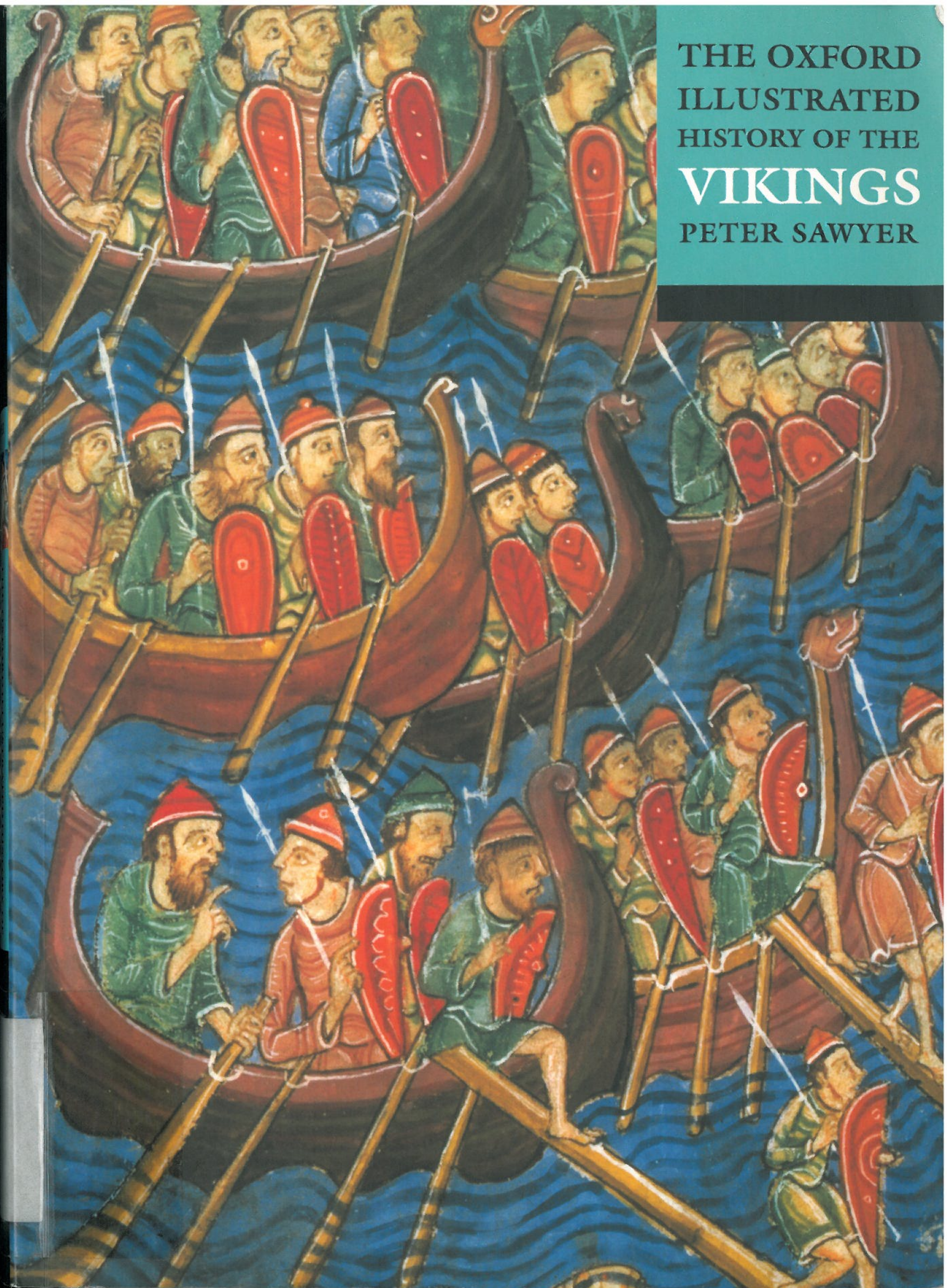


THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE VIKINGS

PETER SAWYER

1

THE AGE OF THE VIKINGS AND BEFORE

PETER SAWYER

From the eighth century to the eleventh, Scandinavians, mostly Danes and Norwegians, figure prominently in the history of western Europe as raiders, conquerors, and colonists. They plundered extensively in the British Isles and the Frankish empire and even attacked the Iberian peninsula and north Africa. In the ninth century they gained control of Orkney, Shetland, and most of the Hebrides, conquered a large part of England, and established bases on the Irish coast from which they launched attacks within Ireland and across the Irish Sea. Men and women from west Scandinavia emigrated to settle, not only in the parts of the British Isles that were then under Scandinavian control, but also in the Faeroes and Iceland, Atlantic islands that had previously been uninhabited. In the last years of the tenth century they also began to colonize Greenland, and explored North America, but without establishing permanent settlements there. The Scandinavian assault on western Europe culminated in the early eleventh century with the Danish conquest of the English kingdom, an achievement that other Scandinavian kings attempted to repeat later in the century, but without success.

Other Scandinavians, mainly Svear from what is now east Sweden, were active in eastern Europe in ways that were very similar to those of their contemporaries in western Europe, despite the great differences between the two regions. In the east there were no churches or well-established towns to plunder, but the invaders exploited the wealth of the region, principally furs and slaves, by seizure or by exacting tribute. Some of their leaders were able to gain control of centres of power, and Scandinavians emigrated to settle in what is now north Russia.

The peoples these Scandinavians encountered gave them a variety of names: the Franks normally called them Northmen or Danes, while for the English they were generally Danes or heathens. The Irish described the early raiders as pagans or gentiles, but by the middle of the ninth century they began to call them foreigners, the Norwegians and Danes being distinguished as 'white' and 'black' foreigners, *Finngall* and *Dubgall.* In eastern Europe the Slavs called the Scandinavian invaders Rus, a word derived from the Finnish name for the Svear, which itself came from a word meaning 'rowers' or 'crew of oarsmen'. It was 'Rus', variants of which were used in Arabic and Byzantine Greek texts, which eventually gave Russia its name. In the ninth century it was only the English who, occasionally, called the invaders Vikings, a Scandinavian word that now has a wider meaning, and is used to describe many aspects of Scandinavian society in what is commonly called the Age of the Vikings.

The first Viking raids reported in western Europe were in the last decade of the eighth century, on monasteries in the British Isles. In 793 Lindisfarne, an island monastery off the coast of Northumberland, was plundered; a year later another Northumbrian monastery, probably Jarrow, was attacked. In 795 Vikings attacked undefended island monasteries in the west: on Skye and Iona in the Hebrides, and on Rathlin off the north-east coast of Ireland. The first recorded raid on the Continent, in 799, was also on an island monastery, St-Philibert's on Noirmoutier, near the estuary of the Loire. One early incident that did not involve a church took place in the reign of Beorhtric, king of the West Saxons (786–802). The crews of three ships, later described as from Hordaland in Norway, landed in Portland on the south coast of England and killed a royal reeve who mistook them for merchants.

Some of the early eighth-century silver coins found in Ribe. They were apparently modelled on English coins, but it is uncertain whether they were made in Frisia or in Denmark.

There must also have been raids on south-east England at this time, although none is reported until 835. As early as 792 the churches of Kent were obliged to contribute to defences against pagan seamen, and in 804 the nunnery of Lyminge, an exposed site near Romney Marsh, was granted land within the walls of Canterbury as a refuge. Across the Channel, in 800, Charlemagne organized defences along the coast north of the Seine estuary against pirates who 'infest the Gallic sea'. As no attack on that coast is reported before 810 it is not possible to say when the raids began: Scandinavian pirates may have been a nuisance there for many years. It is, however, clear that by the last decade of the century their raids had become so serious that rulers on both sides of the Channel took action against them.

Why the Raids Began

It has often been suggested that the main cause of Viking activity was the pressure of increasing population in Scandinavia and the consequent shortage of land there. That may have been partly true of western Norway, where there were few reserves of land, but in other parts of Scandinavia there is no hint of population pressure on the eve of the Viking period. Most of the first generations of Vikings were seeking wealth, not land. It is true that during the Viking Age many Scandinavians emigrated, but few did so out of necessity. It is more likely that most of those who settled in the British Isles, Iceland, or Russia were attracted by the prospect of having more land than they could ever hope to own or rent in Scandinavia.

A key factor in the outburst of piracy was, in fact, the commercial expansion in north-west Europe that had begun over a century before the first reported raids. Towards the end of the seventh century a significant increase of trade between the Continent and England led to the development of several relatively large trading centres: Dorestad on the Rhine, Quentovic near Boulogne, and, in England, *Hamwic* (the precursor of Southampton), Fordwich (the port of Canterbury), London, Ipswich, and York. This trade

Winter view of Birka, from the north-east. In the background Lake Mälaren is covered with ice and to the left the fort overlooks the site of the settlement which was surrounded by a wall, part of which can be seen beyond the cemetery in the foreground.

grew even faster after about 700, when the Frisians obtained a very large stock of silver from an unidentified source and produced from it a huge supply of coinage that quickly spread throughout the Continent and in England.

Scandinavia and the lands round the Baltic were soon affected by this development, for the produce of that region, particularly its furs, was highly prized in western Europe. The best-quality furs came from areas with the coldest winters, and for western Europe Scandinavia and the lands east of the Baltic were an ideal source. Merchants could sail into the Baltic in the summer to buy furs, skins, and other produce, such as amber, eiderdown, and good-quality whetstones, in trading centres that were established during the eighth century. Already in the first years of that century such a centre had been founded at Ribe on the west coast of Jutland, and by mid-century there were others around the Baltic, the most important being Hedeby at the head of Schlei fjord in south-east Jutland, Birka in Lake Mälaren, and Wolin near the estuary of the Oder.

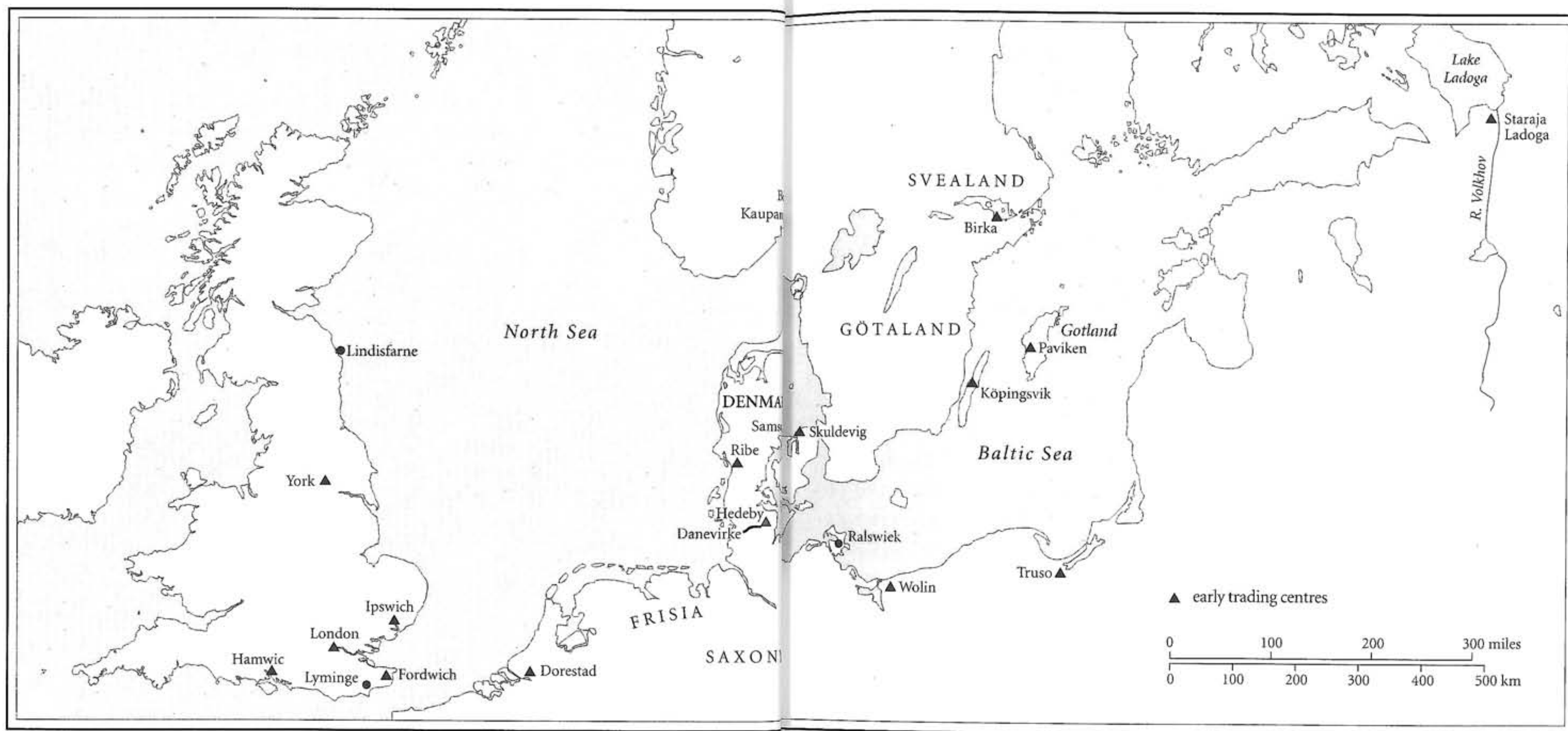
Most of the produce offered for sale in such places had been gathered as tribute from the Saami, Finns, and Balts who inhabited the best fur-producing areas. The exaction of tribute in Scandinavia is described in a ninth-century English text that includes some information provided by

Ottar, a Norwegian who visited the court of the English king, Alfred. Ottar lived in the far north of Norway and took tribute from the Saami:

That tribute consists of the skins of beasts, the feathers of birds, whale-bone, and ship-ropes made from walrus-hide and sealskin. Each pays according to his rank. The highest in rank has to pay fifteen marten skins, five reindeer skins, one bear-

Left: The main wall of Danevirke, seen from the south-west. About ten kilometres of this barrier defending Jutland was constructed in or soon after 737.

Below: Timber foundations to support the face of Danevirke in marshy ground. Some of the wood was so well preserved that it has been possible to determine that it came from trees felled in 737.



THE NORTH SEA AND THE BALTIC IN THE EIGHTH CENTURY

skin, and ten measures of feathers, and a jacket of bearskin or otterskin, and two ship-ropes. Each of these must be sixty ells long, one made of walrus hide, the other from seal.

He also hunted walrus for their tusks, which were a valuable substitute for elephant ivory, as well for their skins. He apparently took what he gathered, as tribute or by hunting, to sell in markets such as Hedeby in south Scandinavia, or possibly in England.

Over a century before Ottar's time, Scandinavians had gathered similar tribute in Finland and north Russia, which continued to be the main source of high-quality furs in Europe for centuries. By AD 750 at the latest a base for this activity, with a mixed population of Finns, Slavs, and some Scandinavians, had been established at Staraja (Old) Ladoga on the River Volkhov, some 13 kilometres from its estuary in Lake Ladoga.

The commercial links between northern and western Europe had consequences that in their turn prepared the way for the Viking raids. First, increased familiarity with western European sailing-ships was an important

factor in the adoption of sails in Scandinavia, a development discussed in Chapter 8. Secondly, their contacts with western merchants enabled Scandinavians to learn about Europe's wealth and about the conflicts between, and within, European kingdoms from which they were later able to profit. Thirdly, merchant ships in the Baltic provided opportunities for pirates who were in time tempted to extend their activities into the North Sea. There were also political consequences. Those rulers and chieftains who were best able to exact tribute gained wealth and power, as did those who controlled the trading centres, or the routes leading to them. The Danish kings, whose central territory was in Jutland and the adjacent islands, benefited most, for they controlled the entrance to the Baltic and could offer security to ships passing through the Great or Little Belts. They were thus able to attract merchants to Hedeby, conveniently close to the land route between Jutland and Saxony. The alternative channel into the Baltic, Øresund, was less attractive, partly because of strong currents, but also because of the threat of piracy; it was not directly controlled by Danish kings until the end of the tenth century.

THE KANHAVE CANAL. Made in 726, it enabled the Danes to control the main routes to the Baltic. Ships based in the sheltered waters of Stavns Fjord could quickly cross the island to intercept vessels sailing across its west coast. The shaded circle shows the limit of visibility in clear weather from the highest point (26 m) on Hjortholm in Stavns Fjord. From higher ground on Samsø (over 50 m) both Jutland and Sjælland can be seen.

There are various indications that in the first half of the ninth century Danish kings were acknowledged as overlords by many of the local rulers and chieftains in the lands round Skagerrak and Kattegat. Any who were unable to resist Danish power and were unwilling to submit to it could choose exile, a prospect made more attractive by the opportunity to win fame and fortune by taking part in, or leading, Viking raids. The Danes were particularly eager to have hegemony over Viken, the land flanking Oslo Fjord. This district was of great value, for it was there that the Danes could obtain the iron that was produced in Norway. If, as seems likely, the word Viking originally referred to the inhabitants of Viken, it could explain why the English, and only they, called Scandinavian pirates Vikings, for England was the natural objective for men from Viken who chose exile as raiders rather than accept Danish overlordship.

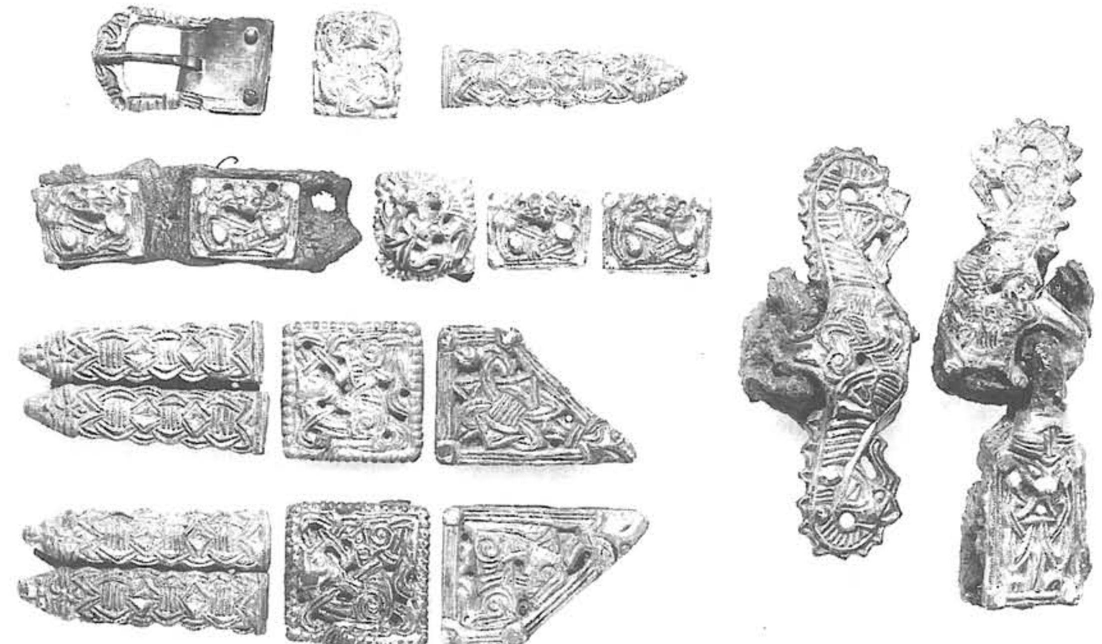
Vikings in the West

At first most of the Vikings who operated in the north and west of the British Isles were from Norway. There is no contemporary record of Scandinavian activity in Orkney, Shetland, or the Hebrides in the early ninth century, but archaeological evidence suggests that there were contacts between Norway and Orkney as early as the seventh century. By the mid-ninth century there were extensive Norwegian settlements in the Hebrides as well as in the Northern Isles, a colonization that could only have been possible after any resistance by the native inhabitants had been overcome, presumably by force. It is therefore likely that the Scandinavian conquests in the Northern and Western Isles began with the establishment of bases by the leaders of the earliest raids. The Danes initially concentrated on the southern North Sea and the Channel coasts. Although the distinction between these Danish and Norwegian zones was blurred in the middle of the ninth century when Danes challenged Norwegians in Ireland, archaeological and linguistic evidence clearly shows that it was predominantly Danes who settled in eastern England and that most of those who occupied land in Ireland, the Hebrides, and the Northern Isles were from Norway.

For several decades the Vikings mounted what were, in effect, hit-and-run raids, rarely venturing far inland. The defences organized by English and Frankish rulers were apparently effective; most reported raids were in Ireland until the 830s, when the scale and extent of Viking incursions increased dramatically. Dorestad, a major trading centre about 80 kilometres from the open sea, was raided in 834 and in each of the next three years. In 835 the Isle of Sheppey was ravaged and in 836 the West Saxon army was defeated by Vikings who landed on the north coast of Somerset. In the same year Vikings began to plunder monasteries in the interior of Ireland and the monks of St-Philibert abandoned Noirmoutier to seek shelter in the Loire valley.

This extension of Viking activity was made possible by the conflict between Louis, the Frankish emperor, and his sons, one of whom, Lothar, welcomed the support of a Viking fleet led by an exiled Danish king. Scandinavians also took advantage of internal conflicts elsewhere in western Europe. In 838 Vikings supported the Britons of Cornwall against the West Saxons, and in 844 a deposed Northumbrian king was restored to power after his usurper was defeated and killed by Viking invaders. In Ireland too there were alliances between Vikings and Irish kings, certainly from 842 and probably earlier. It was, however, Frankia that offered Vikings the most rewarding opportunities. In 841, during the war that broke out between the sons of Louis after his death, churches and towns in the Seine valley were

A ship-burial of *c.*900 in the cemetery at Borre, near Tønsberg, west of Oslo Fjord, contained numerous gilt-bronze harness mounts, some of which are illustrated here. This cemetery, which was in use from the seventh century to the beginning of the tenth, originally had nine monumental mounds, the largest concentration in Scandinavia. The implication is that Borre was a power centre before and during the first part of the Viking Age. The Borre style of Scandinavian art, widely spread in the early Viking Age, is named after the decoration on these mounts.



raided and in 842 Quentovic was sacked by a fleet which then crossed the Channel to attack *Hamwic*. When in 843 the war ended with the division of Frankia into three kingdoms, the Vikings had discovered that monasteries and towns on navigable rivers were vulnerable and that the Franks were sometimes prepared to pay large sums for the sake of peace. In 845 an attack on Paris was prevented by the payment of bullion worth 7,000 pounds of silver: for the Vikings an unprecedented tribute. It is not surprising that before long many new bands of Vikings were attracted to Frankia. A Viking fleet wintered in the Seine valley in 852, and a year later another did so in the Loire valley. By the end of the decade all the main rivers of the west Frankish kingdom were being exploited by Viking fleets. Even the Rhône valley was plundered by a fleet that sailed into the Mediterranean in 859 and established a base in the Camargue on the south coast of Frankia. The West Frankish kingdom suffered most; the others were not so seriously disrupted by Vikings, despite the existence of many promising targets in the valleys of the Rhine and Meuse. These rivers were, in effect, protected most of the time by other Vikings who were based near their estuaries as allies of the rulers of that part of Frankia.

Although the main arena of Viking activity in the middle years of the century was Frankia, the British Isles continued to suffer raids. In England one of the main objectives was the estuary of the River Thames. In 850 a fleet wintered on Thanet, near its mouth, and for several years Vikings were based there or further upstream on the Isle of Sheppey. Vikings began to winter in Ireland earlier than they did in England, first in 840 on Lough Neagh and a year later in Dublin, in one of several defended ship enclosures that were constructed in that year. Before long there were Viking bases at Wexford, Waterford, Cork, Limerick, and elsewhere, from which the surrounding areas were plundered. The booty included ornaments and elaborate caskets, but Irish monasteries were not so rich in gold, silver, and gems as those of Frankia and England. Captives, who could be sold to Muslims in Spain or north Africa were far more valuable. The Vikings in these bases were, of course, not land-bound: the Dublin Vikings launched several expeditions across the Irish Sea and in 870, after a siege of four months, captured Dumbarton, the capital of the British kingdom of Strathclyde. The victors returned to Dublin with 'a great multitude of men, English, Britons, and Picts in captivity', a reminder of the importance of human booty. The Vikings based in Ireland were far from united, and rivalry between them was complicated by the arrival of Danes in 851 to challenge the Norwegians in Dublin and elsewhere. In subsequent years Irish annalists recorded with great pleasure many battles between these invaders.

By 870 there had been profound changes in Frankia and England. In 862

Charles, king of West Frankia, began systematically to defend the heart of his kingdom. He had bridges built across the Seine and Loire to hinder the passage of enemy ships, and he fortified towns and abbeys. The lower reaches of those rivers, together with other coastal areas, were, in effect, left to the mercy of the raiders, some of whom remained in the Loire valley for many years. Most of the religious communities and many bishops in the exposed regions sought safety in other parts of Frankia. These changes encouraged many Vikings to concentrate on England instead of Frankia. Several Viking leaders joined forces in the hope of winning status and independence by conquering England, which then consisted of four kingdoms. In 865 a fleet landed in East Anglia and was later joined by others to form what a contemporary chronicler described, with good reason, as a 'great army'. Five years later this army, by conquering two kingdoms, Northumbria and East Anglia, and dismembering a third, Mercia, controlled much of eastern England, from York to London. Only one kingdom, Wessex, remained intact and independent.

For several years after 870 the Viking army made determined, but unsuccessful, efforts to conquer Wessex, and between 876 and 880 its leaders began to grant estates in the conquered areas to their principal followers, who in turn distributed land to any of their men who wished to settle. These colonists had a profound effect on dialects and place-names in the areas in which they settled; their influence on the farming vocabulary and field-names confirms that many were, indeed, farmers.

At much the same time as members of the 'great army' were settling in England, other Scandinavians, mainly Norwegians, began to colonize Iceland. The existence of this island had long been known, but nobody lived there before the ninth century, with the possible exception of a few Irish Christians, who may have established religious communities, as they did on other Atlantic islands. Icelanders later claimed that their ancestors emigrated in order to escape the tyranny of Harald Finehair, who was traditionally remembered as the first king of a united Norway. This explanation is unsatisfactory because the emigration to Iceland began before Harald's time. Although lack of reliable evidence makes it impossible to say what part earlier developments in Norway played in the movement to Iceland, Irish annals suggest that Scandinavians based in Ireland had reason to look for new homes in the second half of the ninth century. By establishing permanent bases in Ireland the Vikings lost the advantage of mobility, and disputes between different groups meant that they were unable to present a united front of the kind that proved so effective in England. They suffered many defeats. In 866 they were expelled from all their strongholds in the north of Ireland and a Viking base at Youghal in the south was destroyed.

Towards the end of the century the Vikings of Limerick, Waterford, and Wexford all suffered defeats and in 902 the Dublin Vikings, weakened by factional conflict, were overcome by the Irish and expelled. Some of the Dublin Vikings settled across the Irish Sea in the Wirral and possibly on the Isle of Man, but other Vikings who left Ireland at that time settled in Iceland.

Whether the colonization was begun from the British Isles or from Norway, reports of the opportunities offered by that unexploited land must have spread rapidly and tempted many to look for new homes there. After about sixty years most of the land suitable for settlement had been claimed. Later arrivals had to be content with less attractive sites, for example in the steep-sided fjords of north-west Iceland. For such people the discovery in the tenth century of apparently better sites in south-west Greenland was welcome, and towards the end of that century some began to move on, to found the most remote permanent Scandinavian settlement in which there were, eventually, some 300 farms.

According to later Icelandic sagas some of the early settlers in Greenland reached North America and discovered a fertile region they called *Vínland* (Wine-land). Several voyages to it are reported, but the natives proved to be unfriendly and permanent settlement was not possible. Remains of buildings of this period with traces of temporary occupation by Scandinavians, found at L'Anse aux Meadows near the northern tip of Newfoundland, appear to have been a base camp for exploration. There is, however, no reliable evidence to show how much further south or up the St Lawrence river Greenlanders went.

The break-up of the 'great army' after its failure to conquer Wessex coincided with renewed succession disputes in Frankia. Vikings were quick to take advantage of such dissension, and from 879 to 891 several Viking armies were active on the Continent, occasionally combining forces. At first they concentrated on the area north of the Seine, including Flanders, where cities and monasteries had not been fortified, and in 881 there was a major incursion up the Rhine to Cologne and Trier. This led the Franks once again to protect that river by allowing a Viking army to control its estuary. Another, more effective, response was to build fortifications. These measures had some success. In 885 the main army divided into two and each part returned to an area of earlier Viking activity, the Thames estuary and the Seine valley. After the former group had failed to take Rochester, some returned to the Continent, while others joined forces with Danes who had earlier settled in East Anglia. The Seine Vikings besieged Paris that winter. Although the city's defences held, the Franks were unable to prevent the invaders spending the next two winters further inland. During these campaigns huge quantities of plunder and tribute, and many captives, were taken, but the Vikings also suffered some defeats in pitched battles, in 881 at Saucourt, in 890 against the Bretons, and in 891 near Louvain.

Following the defeat of 891 the army returned to England to renew the attempt to conquer the West Saxons. It failed. Alfred had learned the lesson of the campaigns in Frankia and had constructed a network of fortifications and built a fleet. In 896 the Vikings, having failed to gain even a foothold in the areas of England not already under Scandinavian control, abandoned the attempt. In the words of the contemporary *Chronicle*: 'The Danish army divided, one force going into East Anglia and one into Northumbria; and those that were moneyless got themselves ships and went south across the sea to the Seine.'

Little is known about Viking activity on the Continent after that reversal. It is, however, clear that in 911 the West Frankish, or French, king granted Rouen and the surrounding territory in the lower Seine valley to a Viking leader called Rollo in the hope that he would deny other raiders the passage of the Seine, an arrangement similar to those made earlier to protect the Rhine. Another group of Vikings was allowed to settle in the neighbourhood of Nantes in 921, apparently to protect the Loire, but that arrangement lasted only sixteen years. The Viking occupation of Rouen proved permanent and was the basis of the later duchy of Normandy, which at its full extent included the Cotentin peninsula in the west. Place- and personal names show that some of the Scandinavians who settled in the west of Normandy came from Celtic regions, probably Ireland, and there are indications that some had spent some time in England.

The other main development in the first half of the tenth century was the conquest of the Scandinavian areas of England by the descendants of Alfred who ruled Wessex and the English part of Mercia. The main resistance came from Northumbrians, who tried to preserve their independence by recognizing Scandinavians as kings of York. With the expulsion and death of the last of these kings, Erik Bloodaxe, an exiled Norwegian king, in 952 or 954, the English were at last permanently united in one kingdom. The earlier Scandinavian kings, none of whom ruled York for long, had all been members of the dynasty that regained control of Dublin in 917. They claimed to be descendants of Ivar, the king of Dublin, who, on his death in 873, was described by an Irish annalist as 'king of all the Scandinavians of Ireland and Britain'. Whatever justification there was for such a title, the fact that his descendants were so closely associated with York lends some support to the suggestion that he was one of the leaders of the 'great army' that seized the city in 866.

During the tenth century the Scandinavians who ruled Dublin and those

who retained control of other bases on the Irish coast became increasingly integrated in Irish politics, in which they played a minor role as allies of Irish kings in their struggles for supremacy. They could, however, act independently overseas, and were responsible for the sporadic Viking activity that that continued around the Irish Sea.

For most of the tenth century the opportunities for Vikings in western Europe were limited. The Scandinavians who had settled in the British Isles and Normandy did not welcome newcomers, unless they had money. In Iceland the first settlers had taken the best land. The most promising targets for raids were well defended by fortifications or relatively well organized armies. Vikings could still hope to profit from hit-and-run raids, but few of these are reported until the last two decades of the century. Only large-scale invasions offered any hope of significant gains, but for most of the century no large Viking armies operated in western Europe. One reason was probably that potential leaders were then engaged in internal conflicts in Scandinavia.

The East

The decrease in Viking activity in western Europe may also have been partly because there were better opportunities to gather wealth in the east, where there had been great changes since the eighth century. Staraja Ladoga controlled the river Volkhov, which was one of the most important routes between the Baltic and the interior of Russia. That control was made all the more effective by the rapids above the town that could only be navigated safely with the help of pilots supplied by the townspeople. A hoard of Islamic coins deposited there in about 790 suggests that the resources of the region were by then being exported to the Caliphate. For over 200 years exports from Russia to the Muslim world, either directly across the Caspian Sea, or through markets on the rivers Don and Volga, were paid for mainly in silver coins, huge numbers of which have been found in eastern Europe.

Scandinavians also had dealings with the Byzantine empire. In 860 they attacked Constantinople and by the tenth century that city was an important market for Rus traders. The Rus had, however, already reached Constantinople by 839. In that year the Frankish *Annals of St-Bertin* report the arrival at the court of the Frankish emperor of envoys from Theophilus, the Byzantine emperor. They were accompanied by Svear 'who said that they—meaning their whole people—were called Rus [*Rhos*] and had been sent to him by their king whose name was Khan [*Chacan*], for the sake of friendship, so they claimed'. Theophilus asked the Franks to grant them safe con-

Facing: A hoard of over 2.5 kg of gold, deposited at Hon, south-west of Oslo, in the second half of the ninth century, vividly illustrates the range of Viking activity. It contained Arabic, Byzantine, English, and Frankish coins, a magnificent trefoil brooch from Frankia, and large neck-rings that were probably made in Russia.

duct and help to return home because 'fierce and savage tribes' made the route by which they had reached Constantinople dangerous.

It is suggested in Chapter 6 that the Khan who sent these Rus to Constantinople was the ruler of the Khazars, a Turkish people who occupied the valleys of the lower Don and Volga and who, from the seventh to the early tenth centuries, ruled a huge empire between the Caspian and Black seas. However, as earlier Frankish annals used Khan to describe rulers of both Slavs and Huns, it is more likely that the Rus were sent by their own ruler, possibly from the new base that, by the middle of the century, had been established on an island in the Volkhov where the river flows out from Lake Ilmen, about 200 kilometres above Staraja Ladoga. This was the Holmgarð of later Icelandic sagas, but in Slavonic it was later called Gorodishche (Old Town or Fort), in contrast to Novgorod (New Town or Fort), founded about a century later 2 kilometres downstream. Gorodishche, with both Slav and Scandinavian inhabitants, soon became an important centre for the growing trade in Russian produce in both western and eastern markets.

The amount of Islamic silver reaching Russia increased dramatically in the tenth century thanks to the discovery of huge silver deposits in the Hindu Kush. This enabled the Samanid rulers of Transoxania to produce a vast quantity of coins, many of which were used to buy goods in Russia. This commerce, and the silver acquired by it, offered tempting opportunities to Vikings who found western Europe less rewarding after 900 than it had been earlier. Archaeological evidence for the presence of Scandinavians in Russia is much more abundant for the early tenth century than for the ninth, and significant numbers of Scandinavian graves have been found in the cemeteries of bases or trading centres on the main rivers of the forest region, for example at Pskov, Chernigov, on a tributary of the Dnepr, Timerevo, near Iaroslavl on the upper Volga, and Murom, on its tributary, the Oka. The largest of these cemeteries was at Gnezdovo, on the upper Dnepr, near Smolensk, with 3,000 or more graves dating from the late ninth to the early eleventh centuries, some of which certainly house men and women of Scandinavian descent, and which include boat-burials of people of high status.

The most significant extension of Scandinavian activity was to Kiev on the middle Dnepr, which by the end of the ninth century was ruled by a dynasty of Scandinavian descent, whose members at first paid tribute to the Khazars. Although the rulers of Kiev, and many of their retainers, were of Scandinavian descent, by the end of the century they had been slavicized, a change that is clearly reflected in their names. The prince of Kiev from about 913 to 945 was Igor and his wife was called Olga, names derived from the Scandinavian Ingvar and Helga, but their son, prince from 964 to 971,

Facing, above: Remains found at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland are good evidence that Scandinavians who had settled in Greenland reached North America early in the eleventh century. Traces of several turf-built houses were found, on which these reconstructions are based. L'Anse aux Meadows was apparently a base for the exploration of the region, but was abandoned after a few years.

Facing, below: Jeufosse in the river Seine, about halfway between Paris and Rouen, seen from the south. Vikings wintered on this island in 853 and 856.

Part of a tenth-century silver hoard from Gnezdovo, on the upper Dnepr, near Smolensk. It contained a great variety of jewellery, mostly in Scandinavian and Slav styles. The iron sword and bronze oval brooches seen here probably came from graves discovered in 1868 at the same time as the hoard.

was named Svjatoslav. Nevertheless, he and his successors continued to be considered Rus, a term that was by then no longer used specifically for Scandinavians.

Coin hoards in Scandinavia show that many Samanid coins were reaching the Baltic region by the early years of the tenth century. It has generally been supposed that their existence reflects a favourable balance of trade, although it is not clear what was bought with them. The fact that for some twenty years after about 965 very few Islamic coins were imported into Scandinavia, although they continued to reach Russia, if in smaller quantities than before, suggests that in the first half of the century much of the silver reaching Scandinavia was acquired in ways that were not possible later. The most satisfactory explanation is that much of it was gathered as tribute or plunder in eastern Europe by bands of Scandinavians operating independently, and that the decline in silver imports reflects the success of Rus princes in resisting such incursions. If so, that success was partly due to the Scandinavian warriors, called *varjagi* in Slavonic (Varangians in modern

English) who were recruited by Rus princes in the tenth century. According to later Kievan tradition, Svjatoslav's son, Vladimir, prince from 978 to 1015, reduced his retinue of *varjagi* early in his reign by sending many of them to the Byzantine empire. This is confirmed by Byzantine evidence that a large force of warriors, later called *varaggoi*, sent by Vladimir in 988, enabled the emperor to crush a serious rebellion. Thereafter Varangians, Slavs as well as Scandinavians, played an important role in the Byzantine army, and later formed the imperial bodyguard, the Varangian Guard. One of the most famous members of this élite force was Harald Hardrada before he became king of Norway in 1046.

The Conquests of England

Increasingly effective opposition in the east may well have been a factor in the renewal of Viking raids in western Europe towards the end of the tenth century. Another incentive for Scandinavians to seek profitable exile as Vikings was the revival of Danish power under Harald Bluetooth and his son, Sven Forkbeard. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the two main periods of Viking activity in western Europe began towards the end of the eighth and the tenth centuries, when Danish kings were extending their authority to neighbouring parts of Scandinavia.

Raids on England reported in the 980s may have been the work of Vikings from Ireland, but ten years later fleets from Scandinavia began once again to threaten western Europe. Many places along the coast of the Continent, from the Elbe to northern Spain, were attacked, but the main target was England, which was then a rich kingdom with large and expanding towns and a great quantity of silver in circulation in the form of coins of high quality. Vikings soon discovered that the English under their king Æthelred were able and willing to pay large sums for the sake of peace, however temporary.

The leaders of several, apparently independent, Viking armies that operated in England after 991 are named in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in Swedish runic inscriptions, but the most important was Sven Forkbeard. There is little doubt that he led the first major raid on England in 991, and he returned several times to extort ever larger sums of tribute before conquering the kingdom in 1013. He died soon after this triumph and the English recalled Æthelred from exile in Normandy. Sven's son Knut returned in 1015 to regain what his father had won. By the end of the following year, after Æthelred's death, he was recognized as king by the English, The Danish conquest of England did not put an end to the threat of Viking attacks, but the fleet that Knut maintained proved to be an effective deterrent. No attacks

are reported after 1018 when the crews of thirty pirate ships were killed by Knut's forces.

Knut died in 1035 and was succeeded in turn by two sons. In 1042, after both were dead, the English chose Æthelred's surviving son, Edward, as king. Nevertheless, several later Danish and Norwegian kings believed that they had a claim to England. Many Scandinavians were willing to encourage such ambitions and hoped at least to have the opportunity to gather some of England's wealth as plunder even if conquest was not possible.

When Edward died childless in January 1066, his successor, Harold Godwinesson, was challenged by the Norwegian king, Harald Hardrada. He invaded England, but was killed in a battle at Stamford Bridge, near York, on 25 September. Three weeks later Harold Godwinesson was himself killed in a battle near Hastings against William, duke of Normandy, who was crowned king of the English on Christmas Day. It was, however, several years before he had firm control of the whole kingdom, and English magnates who were unwilling to accept him were prepared to support the claim of the Danish king, Sven Estridsson. He arrived in the Humber in 1070, but William's vigorous defensive measures were effective and Sven withdrew in the summer, although he and his men were able to keep some of their booty. Five years later a Danish fleet, led by one of Sven's sons, Knut, set sail to support a rebellion against William, but it had been crushed before they arrived. The Danes returned home after plundering York and its neighbourhood. In 1085 Knut, now king of the Danes, planned to conquer England, a threat that William took very seriously, but the assembled fleet never sailed. There were a few later expeditions by Norwegian kings to the Northern and Western Isles, but England never again suffered a large-scale attack by Scandinavians. The Viking Age was over.