, located on an island that had seemed immune to attack throughout its history.

[789–802] In this year king Beorhtric married Eadburh, daughter of Offa. And in his days for the first time three ships came [to Portland in Dorset]: and then the reeve rode there and attempted to make them go to the royal

manor, since he did not know what they were, and they killed him. These were the first Danish ships to come to England.

[793] In this year terrible portents appeared over Northumbria, and miserably frightened the inhabitants: these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year in January the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.¹

The killing of the West Saxon royal reeve, Beaduheard, who mistook a force of Danish raiders for merchants and attempted to make them go to nearby Dorchester to present themselves for inspection, is almost certainly not the first instance of a Viking raid on the British mainland. Recorded only in the late ninth century in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, it is an account that needs to be treated with some care, for the chronicle is a highly propagandistic work and there may be a strong element of 'spin'. Quite simply, it may have been inserted in that place to emphasise the idea that Wessex was, and always had been, both first victim and principal defender of the Anglo-Saxons against the heathen onslaught. We are, however, on surer ground with the second annal, which records a raid by a war-band from Hordaland in western Norway. It is a powerful record and one that still resonates after twelve hundred years.

The attack on Lindisfarne, the spiritual and intellectual heart of Northumbria, was a truly shocking event for the English at home and abroad. Founded in 634 by St Aidan, it was the centre from which the conversion of the pagan Angles of Northumbria had been achieved in the seventh century. Under the patronage of the kings of Northumbria it had grown rich, making it an attractive target. Later Durham tradition expands on the laconic words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, telling how the raiders failed to find the jewelled shrine of St Cuthbert and the community's most valuable treasures, but describing how the buildings were plundered and burned, altars desecrated and some lesser relics destroyed. Some of the monks were killed, but, establishing a trend that was to become common in the future, others were carried off as slaves or as captives for ransoming. The incident sent a shockwave through Christian Europe. The Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, who lived in Aachen at the court of the Frankish ruler, Charlemagne, embarked on a veritable campaign of moral support for the English from 793

¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and trans. M. J. Swanton. London: Phoenix, 2000.

to 797: he sent letters of consolation to Lindisfarne, Wearmouth and Jarrow, and exhortations to bear the devastation of the Norse as a punishment from God to the archbishops of Canterbury and York, to the Kings Æðelred of Northumbria and Offa of Mercia, and to the people of Kent. He saw the failure of God or the saints of Northumbria to protect the region as a sign of divine displeasure at the sins of the people, and urged penitence and spiritual reform:

The pagans have contaminated God's shrines and spilt the blood of saints in the passage around the altar, they have laid waste the house of our consolation and in the temple of God they have trampled underfoot the bodies of the saints like shit in the street.²

And in another letter from the same year, this time to King Æðelred, he interpreted the attack as a punishment from God:

Behold the almost 350 years that we and our ancestors were inhabitants of this fair land, and never before has such a dreadful deed come to pass in Britannia as the one we now have been exposed to in the hands of a pagan people, nor was it thought possible that such a voyage could be made... Can it not be thought that these punishments of blood came upon the people from Northern lands?³

However, although it has grabbed the attention of generations of historians, the attack on Lindisfarne was not the first example of a Viking raid (Figure 1). The Vikings did not just appear out of thin air: they had a history of raiding before their appearance in their fearsome ships off the coast of northern Britain in 793.⁴ This is hinted at by a charter of 792 in which – ‘at the insistence of Æðelheard, the archbishop of Canterbury, in the thirty-fifth year of his reign (792)’– King Offa of Mercia confirmed the privileges of the churches of Kent at the synod of Clovesho. As they had been under previous kings, the churches and their tenants were to be

² Pagani contaminaverunt sanctuaria Dei et fuderunt sanguinem sanctorum in circuitu altaris, vastaverunt domum spei nostri, calcaverunt corpora sanctorum in templo Dei quasi sterquilinum in platea. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Latina*. Vol. CL, *Opera Alcuini*. Paris: Garnier, 1844–1905. p. 9.

³ Ecce trecentis et quinquaginta ferme annis, quod nos nostrique patres huius pulcherrime patrie incole fuimus, et numquam talis terror prius apparuit in Britannia, veluti modo a pagana gente perpassi sumus, nec eiusmodi navigium fieri posse putabatur... Nonne potest putari a borealibus poenas sanguinis venire super populum? (The ‘punishments of blood’ may be a reference to Isaiah 26:21.) C. Christensen and H. Nielsen, eds. *Diplomatarium danicum*, 1. Række, Vol. I, *Diplomatarium danicum: Regester 789–1052*, Det danske sprog og litteraturselskab. Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1975. p. 4. Extracts from the other letters mentioned above are printed in *ibid.*, pp. 1–6.

⁴ A. Johansson, Die erste Westwiking. *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 1934, pp. 1–67; G. Ward, The Vikings came to Thanet. *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 1950, pp. 57–62.

Figure 1
 Lindisfarne
 Priory,
 Northumberland.
 Ruins of the
 twelfth-century
 priory on the site
 of St Cuthbert's
 monastery, first
 plundered by
 Viking raiders in
 793.



exempt from royal levies except in the case of providing military support against ‘marauding heathens in roving ships’.⁵ The wording of Offa’s privilege makes it clear that Kent had been the target of attacks for generations before 792. The record of the privileges mentions that Offa was confirming privileges already given by Kings Æðelbald (716–57) and pyhtred (possibly a mistransliteration for Cenred (709–16)).⁶ Therefore, this chapter explains who the Vikings were and what we know about how the society that spawned the Viking Age in Scandinavia developed.

⁵ Christensen and Nielsen, *Diplomatarium danicum*, p. 1.

⁶ W. d. G. Birch, ed. *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*. Vol. I, A.D. 430–839. London: Whiting & Company, 1885. pp. ix–x.