Raiders, Traders and Explorers
A History of the Viking Expansion

Week 2:
March 13th, 2015

Anglo-Scandinavian runic cross-shaft (the “Tunwini cross”), Church of St. Mary and St. Michael, Urswick, Cumbria, England.
This Week

• Any questions about last week?

• Starting Our Look at the Viking Expansion:
  • The British Isles
    • Scotland and the Northern Islands
    • England and the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms
  • Ireland
The Vikings in the British Isles

• “Viking” contact begins in the 8th century.

• Eastern coast of England is a main target, but Vikings also target and colonise Shetland, Orkney, the Outer Hebrides, North and West coastal Scotland, Ireland the lands around the Irish Sea.
Scotland and the Northern Isles

• Not difficult to get to from Norway.

• Mostly rural raids and settlement, starting in the 790s.

• There may be a degree of coexistence with the native Picts.

• Scandinavian political influence lasts for 600 years in some places (Shetland).
England

•Raids start in 780s (789 Portland, 793 Lindisfarne).

•Until c. 840s, mostly “hit-and-run” coastal raids.

•Much bad press, but overall, little impact.

•The targets are mostly monastic sites. This IS NOT religiously motivated, just that they are “easy pickings”.

England

• The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms are not united, and not cooperating. This makes Viking incursions and conquest of territory easier.
England

• The Vikings first overwinter in England in 850. As of that point, raids become invasions, penetrating further inland. The Vikings are here to stay, as it were.

• The kingdoms of East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria are taken by the Vikings: only Wessex resists.
England

• The Viking “Great Army”, as the Anglo-Saxons call it, conquers much territory.

• In 865/866, the city of York in Northumbria is taken, and becomes the “capital” of a Viking kingdom on the island of Britain.
England

• King Alfred of Wessex († 899) leads a successful resistance against the Vikings and manages to hold Wessex, and eventually regain some territory.

• In 871, an attack on Wessex is repelled. “Peace” between the West Saxons and the Great Army.

• Scandinavian activity continues in the 870s, and by 876 there is evidence that they are settling and farming.

The “Alfred Jewel” (9th C.)
England

• 878: intensified Viking attacks drive King Alfred into hiding, but he retaliates and wins a decisive victory at Eddington.

• Alfred makes peace with the leaders of the Great Army (including the “main” leader, called Guthrum).

• Alfred’s resilience earns him the title “The Great”.

Mass grave of Vikings at Repton in Derbyshire, England (the result of disease, not war).
In 886 (or possibly as early as 879), King Alfred and Guthrum define the boundaries of the territories held by the English and the Vikings.

The area under Scandinavian control becomes known as the Danelaw (the place where Danish law holds sway).
England

• Viking raids against monastic sites: affects administration and worsens an existing problem.

• King Alfred’s response: strengthening the kingdom through the building of defences, the reorganisation of the bureaucracy, and intellectual reform (translation of books into Old English).
England

• The establishment of the Danelaw keeps the Scandinavians and the Anglo-Saxons in their respective places for a while, but conflicts continue.

• Viking raids start again in the 890s (after Guthrum’s death), but Alfred’s improvements are effective and the raids don’t have a significant impact.
England

• The successors of Alfred the Great, Edward the Elder and his sister Æthelflæd, re-conquer much Scandinavian territory in the Danelaw in the early 10th century.

• King Athelstan (dies 939) even manages to retake Northumbria and scores a major victory at the battle of Brunanburh (937).
• Athelstan dies in 939. Viking hostilities increase afterwards.

• In 947, Norwegian King Erik Bloodaxe becomes King of York. Viking control lasts until his death in 954. The Kingdom of York does not recover.

• Viking raids in the late 10th C. become more focused on the payment of ransoms and protection money.
Success swings from one side to another, i.e. Battle of Maldon 991 (English defeat), St Brice’s Day Massacre 1002 (Vikings slaughtered).

In 1016, Cnut (Canute or Knut), king of Denmark, conquers England and becomes King. His “empire” includes England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden.
England

• Cnut becomes an “English” king, however.

• He marries Emma (Ælgifu), widow of king Æthelred the Unready, and sister to Duke Richard II of Normandy.

• Knut rules as a Christian king and he and Emma are great patrons of the church.

Gift of a cross to Hyde Abbey (Winchester, England), mid-11th C. (Stowe MS 944 “Liber Vitae”, British Library)
England

• Cnut’s death in 1035 leads to a battle of succession between Scandinavian, English and Norman nobles:

• King Harald Hardradi of Norway invades in the North and is defeated by the English earl Harold Godwinson’s forces at the Battle of Stamford Bridge (25 September 1066).

Gift of a cross to Hyde Abbey (Winchester, England), mid-11th C. (Stowe MS 944 “Liber Vitae”, British Library)
Vikings in England

• ... and the Norman invasion of England: Harold Godwinson is defeated by William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066.

• These events are considered to mark the end of the Viking Age.

• Q: Are the Normans Vikings?
England

• Alfred’s victories started something very important in England: the idea of cultural unity, of “Englishness”.

• Despite this increasing English political and cultural unity, the Scandinavian cultural presence remains.

• The Danelaw is a hybrid society.
England

• Huge evidence from place-names:
  • -by names (ex. Derby, Whitby)
  • -thorpe names...

• Some dialectal features in Northern England (Northumbria), especially the dialect of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

• Archaeology, sculpture, runes...
Ireland

• First recorded raids in 795.

• Initial raids in early 9th C. have no significant impact: Ireland is resilient.

• The Vikings start to overwinter in 840: longphorts.

• The Dublin longphort lasts from 842 to 902.
Ireland

• Viking raids from the longphorts actually galvanises Irish resistance, and the native population fights back.

• This leads to expulsions (as at Dublin), but also to absorption: the Scandinavians in the longphorts start to hybridise.
Ireland

• Vikings return in 915 and begin a new strategy of urban settlement as opposed to isolated staging-posts for raids.

• Urban settlement is focused on trade, crafts, and manufacturing industry.
Ireland

• Major Viking trading “towns” are established at Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick.

• Production included things like ring pins (North Atlantic migration)

L’Anse aux Meadows ring pin, 11th C.
Ireland’s Vikings become very quickly integrated in the 10th C., mainly as a result of vibrant trade with the Irish and internationally.

- Heavily involved in politics locally, in the Irish Sea region (esp. Isle of Man), Hebrides, York.
Socially: the integration matters. Ireland becomes part of the Viking world.

Staging ground for Westward expansion (Irish presence in Iceland... voluntary?).

Expulsion from Dublin in 902 may have spurred migration flow to Iceland.
Ireland

- Viking Ireland: major impact, but brief.
- By 980 the Vikings have basically been expelled by strengthening Irish leaders.
- Irish strengthening continues into the 11th C.
- The Normans will invade Ireland from England in the mid-12th C.