

THE VIKINGS AND THE IRISH SEA

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The Vikings reached the Irish Sea from both north and south. The first to arrive, in the last years of the eighth century A.D., were Norwegians who sailed north of Scotland, while the Danes, who came through the English Channel, reached the area half a century later. Both groups appear in contemporary chronicles as pirates, but their raids were, in fact, a by-product of a movement of colonisation. The Norwegians, who first appear as the plunderers of Lindisfarne (793) and Iona (795) had, some years before, left the coastal provinces of Norway in search of new homes in the islands of north and north-west Britain. This chain of islands led naturally to Ireland and the Irish Sea, and in the course of the ninth century men of Norwegian descent established themselves around its coasts and in the Isle of Man. The Danes were also colonists and in the second half of the ninth century they settled in east and north-east England and, some years later, in Northern France. They, like the Norwegians, ranged far afield in search of the wealth they needed to establish themselves. In their voyages they raided both Ireland and Wales, but for the history of the Irish Sea the men from the north were the more important.

There has been much discussion about the motives of this Norwegian emigration. The descendants of the emigrants believed that their ancestors were fleeing from the tyrannical growth of royal power in Norway, and there is probably an important element of truth in that tradition. Certainly the colonists who eventually reached Iceland avoided creating any central executive authority and in doing this seem to have attempted to preserve an old form of society that was in Norway, as elsewhere in Europe, succumbing to the growth of royal power. Another cause for the emigration seems to have been a dramatic growth of population attested by place-name and archaeological evidence. This increase of population may well have been stimulated by the discovery in Norway of abundant resources of iron, which, by making iron tools and weapons both cheap and plentiful, would have facilitated the extension of settlement into the virgin forest. In the eastern parts of Norway the early Viking period is marked by a significant growth of the settled area, but in the west, where the reserves of exploitable land were more limited, the path across the sea to new, and often underpopulated lands must have seemed attractive. This migration to the islands of Britain and beyond could, in the eighth century, be undertaken with confidence, for by then the Norwegians had developed excellent sailing ships. The Norwegians chose to settle in the Orkneys, Shetland and the Hebrides not only because they were conveniently placed, but, even more important, because they could find there an environment very similar to the homes they had left. The techniques and equipment of farming, fishing and bird catching that they had developed in Norway could be used in these islands with little or no adaptation. In the same way, when the Danes settled it was in such areas as Lincolnshire and the Seine Valley where they too would feel at home.

It is not surprising that the settlers in the islands of north Britain should have sought supplies, and treasure, wherever they could, but after the first few raids, they seem to have left England alone. Their effort was directed to their new island homes and to Ireland, which,

with its indented coastline and navigable rivers, was easily accessible to seaborne raiders. Some of them entered Ireland from the west, an approach that may seem odd to those of us who live in the eastern parts of Britain, but was a very natural route for seamen coming from the north. The neglect of England at the expense of Ireland was not because the English defences were better, or because England had no rich monasteries worth raiding, but simply because the chain of settlement led to Ireland where the monasteries housed tempting and accessible stores of wealth. Wales, also, seems to have been neglected by the Norse, and the first reported raid, in 851, was probably by Danes.

The attacks on Ireland can be studied in some detail through the chronicles which were compiled in several Irish monasteries at that time. One of the best is known as the *Annals of Ulster*, and a typical entry is its account of the year 831 (=832).

'The first plundering of Armagh by Gentiles, thrice in one month. Plundering of Mucknoe (co. Monaghan), and of Lughmadh, and of Ui-Meith, and of Druim-mic-U-Blae, and of other churches. The plundering of Damliag and of the territory of Cianachta with its churches, by Gentiles. Capture of Ailill, son of Colgu, by Gentiles, and the shrines of Adamnan, from Donaghmoyne (co. Monaghan). Plundering of Rath-Luraigh (Maghera, co. Londonderry) and Connere, by Gentiles . . .'

The annal ends by reporting the death of several notables, one through the treachery of his associates.

The interests of any one chronicler were, of course, limited, but by putting together the evidence of all the chronicles it is possible to build up a remarkable catalogue of Viking depredations. At first the raids were sporadic and limited to the coast, but, in the second decade of the ninth century, they became much more frequent and penetrated deep into Ireland. By 840 the invaders had strongholds at Dublin and Dundalk from which they raided extensively, and in 832 a fleet under the leadership of Thorgestr arrived and based itself on Lough Ree. It has even been suggested that Thorgestr set out to conquer Ireland but there is no evidence for such an ambition, apart perhaps from the later tradition that he assumed the abbacy of Armagh, which, as Professor Binchy has pointed out, would suggest that he was a man of remarkable insight and recognised the importance of Armagh's claims to supremacy (Binchy 1962, p. 127). Whether Thorgestr aimed at conquest or not, neither he nor any other ninth-century Viking leader came near to achieving it. Ireland would have been a hard land to conquer because, having many kings, it was politically fragmented. The Irish were unused to claims of overlordship by the Irish, let alone by Norsemen. The Irish also put up a stiff resistance to the invaders and the annals report many Viking defeats. The situation was further complicated in the middle of the ninth century by the arrival of Danes who attacked the Norsemen as well as the Irish. The complex Irish political structure, rivalry among the raiders and the resistance of the Irish all served to limit the Vikings to their coastal strongholds of which the most famous and important was Dublin.

It was from this base that the Norse extended their raiding across the Irish Sea. In 865 (=866) the *Annals of Ulster* say that Olaf and Audgisl, elsewhere in the same chronicle called kings of the Foreigners, raided all the land of the Picts with the Foreigners of Ireland and Scotland. Four years later Olaf with Ivar, another king of the Foreigners, besieged Dumbarton and after four months took it, enabling them to return the following year to

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Dublin 'with two hundred ships and a great spoil of people—of English, Britons and Picts'. The last mention of Olaf in the *Annals of Ulster* is in 870 (=871) and it may be that he died before Ivar whose death as 'king of the Northmen of all Ireland and Britain' is reported in 872 (=873).

The removal from the scene of these leaders of the Dublin Vikings marks the beginning of what the Irish later called 'the forty years' rest'. In that time far fewer raids are reported in Ireland than in the years before or after. The relative quiet may in part be due to Irish resistance led by such men as Mael Sechnaill I and his kinsman, Aed Finnliath, who died in 862 and 879 respectively. Both these Irish kings were prepared to ally with the Vikings, but both gained notable successes against the invaders. The Irish resistance was no doubt aided by divisions among the Norsemen, which in the last years of the century appear to have become particularly acute. The *Annals of Ulster* report the death of several Viking leaders at the hand of their brethren and in 892 (=893) they speak of confusion among the Foreigners of Dublin and a consequent division into two parties. This must have assisted the Irish who, in 902, defeated and expelled the Foreigners of Dublin who 'left a great number of their ships and escaped half-dead after having been wounded and broken'. The importance of Dublin and the success of the Irish resistance is clearly underlined by the fact that for the next ten years the *Annals of Ulster* report no Viking attack in Ireland.

In the late ninth or early tenth centuries there was a secondary migration of Norse colonists from Celtic areas. Some settled in north-west England and south-west Scotland while others sailed on to Iceland. Almost the only evidence for the movement across the Irish Sea is provided by place-names, and these show clearly the settlement at many places along the coast between the Wirral and the Solway Firth of Norsemen who had acquired some Celtic vocabulary, with Irish personal names and Irish habits of place-name formation. The place-names themselves do not reveal when they were formed but there are good reasons for associating the settlement of the Wirral with the expulsion of the Norsemen from Dublin in 903 and for believing that the colonisation of Lancashire by Norsemen was well under way in 930. It does not necessarily follow that these dates define the period of the Norse colonisation of northern England. Some settlements, especially in Cumberland and Westmorland, are likely to be later and others could have been earlier. There was undoubtedly some migration from Ireland in the second half of the ninth century, but that was to Iceland. The colonisation of Iceland began in about 870 and although many of the colonists came direct from Norway, a large number were Norsemen who had earlier settled in Britain, and some of them had Irish wives or slaves. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the tenth century several famous Icelanders had Irish names, such as Njal or Kormakr, and that others had Irish nick-names.

It is possible that this movement from Ireland to Iceland, like that across the Irish Sea, was stimulated by Irish resistance, but there is perhaps more to be said for the alternative view that this migration of Norsemen from the west of Britain does much to explain the success of the Irish at that time. The discovery of new opportunities for colonisation in an unpopulated land, or perhaps in such thinly populated areas as north-west England, led to a diversion of effort and a movement of people that reduced the pressure in Ireland and allowed the Irish to win a forty years' rest. The rest lasted no more than forty years because by then the opportunities in Iceland must have appeared much less attractive than they were at first. Traditionally the settlement of Iceland took fifty or sixty years, and by the early

tenth century much of the best land had been taken. Such late arrivals from Norway as Erik the Red and his father had to make do with poor land in the rugged and barren north-west of the island. We should therefore not be surprised that ten years after the Norse were expelled from Dublin some Vikings who had already settled in Britain should have returned to exploit the resources of Ireland and begin to compete with each other for a share of the spoils. In 914 fleets reappeared in Ireland and bases were soon established at Dublin, Wexford, Waterford and Limerick. Once again fleets operated on the inland waterways and bases were established on Lough Ree, Lough Erne and Lough Neagh. The annals are once again filled with reports of plundering, burning, killing and devastation.

The new generation of Vikings in Ireland does not seem to have come fresh from Scandinavia, but to have been recruited from families already established in Britain. The indigenous nature of this tenth-century Viking activity in Britain is confirmed by archaeological and numismatic evidence. Relatively little tenth-century Irish material has been found in Scandinavia and Mr. Dolley has recently pointed out that 'the paucity of hoards from Scandinavia with pre-Æthelred coins of the Chester area not only contrasts with a plethora of such pieces in hoards from Ireland and the Isles, but suggests very strongly that already by the tenth century the Vikings in Ireland could not look further than the Scottish settlements for recruits for their campaigns of conquest' (Dolley 1966, p. 18). In 918 Ragnald, after some campaigns in Ireland, followed the example of his grandfather, Ivar of Dublin, in crossing the Irish Sea to fight the Scots but he went on to make himself king in York. He was followed by a confusing succession of Scandinavian kings, almost all of whom came from, and maintained close links with, Dublin. The fact that the last Scandinavian king of York was Erik Blood-Axe, an exile from Norway, should not be allowed to obscure the essentially Hiberno-Norse character of this Scandinavian kingdom.

It is sometimes suggested that even in the ninth century the king of Norway had a close interest in and some control over the Norse activity in Britain. The main contemporary support for this anachronistic notion seems to be the description in the *Annals of Ulster* of the Olaf who arrived in Dublin in 853 as 'son of the king of Lochland'. Lochland is normally taken to mean Norway and Mrs. Chadwick has written: 'It would seem likely on the whole that the arrival of Olaf from Lochlann . . . was due to a determination on the part of his father, the ruler of Lochlann, to quell the incipient Danish power and consolidate the Norwegian settlements which had sprung up under Turges and other Norwegian leaders earlier in the century. This view, if accepted, would suggest that the Norwegian activities in Ireland were the expression and implementation of a fully thought out scheme of expansion and conquest from a given district in south-western Norway. The Danish threat was met by a stunning blow from Norwegian headquarters.' (Chadwick 1962, pp. 18-19.) As Mr. Dolley had recently pointed out, Lochland could as well describe the western parts of Scotland as of Norway (Dolley 1966, pp. 18-19) and a connection between the Vikings of Ireland and the colonists in the Hebrides seems far more probable than the connection suggested by Mrs. Chadwick. The Irish and Icelandic sources that appear to prove a close ninth-century connection between Norway and the Vikings of Britain are all late and contain a great deal of demonstrable confusion. It is true that the Norse emigration in the eighth and ninth centuries had created a sort of extension of Norway in the Atlantic Islands, but the Norwegian kings did not attempt to extend their authority over the Hebridean colonists until the last years of the eleventh century, and it was only in the thirteenth century that Iceland was brought under the Norwegian control.

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The Vikings who settled in Britain may have done so partly to escape the growing authority of kings in Scandinavia but many of them were, before the end of the tenth century, forced to acknowledge the kings of England and Ireland. In England the settlers south of the Humber accepted the kingship of the West Saxons by 925 and thirty years later the Scandinavian kingdom of York was finally incorporated in the kingdom of England.

The contrast between the hazardous situation in the ninth century, when it appeared to some contemporaries that the Vikings would overcome England, and the rapid and confident recovery of the Scandinavian conquests, was not due to any sudden degeneration of the Scandinavian settlers or to an equally sudden improvement in English military capacity. The explanation for the change is, quite simply, that in the tenth century the English had the advantage of dealing with a settled enemy instead of a mobile one. As long as the Viking bands were on the move they were extraordinarily difficult to combat, but once these warriors settled in farms and villages they were as vulnerable to military pressure as their victims had earlier been and were soon brought to acknowledge the English kings.

The Irish faced more difficult problems than their English neighbours. In the first place there were many Irish kings who did not always work together and were at times prepared to ally with the Norsemen to further their separate interests. Even more important, the Vikings never settled widely in Ireland as farmers; they were content to establish themselves in strongholds from which they could launch plundering raids on the Irish countryside. The Irish had therefore to deal with a mobile enemy operating from defensible bases. What is more, the Norse were able, when need arose, to call for help from their friends across the sea, from the Isle of Man, Wales, the Hebrides and beyond. Even with these advantages the Norse invaders of Ireland suffered many defeats at the hands of the Irish, and by the end of the tenth century the Dublin Norse had been forced to submit to king Brian. The speed of the Irish recovery may even suggest that the scale of the Viking assault has been somewhat exaggerated.

The character of tenth century Viking operations in Ireland has been obscured by the insistence that the Vikings plundered the churches and monasteries for treasure, generally understood to be in the form of silver and gold. Much treasure was undoubtedly looted in these raids but the Vikings, like the Irish themselves, seem to have been as interested in gathering plunder in the form of food and, even more important, cattle. The chronicles contain many references to the capture of cows. This point has recently been emphasised by Dr. Lucas in an important discussion of 'The plundering and burning of churches in Ireland from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries'. He points out that the Irish were as much involved in this kind of activity as the Vikings and that one of the main purposes of both was to steal the goods and cattle housed in churches for safety. The Vikings were not inspired by a hatred of Christianity but by a hope of gain. The attacks on churches were incidents in tribute collecting operations, undertaken by men who found this way of life an agreeable and lucrative alternative to farming.

This is not to say that they were averse to acquiring treasure when and where they could. The Norwegians were raiding in areas that did not use coin, but some churches no doubt housed treasures like the St. Ninian hoard recently found in Shetland. The scarcity of such treasure in Scandinavian finds has been explained by the assumption that this loot was melted down, but it is worth nothing that the two Irish reliquaries listed in Petersen's

Inventory of British Antiquities of the Viking Period found in Norway, are both made of wood. (see Lucas 1967, p. 212: 'It is also sometimes forgotten that, to judge by the surviving examples, the bullion value of the great bulk of Irish metalwork of the time was exceedingly small, gold being used only in microscopic quantities in the form of gilding, filigree and granulation and silver not a great deal more lavishly, while the overwhelming proportion of the weight of the items consisted of bronze'.) The Danes who raided in England and on the Continent undoubtedly acquired large quantities of silver, some of it in the form of coin, but again very little, even of the coin, has been found in Scandinavia. There is, however, a significant number of ninth century British hoards containing Carolingian coins, and it is also significant that the Danes who conquered and settled in the eastern parts of England issued silver coinages of their own before the end of the ninth century. Most remarkable of all is the fact that the Vikings of York were, by 895, producing a silver coinage in an area where the earlier, pre-Viking coins had been of base metal. There need be little doubt that much of the silver used in these Viking issues had been won in Viking raids. This wealth imported into Northumbria by the Danes may have been one of the reasons Norsemen found York so tempting in the tenth century. The Hiberno-Norse kings of York certainly used it to make the coins which are found throughout the north of England, Ireland and in the western Isles.

Towards the end of the tenth century England was again attacked by Viking invaders, but this time they came in search not of land but the silver wealth of England that was by then abundant. This second Viking Age, as it has been called, did not much affect the Irish Sea. Then, as in the ninth century, Viking raids in that area were generally the work of men of Norse descent operating from their bases in Ireland and the Isles.

With the growing power of the Irish kings these Norse Vikings found their field of activity more and more limited. They suffered a series of notable defeats, and the Norsemen of the coastal strongholds apparently turned to trade. The change was perhaps symbolised by the beginning of a Dublin coinage in about 995. From time to time in the eleventh century the Dubliners formed alliances with the men of the Isles for military enterprises of which the most famous, and in some ways the most mysterious, led to the battle of Clontarf. This battle, which was long remembered in both Iceland and Ireland, is sometimes held to have marked the end of Viking attempts to conquer Ireland. This seems to be an oversimplification, for it is by no means certain that the Vikings either before or at Clontarf aimed at conquest, nor is it clear that the situation of the Dublin Norse was much changed by the defeat of the army that had been recruited from so many parts of the Norse world. One thing is clear, that the main centres of traditional Viking activity thereafter lay in the Isles and in the Isle of Man. The Lords of the Isles and the Kings of Man were able to recruit forces from the western and the northern Isles, and they found a variety of allies—Irish, Welsh and Icelandic, exiles, younger sons and men who simply sought fame and fortune. Violence was endemic: men who could only win a poor living in peace saw their best hope of improvement in raiding and in war, and the lands around the Irish Sea were for many years troubled by these successors of the Vikings.

The source material for the study of the Vikings in the Irish Sea is remarkably good. Archaeological evidence, coins, place-names and language can all teach us much. There is also a relative abundance of contemporary chronicles which can be supplemented by later traditions that preserve much valuable information, often buried among accretions of

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misunderstanding and romance. Much work has been done on this material, but much remains to be done. One difficulty has been that students have too often accepted the judgements of contemporaries about the aims and achievements of the Viking invaders and the evidence badly needs re-examination. Whatever emerges from such a study, there can be no doubt of the profound transformation wrought by these invaders in the lands around the Irish Sea. Politically, economically, socially and ecclesiastically, this part of the world could never be the same again.

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PLATE IX. Modern reconstruction of a Viking Ship
(by courtesy of Sunbeam Photo Ltd., Margate)