Rethinking the Early Viking Age in the West

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Introduction

The Viking Age in the West is traditionally viewed by academic and popular audiences in national/ethnic terms, as a 'colonising' migration of Scandinavians, who went on to form conquering elites or whole societies in an Atlantic and European diaspora. Traditionally signalled as beginning with raids in the AD 790s, its causes have mostly been sought within the homelands, with indigenous economic, political, environmental and social stresses quoted as factors. Territorial take-over is assumed largely to have followed the pattern of raiding, and to have occurred on the nearest and most convenient landfalls first. Areas of Britain and Ireland which have upheld the strongest Scandinavian cultural connections into modern times, notably Orkney and Shetland, are viewed unquestioningly as the locations of the earliest and most vigorous Viking settlement. There are grounds for challenging these assumptions, and for redefining the Viking Age as a sporadic, opportunistic and chaotic series of events and cumulative impacts. The limited contemporary evidence, it is argued below, has been embellished and retrospectively reworked into a 'national conquest' narrative by later historical and literary sources seeking to emphasise the power and lineage of Medieval dynastic states. This stance was then taken on into modern scholarship at the time of the Scandinavian nationalist revivals of the nineteenth century. The western Viking Age is not a fiction, but in its currently-understood form is a distorted concept, given a spurious and artificial coherence by later accounts. This legacy has proved difficult to overcome.

The Early Viking Age: a 'bolt from the blue'?

The view of the Viking Age as an invasion of Europe by the Scandinavian nations remains so embedded in our perceptions that the co-editor of a major recent summative publication on the period felt able to introduce it thus: "from 800 to around 1050 […] Norwegians in particular controlled and colonised the whole of the North Atlantic […]. Especially Danes but also Norwegians and Swedes ravaged and had an impact on the political and social development of England and parts of France. Swedes travelled eastward…" (Brink 2008: 4). The search for expatriate Scandinavians and their indigenous cultural traits remains an undimmed obsession for archaeologists, biologists and historians, even though awareness is growing, through current research and debate (e.g. Baastrup 2012; Eriksen et al. 2015), that the evidence is far more complex, nuanced and ambiguous than could reasonably serve such a purpose. Causal factors behind this multi-national but curiously simultaneous

phenomenon have mainly been sought within Scandinavia itself, with a preponderance of young males (e.g. Barrett 2008), advancing ship technology, opportunities for engaging in slavery, and land-hunger, all given credence to varying degrees. The widely-varying social and environmental topography of Iron-Age Scandinavia is often elided into a single causative background. The Viking Age is usually seen as having 'begun' in the later eighth century when western European sources begin to describe and attribute raids in some detail, and to have 'ended' at in the mid-eleventh century.

There is no doubt that raiding did capture the fears and to some extent the imaginations of Western European Christian writers in the 790s, with the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 being the quintessential marker of this new period of danger, conveyed most vividly by Alcuin's letter to Ethelred, King of Northumbria, shortly after the event (Whitelock 1979: 842). To what extent was the Viking Age a 'bolt from the blue' or a symptom of existing behaviour turning violent in the context of a systemic social and economic breakdown? Scandinavians were far from strangers to western Europeans. Cultural contacts pre-date the Romans, and were vigorous in the mid-first millennium AD, as exemplified by the similarities between high-status ship burials at Sutton Hoo, England, and Vendel/ Valsgärde, Sweden. As the North Sea trading network of England, Frisia and Francia reached its apogee in the mid-eighth century, Scandinavians were busily and profitably involving themselves. The earliest growth of the trading town at Ribe, Denmark, is dated to 705-710 (Feveile 2006). But, as a temporary period of trading prosperity around southern North Sea dimmed in the later eighth century, events around its fringes took a chaotic turn.

The 'Southern Route'

A recent historical survey of the early Viking Age (Downham 2017) reminds us that Lindisfarne was not the first, nor even necessarily the most important, of the early Viking attacks on Britain. The Mercian King Offa strengthened the coastal defences of Kent in 792, and the first identified Scandinavian attack took place on the south coast of Wessex at Portland, Dorset. Even whilst Charlemagne lived, Vikings harried the fringes of the Carolingian Empire, attacking Aquitaine in 799 and Frisia in 809, and after his death in 814 they began to attack Francia in earnest (Nelson 1997). The geographic emphasis at this time was on the southern North Sea and the Channel. Whilst Francia was attacked, England survived briefly, until a more concentrated presence of Vikings occurred, again in the south, beginning with an overwintering army in Thanet in 850. By contrast, evidence for raids on the far north of Britain is elusive. We have no historically-attested case of attacks on northern or eastern Scotland, the Outer Hebrides or the Northern Isles. Archaeological claims, based on weapon injuries observed in skeletal material and on structural burning, of unrecorded Viking attacks on monasteries in this region, such as at Portmahomack (Carver 2008: 80), remain debatable; these effects could have had a number of alternative causes including inter-communal violence. The initial phase of Viking raids on Ireland and on Iona, from 795 to 806, requires explanation. Traditionally seen as being raided from the north,

could these in fact be outliers of activity coming northwards, through the Irish Sea from areas further south? On the other side of Britain, Lindisfarne could have been an opportunistic raid following a chance landfall heading south. Navigating by eye through the North Sea from the Skagerrak to Francia can involve making visual contact with Britain due west of southern Scandinavia, and tracking the coastline southwards (thus avoiding the shoals and lee shores of the continental side) towards the inward-funnelling narrows between East Anglia and the Low Countries. Sighting Lindisfarne from the sea therefore makes more sense on a southerly-pointing expedition, rather than one aimed at the far north.

Figure 1

Cultural convergence in Francia, England and Ireland

Historical sources of the eighth and ninth centuries are more concerned about the invading Vikings' pagan religion than their ethnicity. The former was brittle and short-lived, whereas the latter proved almost infinitely malleable, as their campaigns engaged with divergent politics, people and landscapes across Western (and Eastern) Europe. Their corporate organisations were militarised, but were far from impermeable to local recruitment and intermarriage. Current research into Viking war-bands has illustrated their heterogeneity of origin and emphasised their shared cultures and mentalities (McLeod 2014; Raffield 2016). That most authentic definition of Vikings as actors - pirates or adventurers - rather than as ethnic stereotypes, holds good. Vikings' language, biology (DNA), religion and material culture transformed in perceptibly different ways, but change they did, and rapidly so. Some Scandinavian elements of these traits persisted, but the surprise is the extent to which these were discarded or isolated as heirlooms in favour of adopting contemporary cultural expressions in new lands. The Vikings who invaded England and Ireland in the ninth century bore with them the trophies of recent campaigns on the continent, as well as the portable wealth of developing pan-European trading networks. Their biological make-up must surely have reflected these intermediate circumstances. Lives were relatively brief – the five decades between 790 and 840 gave plenty of scope for the early raiders' descendants to have grown up entirely outside Scandinavia. Many of the weapons and personal ornaments displayed in insular furnished graves were of Frankish origin (Thomas 2012). Harrison and Ó Floinn, in their recent comprehensive study of Viking graves in Ireland, remark on the imported swords found in the graves: "As the preponderance of possible Carolingian forms demonstrates, however, these swords were not necessarily imported from Scandinavia" (2014: 76-77).

Figure 2

Weapons in insular Viking burials were accompanied by a range of locally-made objects, such as Hiberno-Norse ringed pins and conical shield bosses. There were some imported Scandinavian objects, notably variants of the oval brooch, but these tend to be somewhat

older in date than other elements. In urban and rural settlement contexts, too, the proportion of imported Scandinavian objects is surprisingly low, and Scandinavian naming-habits and territorial distinctiveness were intricately bound up with indigenous traditions. There are nevertheless numerous parallels found in Scandinavia for these objects and assemblages (Wamers 1998; Aanestad 2015). The extent to which Scandinavia was a receiver of incoming cultural practices (and indeed of people) during the Viking Age, as opposed to a generator of outgoing ones, has probably been greatly underestimated. In tracking the Viking presence we are searching for a fast-changing and adaptive intrusive population element. From the earliest attacks onwards, this was no longer the 'colonial' Scandinavian imprint, but already something new, hybrid, and which was subject to ongoing transformation, whilst retaining some strategic cultural allusions to a real or imagined homeland. Continuing to search for an untrammelled Scandinavian archaeological heritage as a means of identifying the Viking presence is more than likely to prove to be a fruitless and misinformed endeavour.

The Northern Isles

Orkney and Shetland are often described as the earliest staging posts for Viking settlement in Britain. Their geographic proximity to Norway has been much remarked upon, as have their dominantly Scandinavian-language place-names and cultural affinities. Orkney and Shetland were the last sovereign additions to the British Isles, having been impignorated by Denmark-Norway to Scotland in 1468-70. Their pedigree as early Viking 'colonial' possessions appears secured by the account in *Orkneyinga Saga* of their take-over, initially by pirates (some of whom were Danish) and then by the Norwegian Earls of Møre, during the reign of Harald *Hárfagri* (Finehair) around 870. Of their pre-Viking inhabitants, the saga says nothing. There may be a grain of truth to this claim, but it must be considered for what purpose the saga was written. Its origins date to around 1200 in Iceland, a time when Norwegian claims of suzerainty over the North Atlantic territories were being energetically pressed by supporters among writers and poets in Iceland. *Orkneyinga Saga* formed part of Snorri Sturlason's inspiration for writing *Heimskringla*, the definitive account of Norwegian royal authority, and helped to give historical ballast to calls for the union of Iceland and Norway, which came about later in the thirteenth century.

The strength of Orkney and Shetland's cultural connections with Scandinavia has arguably clouded scholarly perceptions of their early Viking Age. The Viking take-over has been debated endlessly, with a date of around 800 becoming something of an accepted orthodoxy, but based on little more than guesswork. Archaeological confirmation of an early dominant Viking presence has remained stubbornly elusive. Viking influence or threat has been invoked indirectly, such as necessitating the burial of the Insular style St Ninian's Isle hoard (Shetland) under a chapel floor in *circa* 800, but there may have been other reasons for this: although concealed, its position was under an upward-facing cross-marked slab and central to the chapel (Barrowman 2011: 203), so hardly inconspicuous. Little or no evidence

for the destruction or raiding of pre-Viking churches or settlements in the far north has been identified. No burials, longhouses, or hoards indicative of early Scandinavian influence have yet been conclusively dated to before the later ninth century, indeed most are from the tenth century or later. A phase of possible early Viking re-use of earlier structures has been recognised in recent excavations of multi-period settlements, notably at Old Scatness, Shetland (Dockrill et al. 2010), Pool, Sanday, Orkney (Hunter et al. 2007) and this interpretation may also be applied retrospectively to Buckquoy, Orkney (Ritchie 1977). Pre-Viking house structures, of a later Iron Age cellular form, can be seen to have developed some possible Scandinavian traits such as long central hearths, and material culture and dietary changes point to the possible presence of incomers. Dating these adaptations coherently to the earliest historical period of Viking involvement remains problematic (e.g. Brundle et al. 2003). Their nuanced and fleeting nature betokens, not conquest, but convergence with the pre-Viking inhabitants; indeed possibly (dare one say it?) some element of permission, or even subjection.

No such doubts about early dates apply to the Irish Viking presence, indeed we are confronted by an almost equal and opposite conundrum where radiocarbon dates from furnished 'warrior' burials in Dublin give a surprisingly early indication of around 800 (Simpson 2005; Griffiths 2010, 76 for a critique). This is at variance to the majority of their associated finds which would normally be dated somewhat later on stylistic grounds, indeed Dublin's take-over is first attested in 841. What *does* characterise the growth of Viking culture in the Northern Isles (and other parts of Scotland), once it becomes more widely recognisable the tenth century, is an undeniably strong admixture of Hiberno-Norse cultural forms. The author's excavations of a tenth to twelfth-century Viking settlement at the Bay of Skaill, Orkney, show a preponderance of Irish forms among the combs, ringed pins, and there are Frankish and Rhineland allusions among the glass objects and pottery; the nearby Skaill Hoard, found in 1858 and dated to 970, has elements of strongly 'Irish Sea' ornamental style (Griffiths 2016; Griffiths, Harrison & Athanson in press). By contrast, a more exclusive dominance of Norwegian contacts appears somewhat later in these islands, as the economy swung towards cod fisheries after 1000 (Barrett 2012). The Hiberno-Norse contacts evident in the early archaeology may help explain the (re)appearance of Ogham script in the Northern and Western Isles during the Norse period (e.g. Forsyth 2007, 2011, see also Griffiths 2010: 155). They are paralleled in the historical sources, where a long and otherwise inexplicable obsession with Irish politics seems to have troubled the earls of Orkney, with Earl Sigurd famously dying carrying the Raven banner at the Battle of Clontarf, near Dublin, in 1014.

Implications for the Norwegian take-over of the North Atlantic

Emerging from the observations above is a hypothesis that the Northern Isles of Scotland were relative late-comers to the Viking world, and that they received much of their initial impetus as such from Ireland, and with that probably also parts of Britain and Francia. The

ongoing reproduction of Viking society surely drew in Irish, Frankish and British elements, particularly women, changing their heritable biology. Studies of mDNA in Iceland (Helgason *et al.* 2000) point towards a significant 'Celtic' admixture such as could only reasonably have resulted from a scenario as painted here. Hybrid Viking groups from Ireland, from Britain and the Northern Isles, are potentially responsible for populating the islands further north and west at least as much as was direct immigration from Scandinavia itself.

A contention of a dominant southern route bringing Viking influence from the Irish Sea to the North Atlantic will inevitably find its sceptics and detractors. It appears to be flatly contradicted by the Icelandic sagas, which stress Norway's dominance. (Reasons for questioning this have been advanced above). No doubt there was some Norwegian involvement, it would be wrong to suggest otherwise. But seeing Scandinavia the only, or main exporter of people, violence and conquest, and not a receiver of these, must surely be open to question. In doing so, one faces head-on the accumulated wisdom of almost two centuries of scholarly tradition, beginning with J.J.A. Worsaae in the 1840s, which has sought to identify and classify the spread of Danish and Norwegian influence in the West by reference to museum collections, principally in Copenhagen and Oslo. An orthodoxy that these are the core reference material for understanding the Viking Age elsewhere grew with the rise of modern Norwegian nationalism in the early twentieth century, as reflected in Haakon Shetelig's *Viking Antiquities* series (Shetelig 1940-54), and remains influential. There is little evidence of any 'national' quest behind the early Viking expansion; this has arguably been imposed retrospectively to serve later political ends. Re-thinking the early Viking Age in the West brings new questions as to the origins and causes of the Viking phenomenon as a whole, some of which perhaps lay *outside* Scandinavia, and thus prompts fresh debate.

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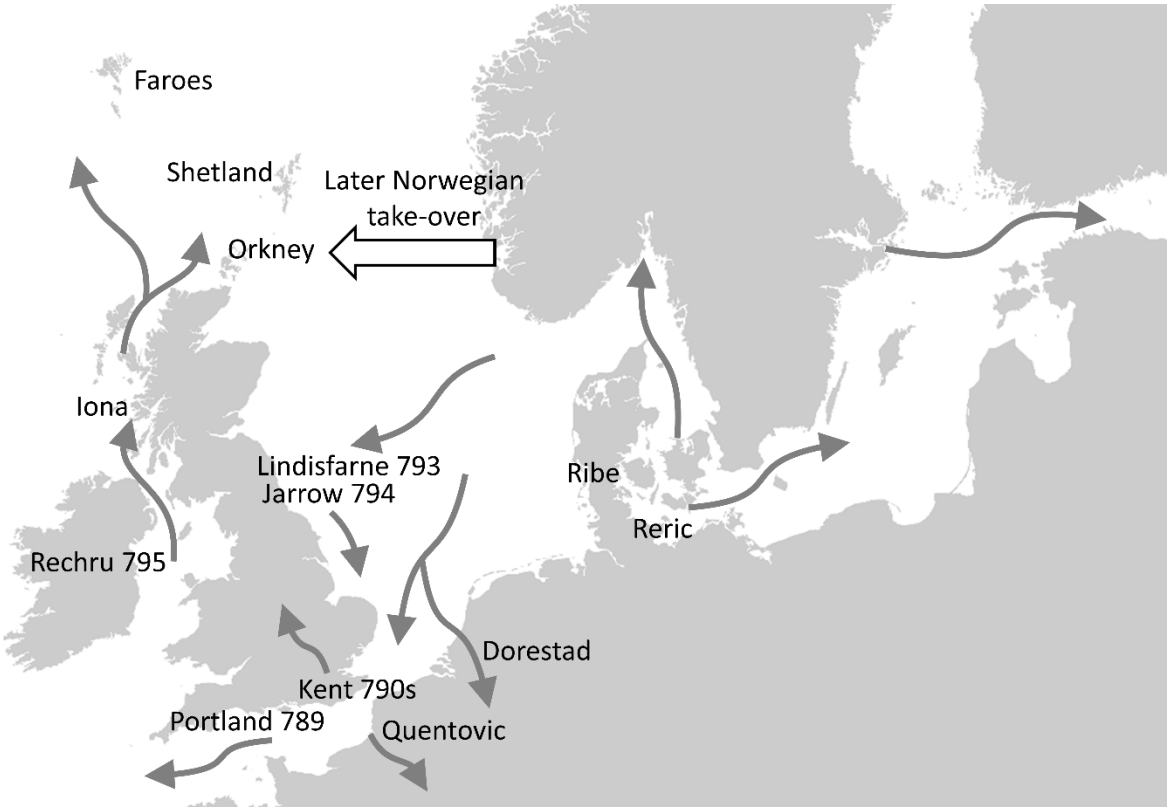
Figure Captions

1. Map of Early Viking activity in the West (arrows indicate the sequence of expansion)
2. Objects from Viking burials at Kilmainham-Islandbridge, Dublin, 1845. © National Museum of Ireland. Only five of the sixteen objects depicted in this plate (one of a series of watercolours by James Plunket) can be securely provenanced to Scandinavia (see also Harrison & Ó Floinn 2014: 48-49).


Faroes
Shetland
Later Norwegian
take-over
Orkney
Iona
Lindisfarne 793
Jarrow 794
Ribe
Reric
Rechru 795
Dorestad
Kent 790s
Portland 789
Quentovic

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