

IV Viking Settlement in the Wirral

by Stephen Matthews

This paper argues that the Norse invasion of the Wirral c 903 and its relations with the Mercian government was not simply a matter of invasion and containment, but was based upon a policy of permitted settlement and treaty relationship which forms a direct parallel with the history of Norse incursions into the Carolingian empire.

The literary details such as those which now envelop the story of the attack on Chester may be set aside as unreliable, but the sequence of events is clear: Norsemen, expelled from Ireland and beaten off from Wales, settled with Aethelflaed's permission near Chester in Mercian territory. After a period of peaceful settlement the new colonists became aggressive;

It appears too that the Scandinavians arrived as peaceable settlers not as an army organised for military conquest. It was some years before they combined in a violent and organised attempt to satisfy their aspirations (Wainwright 1975, 153).

Wainwright's narrative has survived to this day as the explanation of Scandinavian settlement in the Wirral, despite its obvious inherent contradiction. The Vikings, we are told, came both as peaceful settlers and as a defeated army. They had been expelled from Ireland, although we may feel that there was some hyperbole in the *Annals of Ulster's* assertion that 'they left a great part of their fleet, and escaped half dead, wounded and broken', and they had failed to seize any territory in Wales after meeting fierce Welsh resistance (Smyth 1975, 60). It then took them some time before they were in a position to 'satisfy their aspirations', presumably of territorial conquest. But if they came as peaceful settlers, when did those military aspirations arise, and why did their motives change?

Wainwright's explanation leaves another question unanswered. Aethelflaed is supposed to have given these fleeing Vikings land on which to settle, but for what reason? It is hard to find parallels amongst other contemporary rulers for anyone taking pity upon boatloads of defeated and homeless Vikings and giving them land, even in the thinly populated area that the Wirral probably then was, to judge by the evidence of place names. In view of the almost predictable outcome, what possessed an otherwise level headed and determined ruler to make such an act of charity? The gift was all the more risky since the Wirral peninsula commanded the entrances to two major river systems, the

Dee and the Mersey. This strategic position is the key to the story, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, but first we must set out the sources and then consider the political background at the time in other Norse settlements.

The sources

Our written evidence is both scanty and late. There is nothing in English sources and our most detailed account is in the Irish *Three Fragments*, with its story of settlement of the Wirral, Ingimund and his attack upon Chester. This exists only in a seventeenth century transcription of a lost original, not, it must be said, an ideal source, but it has some support in Welsh writings and has been accepted as historically valid in its main outlines. In Wainwright's translation it reads:

The men of Britain assembled against (the Norsemen), and a hard, vigorous battle was given them, and they were driven by force from the territories of the men of Britain. Afterwards Ingamund with his forces came to Edelfrida queen of the Saxons, for her husband, that is Ethelfrid, was at that time in a disease ... Now Ingamund was asking lands of the queen in which he would settle, and on which he would build huts and dwellings, for he was at this time weary of war. Then Ethelfrida gave him lands near Chester and he stayed there for a time. The result of this was, when he saw the city full of wealth and the choice land around it, he desired to possess them. Afterwards Ingamund came to the leaders of the Norsemen and Danes; he made a great complaint in their presence, and he said that they were not well off without good lands, and that it was right for them all to come to seize Chester and to possess it with its wealth and its lands. Many great battles and wars arose on account of that. This is what he said: "Let us beseech and implore them first, and if we do not get them willingly in this way let us contest them by force". All the leaders of the Norsemen and Danes agreed to this. Ingamund then came to his house, with an assembly following him. Though he made this council a secret, the queen came to know of it. Therefore the queen collected large forces around her in every direction, and the city of Chester was filled with her hosts.

There then follows the description of the battle, culminating in the release of all the bees in the city, but the details do not concern us here. The account concludes with the ominous words

Afterwards they (the Norse?) left the city and abandoned it. It was not long after that [before they came] to wage battle again (Wainwright 1975, 81).

The historical existence of both Ingimund and an attack upon north Wales, more specifically, Anglesey, is demonstrated by the brief entry in the otherwise unrelated *Annales Cambriae*, under the year 902: 'Igmund came to Mona and took (*tenuit*) Maes Osfeilion' (Morris 1980, 49, 90). We may argue about how *tenuit* should be translated. Ingimund 'took' the site but plainly did not keep control for long and we lack a modern word which implies temporary possession. 'Held' has the implication that the site was retained for a substantial period. This brief account is repeated by the *Brut y Tywysogyon*, in its entry for 900 (903): '900 was the year of Christ when Igmund came to the island of Anglesey and he held Maes Rhosmeilon' (Jones 1952, 6).

Several features of the Irish account should be noted. When he arrived, Ingimund was clearly a defeated leader, and he asked for land rather than won it by conquest. He was supported by a number of subsidiary chiefs in a mixed following. The second request, genuinely meant or not, was for the grant of more land by negotiation, which *could* imply the existence of an earlier treaty or agreement which must have accompanied the initial land grant and which he now wished to renegotiate. Last, it is said that further conflict followed. We do not know whether this is true or not for we have no direct information other than the account by William of Malmesbury of the revolt by Chester in league with the Welsh, after which Edward the Elder died, in 924 (Stubbs 1887–89, ch. 133, 144). There is no evidence that the allies were joined by the Norse in the Wirral. We can, however, observe that the dramatically increased prosperity of the city in the tenth century does not sit well with continued warfare and any disruption was probably only temporary.

The archaeological record gives no explicit support to this account – one would not expect it to do so – but in a negative way it does support the thrust of this paper. Norse expansion seems to have been checked, for there is a remarkable lack in north Cheshire and along the Mersey of the coin find-spots that indicate the passing of armies or numbers of traders, and this is all the more remarkable when one considers the opportunity provided by that estuary and river basin. It is true that from 915 the route was blocked by the forts successively at Runcorn and Thelwall, but the lack of finds further downstream does suggest that the blockage lay nearer the sea. This is matched by the scarcity of Norse place names in the county, outside the Wirral, as Wainwright noted (1975, 154). Something was keeping further Viking incursions away.

The strategic background

Higham set out the strategic considerations in his analysis of the Mercian burhs (1988). The military problems facing Mercian and later the West Saxon rulers in the last decades of the ninth century and the early ones of the tenth century can be summarised from his analysis. First, the rump of Mercia after the expulsion of Burgred in 874 consisted of a quite narrow strip of territory wedged between hostile Danes to the east and not necessarily friendly Welsh princedoms lying to the west of a frontier that fluctuated between the Rivers Dee and Clwyd. Beyond and to the north of them lay the growing strength of the Irish Sea Vikings. Of the two the eastern was probably the greater threat but whether it was or not, one imperative was to neutralise any danger from the west and protect the food producing core lands of the Dee Valley. Later, in the new century, with the resurgence of native power under West Saxon leadership and as the Dane-free area expanded, the need changed to preventing the junction of the Irish Sea Vikings with their cousins in the kingdom of York. In the first of these phases the emphasis was upon western security and this paper argues that the settlement of the Wirral should be seen as part of this military imperative (Graham-Campbell 1992, particularly contributions by Higham and Campbell). Before we can move on we must look at other responses to similar problems.

The Vikings were essentially sea raiders. Even when they moved swiftly inland, the key to their strategy was always a surprise arrival and an easy departure. In broad outline, their movements were predictable. They wanted loot and loot easily obtained if possible, so that

their targets were the rich monasteries and town churches. They were only secondarily interested in ravaging the countryside: that was necessary for food, and the entertainment of terrorising the population, but it yielded little in the way of valuables to take home. It was the rich ecclesiastical and urban centres that were at risk and had to be protected: both sides knew where they were and how they could be reached.

Continental rulers soon realised that the most effective response to the threat lay in the protection of rivers, either by trying to secure the river estuary itself to prevent penetration at all or by building river defences higher up at a suitable bridging point, as at Pont de l'Arche, on the Seine which covered the approaches to Paris (Dearden 1997/8). Coastal fleets were of little use, for the limited range of visibility to spot an enemy and the hazards of wind direction meant that the advantage was always decisively with the aggressor. There was also the administrative problem of keeping the fleet sea-ready for long periods of time. Even if it was ready, by the time a defending fleet had learnt of an attack, put to sea and arrived at the danger zone, the enemy had probably gone. Charlemagne had attempted to provide coastal protection through naval concentrations based upon river estuaries, and this had been moderately successful, though often more in catching the raiders on their return downstream rather than in stopping incursion. The system was maintained after his death and defences were kept in good order until about 830 when they began to collapse after rebellions and division of the Empire (Haywood 1991, 120–24). Although they relate to a later attack, the conclusions drawn by the Grainges on Harold's naval strategy before the battle of Hastings are still valid, for technology had not changed. They concluded, a propos Harold's fleet stationed at the Isle of Wight

Was the Isle of Wight a good look out position? On a day with perfect visibility, from the highest point on the Island (780 feet) Harold would be able to see the sea horizon at a distance of 32 sea miles. Dives is 90 sea miles away, St. Valery even further, and summer days in the English Channel rarely have perfect visibility (Grainge and Grainge 1996, 134).

If one considers the difficulty of maintaining a network of observation posts, still more, naval bases, at this frequency, and allows for lookout stations some of which would necessarily be based at a lower level, poor weather and adverse winds, it is apparent that the task was impossible with medieval resources. Successful defence could only be based on the ground and even then, to be effective, it depended upon the very rapid assembly of an army large enough to be sure of trapping the invader, usually when returning to his ships.

In time the raiders became settlers with a tendency to cluster round the river estuaries that had given them such profit. The mouths of the Seine, Somme and other rivers became Norse bases from which expeditions could be launched inland or along the coast, but with time settlement became as important to the inhabitants as raiding. The most famous result of this process was the Duchy of Normandy but whilst it alone became an identifiable province it was initially not alone in representing an alien presence by the coast. Activity at the mouth of the Seine began in the 840s and there as elsewhere the pattern of allegiances was mixed, with some Frankish resistance to the raiders but some co-operation with them if there was a local advantage to be obtained. For example, in 860 Charles the Bald paid Weland, leader of

the Somme Vikings, to attack the Seine Vikings but was not above creaming off some of the money Weland demanded for his services. Weland is one of a number of interesting figures who feature frequently in the entries in the Annals of St-Bertin and the various relationships may be illustrated by looking at some of the entries (Nelson 1991).

The Annals record that in 862 Weland, 'came to Charles and commended himself to him, while he and the men he had with him swore solemn oaths in their own way. Then they returned to the ships and with the whole Danish fleet sailed down the Seine to Jumieges' where they wintered before dispersing the following spring. Some were hired by Robert, Count of Angers, when 'hostages were exchanged, and Robert paid them 6,000 lb of silver.' Later, in 870, Charles 'went to the palace of Nijmegen to hold discussions with the northman Roric, whom he bound to himself by a treaty'. Perhaps the most relevant account of treaty relationships is set out in the annal for 873, when Charles managed to besiege the northmen in Angers. The description of the treaty is worth giving in full:

He cowed them so thoroughly that their chiefs came to him and commended themselves to him, swore exactly the solemn oaths he ordered, and handed over as many, and as important, hostages as he demanded. The conditions imposed were, that on the day appointed, they would leave Angers and never again so long as they lived either wreak devastation in Charles' realm or agree to others' doing so. They requested to be allowed to stay until February on an island in the Loire, and to hold a market there; and, in February, they agreed, those of them who had by then been baptised and wished thenceforth to hold truly to the Christian religion would come and submit to Charles, those still pagan but willing to become Christian would be baptised under conditions to be arranged by Charles, but the rest would depart from his realm, never more, as stated above, to return to it with evil intent.

There is no need to multiply examples: this alone shows the political and military parameters. A powerful but not omnipotent king was able to trap and defeat his opponents but was either unable or (for strategic reasons) unwilling to expel them entirely. Those who were willing to profess Christianity and become his men were permitted to remain and settle. The others were to leave. The king had won a crushing victory, but whilst that is enough to dispose of a field army, at least for a time, it cannot solve the problem of infiltrated settlement. A bargain has to be struck in which the defeated opponent can be absorbed into the political system. That is not to say that all such arrangements ended happily for we are told that in 872 Charles judged his two associates, Roric and Rodulf. 'He gave a gracious reception to Roric who had proved loyal to him, but Rodulf he dismissed empty-handed because he had been plotting acts of treachery and pitching his demands too high' (Nelson 1991, 180, sa 872). Despite failures of this kind, in time, as McKitterick observed, 'from the middle of the ninth century (the Vikings') fortunes were bound up in Francia and they were a part of its political life' (McKitterick 1983, 232).

These local chieftains wanted to retain and increase their own power not only against the Carolingian kings but also against other coastal predators who were seeking land and loot. It was possibly also a weakness in Weland's own position which caused him to seek an alliance with Charles (Nelson 1991, 99, n.10). The Carolingian kings in their turn wanted

no more raiders than already existed and the two motives combined in treaty arrangements by which the kings ceded land to the settlers and offered them the status and protection of a royal alliance, whilst in return the Norse undertook to stop raiding and more particularly to stop any other raiders penetrating inland. This was potentially the greatest advantage for it limited the risks: it was true that the bargain might not be kept but if so the king was little worse off than before, while if it were honoured he had coastal security and his defensive fighting done for him at relatively little cost. This strategy worked as often as not. The essential ingredients were conflict, settlement and limitation of that settlement by treaty and integration into the existing political structure.

To what extent can this model be applied to events in England? There is a possible parallel to continental practice in the treaty between King Alfred and the Danish King Guthrum. Most of Alfred's exploits are seen through Asser's eyes, who invariably puts the best gloss upon events and we compound this favourable picture by interpreting the reign through a century or more of academic and popular hero worship. With the benefit of hindsight, Alfred was a winner, destined to succeed. Having, like Charles, won a great victory, Alfred granted the defeated Dane the right to rule in an eastern corner of England. In so far as we can discern its conditions precisely, the arrangement was something less than the arbitrary imposition of terms upon a helplessly defeated opponent. There can be no doubt that temporarily at least Alfred had the upper hand, for he demanded hostages but gave none. Both sides bound themselves to certain obligations. It is possible that the arrangement was less favourable to Alfred than is commonly supposed though it may be more relevant for our purpose. Guthrum was a capable opponent and his continued presence indicated that he was by no means a spent force. Neither of them could win: Alfred could not dislodge Guthrum and the latter had failed to defeat Alfred. Whatever the immediate military balance was, they had reached stalemate and both had to make the best of it. For Guthrum this meant holding on to the territory he had acquired and continuing as the minor partner in a division of land. For Alfred the gain was greater. The land that Guthrum retained had never been his, so there was no loss of royal territory or income and it could wait under Danish rule until the opportunity came under Alfred's descendents, to start the conquest that created a unified English kingdom. We must doubt whether Alfred ever thought in those terms and it is more likely that he simply kept his fingers crossed in the hope that he had eliminated any fresh danger from the east.

Barbara Yorke asserted that a similar arrangement was made in 993 with King Olaf, when it was agreed that 'the bulk of the fleet would remain in England and provide protection against any other invaders' even though Olaf himself returned to Norway (Yorke 1995, 137). This interpretation may read too much into the wording of the *Chronicle*, but there is no doubt that Olaf became King Aethelred's godson, that a treaty was made which was associated with the ceremony, and that it held good for the next four years.

The Wirral

It is now time to turn to the settlement of the Wirral, and to admit at the start that we do not know precisely what happened. There could have been gradual settlement, or predominantly one major incursion or a combination of the two. That there is a 'Thing' name suggests the existence of some popular assembly which might in its turn imply

scattered settlement without one central force and this is reinforced by the existence of the Wirral as an administrative district but neither of these is incompatible with the leadership of a single war lord (Higham 1988, 198). The place names themselves give indications of topography or economic status but they do not tell us what caused the settlements to be placed there. To the author, the mixture is the more attractive explanation, with an initial incursion under a single warlord – the Ingimund of the Irish chronicle – associated with scattered settlement into the territory ceded to him. For our purpose it is not a significant question, for if we accept that Ingimund arrived with a group of supporters and was given land, then further settlement is a bye issue.

Historical reconstruction is always risky but sometimes it is necessary when facts are sparse. Let us suppose then that Ingimund arrived with an army which had been driven off by the Welsh but was not completely shattered. It either seized under-utilised territory, possibly of low quality, or settled among a thinly scattered existing population. We may assume that previous immigration had been limited to small numbers because there is no suggestion that it had caused any previous trouble to the Mercian rulers. Once Ingimund was settled, Aethelflaed was either unable to dislodge him or saw an opportunity in making him a dependent ally, in the hope that he would guard the land that he was given against further unwelcome intruders and also seal the two rivers that led into and across the top of Mercian territory. The Dee valley was vital to Mercian survival for it lay along the communication routes to the south whilst control of the Mersey was essential if the two threatening groups of Norse – in the Irish Sea and in York – were to be kept apart. As the frontier moved east in the years following the capture of Derby in 917, the northern flank had to be protected by forts, successively at Runcorn, Thelwall and finally Manchester to prevent incursion from the north and along the river.

At this point a little diversion must be made for it could be argued that a disposal of land of this kind would lose Aethelflaed control of the important trading centre at Meols at the very end of the Wirral peninsula. We must first question to what extent and in what way she did control it. ‘Control’ can imply legal mastery (in contemporary terms, ‘lordship’) and no more than that. That was probably hers. It can also imply the capacity to exploit the riches of the site, and that has been considered by Griffiths who plausibly suggested that one of the advantages of Meols was its location between Mercia and Northumbria, in a political ‘no man’s land’ where it functioned as a tax free zone (Griffiths 1996, 53). If that attractive argument is right, Meols would have been of little direct advantage to the Mercian authorities, and granting away the area in which it lay would cost them little. That leads us on to the possible explanation, for which we have to turn to what was happening elsewhere in Europe, in England and especially to the precedents of London and Wessex. From the later ninth century, partly perhaps as a reaction to Viking incursions, European monarchs managed a programme of urbanisation, known in England by the construction of burhs – a network of defended strong points designed to frustrate marauding armies. Open trading *Emporia* tended to give way to these new urban centres. Historians have tended to concentrate upon their military implications but their economic impact was equally far reaching. Despite the enigmatic language, we know best what happened in London which was ‘restored’ by Alfred in 886 (Swanton 2000, 80, sa 886; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, ch. 83, 97–98). What seems to have happened was that the old Roman

fortifications were refurbished and the civilian trading settlement which by then was sprawling untidily to the west, down what is now the Strand to Aldwych was removed inside the newly defended area, accompanied by the decision to re-exploit the city waterfront (Vince 1990, 19–22). This enabled the imposition of a more efficient taxation system, which paid for the defences. The further important feature was that the man to whom Alfred entrusted the management of the new London, was Ethelred, Aethelflaed's husband.

If we translate this experience, which was not unique, to the north west, we can begin to understand what may have driven the changes in and around Chester. Aethelflaed, as already noted, had to defend the western flank of her realm against both Welsh and Norse/Irish attack and this resulted in both an aggressive forward policy, typified later by Edward's abortive attempt to found a settlement at Clethemutha, and a defensive back up in the form of fortified strong points. That had to be paid for. Chester provided the money: already a prosperous town by the late ninth century (Maddicott 1989; Matthews 1996–7 and 2000–1), it was necessary to bring it within a fortified enceinte. There is, however, no substitute for the old policy of setting a thief to catch a thief, and Ingimund's arrival gave Aethelflaed the opportunity to replicate the arrangements made earlier on the Continent and later in Wessex. Whether he landed and she failed to dislodge him and made the best of a bad job, or whether she saw an opportunity in his arrival and took it, does not really matter. If Griffiths is right and Meols was outside Aethelflaed's control, then she would lose no revenue by formally ceding it to Norse settlers. There was, for her, more sense in allowing it to run down and be replaced by a developed port in Chester, one which was further inland and, more important, under royal control and so able to generate the revenue that Meols almost certainly did not. If at the same time the Roman walls were extended to the river bank, the facilities would be enhanced. In practice, the plan, if that is what there was, probably went wrong, for such evidence as we have suggests that Meols did not decline in the late tenth century. Interpretations have varied: Higham took an opposite view, picturing a rise of Chester at the expense of Meols, though he did not indicate whether the result arose from deliberate policy to promote Chester or was just something that happened, given the town's primacy (Higham 1993, 122–23). Recent examination of the finds from the trading site suggests that this was not the case, for their range and number is sufficient to indicate that Meols was 'rather vibrant at this period' (R. Philpott, *pers. comm.*). It is possible that the late ninth century decline of Meols continued for a time, but if it did, it was only temporary (Griffiths 2001, 24). It seems that in the longer term both Meols and Chester prospered as trading points, and in the case of Chester, as an important mint. The rise of Chester had potential advantages for both parties: the Norse traders (if that is what the users of Meols had been) gained the advantages of being able to switch their activity to a site at the political centre of Mercia – as Chester was to become in the tenth century – and share in its prosperity. That they were present in numbers in the city has long been acknowledged and why should they be there if they did not use the port? For its part the Mercian government obtained the revenue it needed. It may be that the two ports served different purposes of long distance and hinterland trade, but even if that is so, it does not diminish the scale of the economic base that sustained them and the implications of this for the interpretation of the economy of late Anglo-Saxon Cheshire are beyond the scope of this paper. None of this can be proved as we have neither the written nor the archaeological evidence to do more than give inferential support, but the purpose

of this digression is to demonstrate that 'loss' of Meols is not an insuperable objection to the posited granting of land.

With the passage of time, military threats came and went, but if we look at the years immediately before and after 900, there was a constant danger of attack from marauders in a desperately unstable Irish Sea area. Ingimund and his followers were only a fragment of the Norse who were expelled from Ireland, the bulk of whom, led by the grandsons of Ivarr, settled further to the north and became a powerful force (Smyth 1975, 64). Their naval strength provoked a military reaction, in a decision by the Ulstermen for example to create their own fleet, and this arms race resulted in conflict and general turmoil. In all of this, Mercia had much to fear, but so had the settlers on the Wirral, who were just as much at risk to attack. The same conditions and needs governed their actions as applied on the continent and it is not surprising to find an arrangement by which Ingimund and his followers obtained both land, legitimacy and a measure of protection, coupled with the obligation of protecting not only his own lands but those inland behind him.

Like so many plans intended to divide the invader and play off one group against another, it seems to have failed in the short run, for Ingimund attempted to enlarge his territory by attacking Chester but once that attempt was defeated, and Ingimund 'cut down to size' the Wirral defence does seem to have served its purpose well for such slim evidence as there is, mostly from coin finds, suggests that east-west Norse passages took place further to the north, through Lancashire, rather than across Cheshire or up the Mersey valley. There is a remarkable shortage of Viking finds in Cheshire, east of the Wirral (Edwards 1998, 23, fig. 9). Two slight indications of the extent to which, by the Norman Conquest, the Norse population had become a part of late West Saxon society are its acceptance in Chester itself as evidenced by the foundation of St Olaf's Church, and the fact that it played no known part in any uprising against William the Conqueror in 1070. In Yorkshire a Norse establishment refused to come to terms with the ascendancy of first the House of Wessex and later the Normans, so that in his bid for the throne, Harold's power base was essentially Scandinavian and north-eastern (Howard, forthcoming). No such separatist aristocracy seems to have survived in west Cheshire so that whatever punishment William meted out to the county as a whole, there was no need for the Wirral to be treated harshly (Matthews 2003). That gives a belated tribute to the wisdom of Aethelflaed's policy and the degree of assimilation of the alien community into the late Saxon political structure.

Bibliography

I have used Wainwright's translation, but the complete text is in O'Donovan 1860, which Wainwright claimed to be less accurate than his version.

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