

## **The Economics of Organizing 9th Century Viking raids**

Viking raiders first appeared on the shores of western Europe in the 790s. For the year 793 the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record, "...terrible portents appeared...and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air.... and the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne."<sup>1</sup> , while the Annals of Ulster for 795 describe, "The burning of Rechru by the heathens, and Sci was overwhelmed and laid waste."<sup>2</sup> These early raids followed a distinct pattern – one or two ships, coastal raids [slide], and hit-and-run tactics. But in the 830s and 840s, the patterns of raids changed suddenly and dramatically. In Ireland, the Annals of Ulster record for the year 837 "A naval force of the Norsemen sixty ships strong was on the Bóinn, [and] another one of sixty ships on the river Life. These two forces plundered the plain of Life and the plain of Brega, including churches, forts and dwellings. The men of Brega routed the foreigners at Deoninne in Mugdorna of Brega, and six score of the Norsemen fell." According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in 838 "In this year came a great pirate host to Cornwall..."<sup>3</sup> The switch to larger raiding parties was swiftly followed by settlement, as in 841 Vikings first set up camp at Dublin. By the middle of the ninth century, it is clear that changes back in Scandinavia were having a direct impact on events in the British Isles, as shown by a takeover at Dublin in the 850s, and the arrival of the "Great Heathen Army" in Anglo-Saxon England in the 860s.

Some scholars have argued that the early raids were a deliberate "softening up" of Europe, a deliberate prelude to land-grabbing.<sup>4</sup> But this view assumes that raiders were displaced farmers, victims of climate change or population pressures.<sup>5</sup> I would argue instead that the earliest raids were the work of minor chieftains, stealing goods to trade at the new market towns in Norway and Denmark. The large-scale raids from the 830s onwards were the result of the success of the early raids, which allowed the market towns to become well-established and successful. This in turn had

provided funds for kings in Norway and Denmark to establish themselves more firmly, organize much larger raids, and then quickly to the deliberate founding or capture and settlement of new market towns in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. After the 850s, competition for power within Denmark and Norway, partially represented by vying for control of these same early towns, led once again to changes in Viking activities as seen especially in Ireland and England.

The earliest raiders targeted monasteries, relatively wealthy and usually undefended sites. People and portable valuables were their targets, "Howth was plundered by the heathens, [and] they carried off a great number of women into captivity"<sup>6</sup> and "The heathens plundered Bennchor at Airtiu (?), and destroyed the oratory, and shook the relics of Comgall from their shrine."<sup>7</sup> [**slide of Emly shrine**]. The shrine, not the relics, held value the raiders could understand. Based on excavations of longships, a raiding crew would have consisted of about 30 men, led by their chieftain after planting and before harvest season.<sup>8</sup>

The reasons for these raids is simpler than has previously imagined. Denmark was the best organized state in Scandinavia at the beginning of the Viking Age, largely in response to the presence of Charlemagne and the establishment of the Carolingian Empire. A single king in Denmark, Godfred, by 800 CE controlled what today is Denmark, parts of Germany, Sweden - and Vestfold in southwest Norway. Within a very few years, he established market towns at Ribe, Hedeby and Kaupang [**map**].

Ribe was an early 8<sup>th</sup>-century settlement, mostly rural.<sup>9</sup> Probably with early royal sponsorship, it developed into a summer trade center, where craftsmen made jewelry and other ware for sale locally and long-distance.<sup>10</sup> It was clearly a town with permanent inhabitants by the middle of the eighth century. In order to trade with the Rhineland and other nearby areas, Ribe seems to have minted its own silver coins, *sceatta*, [**slide**] by the end of 8<sup>th</sup> century. These *sceatta* were

minted in many places, and represented a common silver standard to facilitate trade. Pottery and glass from Rhineland show Ribe's most important European trade partners and wine trade. The market town flourished in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike Hedeby, Ribe was not walled in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

Slightly further north, the development of Hedeby followed a similar pattern. **[map]** There was a small rural settlement at Hedeby by the mid-eighth century, but the site became a trade center around 800 CE.<sup>12</sup> In 808 Danish king King Godfred kidnaped Frisian merchants for Hedeby, "But Godfred before his return destroyed a trading place on the seashore, in Danish called Reric, which, because of the taxes it paid, was of great advantage to his kingdom. Transferring the merchants from Reric he weighed anchor and came with his whole army to the harbor of Schleswig."<sup>13</sup> In order to protect his new trade center, according to the Royal Frankish Annals Godfred went on to build the Danevirke, a defensive rampart that stretched across the Jutland peninsula and incorporated the walls of Hedeby.<sup>14</sup> **[slide]** By attacking Ribe and stealing its merchants, Godfred accomplished two important tasks at once. First, he eliminated an important rival; Reric had been a flourishing Slavic market center from about 770 onwards. Second, he literally staged a hostile takeover – the merchants from Reric, now worked for Godfred and within his realm.<sup>15</sup>

Excavations at Hedeby clearly demonstrate its function as a trade center. Dendrochronological dates show a bridge was built around 811, the same time an irregular grid pattern was laid out on the streets. Locally, Hedeby traded with the Carolingians (brooches) and Germans (coins)<sup>16</sup> About 1500 people probably lived at Hedeby: silk and silver from Baghdad and Byzantium via Swedish trade centers have been found in 9<sup>th</sup>-century levels at Hedeby.<sup>17</sup> It is also clear that there was little to differentiate between traders and raiders, even in the towns. One richly furnished burial from Hedeby consisted of both a ship and burial chamber. The presence of three swords and three shields has led some to argue that a chieftain and two warrior-retainers were buried

together. Glass objects and silver filigree jewelry attest to the wealth of the burial, which dates to approximately 840-850. Like Ribe, someone at Hedeby was minting *sceattas*. Since these early silver coins from Hedeby had ships on them, one possibility is this was the king/leader who'd begun minting them ca. 825.<sup>18</sup>

As with Ribe and Hedeby, recent excavations at Kaupang in Vestfold have illuminated much about the early ninth century market town. Kaupang was founded approximately 800, based on tree-ring data from some posts. There was a royal center overlooking the town at Huseby, presumably Norwegians who acknowledged the overlordship of Godfred. Kaupang was at first a craft center, then houses were built within a decade or so as the settlement became full-time and permanent. Amber working, jewelry makings and other crafts were practiced. There was a population of only 400-1000 people, and no defenses have been discovered.<sup>19</sup> The Royal Frankish Annals 813 shows two sons of Godfred, who had died in 810, Harald Klack and Reginfred, as joint-kings in Denmark. It states that Vestfold was "the most distant part of their kingdom...where the princes and people were refusing to be subject to them."<sup>20</sup> Harald Klack ruled territories that included Vestfold until his death in 826.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of these new market towns created a demand for ever more goods to trade. Vikings raiders in Ireland and England captured slaves and ecclesiastical treasures to fill the demand, as shown by both written material and excavated material [slide] show the same thing.

The early pattern is thus clear: Ribe, Hedeby and Kaupang were just at the beginning of the Viking Age, probably all by the Danish king Godfred. As Dagfinn Skre has pointed out, all were on the BORDERS of his territories rather than at its heart. This shows first of all that he viewed himself as a king with a territory with defined borders.<sup>22</sup> Each faced a different direction out of his realm. And early Viking raiders now had reliable, protected markets in which to sell their loot. The

raiders did not necessarily come from within Godfred's or Harald Klack's own territories; raiders into Ireland, for example, came mainly from Norway's southwestern coast, as shown by the many graves containing Irish artefacts.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, the successes of the early raids is part of what led to their end. As goods from Western Europe, especially slaves, flowed into Kaupang and Hedeby, the market centers thrived. So, too, did the kings who controlled them. Now better funded and thus able to better organize their kingdoms, their political reach extended further, at the expense of the same local chieftains responsible for the early raids, especially in southern Norway. By the 840s, larger, better organized raiding fleets were being sent throughout England and Ireland, and permanent raiding bases were being established at the same time.

After Harald Klack's death in 826, events in Norway become more difficult to follow. Horic I, a pagan, followed Harald Klack as king in Denmark. Anskar, the best local source for information during this period, was forced to flee Hedeby in 827.<sup>24</sup> Horic I seems to have been unable to maintain control of Vestfold throughout his entire reign. The Frankish Annals of Angoulême state that in 843 that men from Vestfold (*westfaldingi*) attacked Nantes and then Aquitaine.<sup>25</sup> The Annals of St-Bertin, usually very carefully specific in these cases, calls these same raiders Northmen, not Danes, suggesting that Horic I may have lost control over Vestfold by this time.<sup>26</sup> Only a few years earlier, in 836, Horic had been referred to in this same source as "king of the Danes," an epithet repeated in 847. But in 850, the Annals of St-Bertin refer to Horic I as the "king of the Northmen," suggesting he had regained some control over Vestfold by then.<sup>27</sup>

It was during Horic I's reign that great fleets of Vikings began to attack Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. Raids on this scale could not have been organized by local chieftains. The costs of building 60 or 90 or 120 ships alone would far have outstripped the resources of most chieftains.

But Ribe, Hedeby and Kaupang all had jetties and were involved in shipbuilding.<sup>28</sup> These large fleets may well indicate both the increased demand for more goods as the market towns expanded, as well as spillover from Horic's troubles with Vestfold. The establishment of a permanent base at Dublin in 841 clearly indicates the expansion of Kaupang's interests, if, as I have argued elsewhere, Dublin and other bases were established as gateway communities from which Ireland could be more efficiently exploited by the royal family at Kaupang.<sup>29</sup> Evidence for direct ties between foreign rulers and Dublin do exist: in 849, "a naval expedition of seven score ships of adherents of the king of the foreigners came to exact obedience from the foreigners who were in Ireland before them, and afterwards they caused confusion in the whole country."<sup>30</sup> That the rulers who sent men to build Dublin were those at Kaupang is suggested by the buildings of Dublin. Patrick Wallace demonstrated one of the two major types of houses that dominated Viking Dublin were post-and-wattle construction, not quite rectangular, and had three aisles and entrances at the front and back. They are not the longhouses typically associated with living in Scandinavia. However, excavations at Kaupang have only recently shown that Wallace's Type I houses were built there first.<sup>31</sup> If Dublin was built by Norwegian rulers in control of Vestfold and Kaupang at a low point during Horic I's reign, the expedition of 841 could well represent Horic's resurgence in southwestern Norway indicated by the titles awarded him in the Annals of St Bertin.

Horik I died in battle in either 853 or 854, but prior to then he had been forced to govern jointly with a nephew, indicating further turmoil within his kingdom.<sup>32</sup> The Annals of Fulda inform us that his heir and nephew was still "a boy," which must have left Denmark in a very uncertain state.<sup>33</sup> It is surely no accident that Ansgar felt safe enough to return to Ribe and Hedeby in 854.<sup>34</sup> In Ireland, events at exactly this time are very illuminating. Annalists throughout the 850s described numerous conflicts between the already-established Vikings in Ireland, called "Fair Foreigners," and

newcomers called “Dark Foreigners.”<sup>35</sup> Welsh sources similarly report the appearance of “Dark Heathens” in the 850s.<sup>36</sup> Attacks by these “Dark Foreigners” on pre-existing settlements in Ireland continued until 853, just at the time Horic I died in Denmark. In the same year, a leader named Olaf, described as “the son of the king of Lochlann” arrived with a whole fleet of ships to force Dublin to submit to him.<sup>37</sup> He accepted submissions from the Vikings who were already settled in Ireland, and accepted tribute from them.<sup>38</sup> If Norwegian kings, possible of the Yngling Dynasty, had seized control of Vetsfold and Kaupang when Horic I died, the arrival of Olaf in Dublin on their behalf, royally supported and with a large fleet, would make a lot of sense.

While the exact sequence of events back in Norway is unclear, the Norwegian Yngling dynasty was clearly attempting to seize control of Vestfold and Kaupang from the middle of the ninth century. There were two royal dynasties vying for power in Denmark, Harald Klack’s family and Horic’s. The famous Oseberg ship, built in Denmark and buried in southwestern Norway, likely represents Danish attempts to maintain control over Vestfold. The woman buried in the Oseberg ship burial may well have been Danish, sent to marry into the family at Huseby in Vestfold, thus keeping the overlordship of Denmark strong and the Ynglings at bay. The ship could well have been part of her dowry.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Denmark disintegrated into petty kingdoms by the end of the ninth century. Horic II died ca 864. It wasn’t until 873 that Frankish chroniclers describe a king in Denmark with enough clout to send envoys to the Carolingian Emperor, Louis the German.<sup>40</sup> The chaos that followed the death of Horic II could well explain why, in 865 Anglo-Saxon chroniclers witnessed the arrival of “the great Heathen Army.”<sup>41</sup> The leaders of this army were enormously successful, destroying most of the Anglo-Saxon royal families and eventually carving out the Danelaw. In Norway, beginning around 870, a king named Harald Finehair made himself king of much of

southern Norway, including Vestfold. Olaf of Dublin, and his brother Ivar, had likely been sent by the Ynglings of Norway to seize Dublin. They were first called “kings” by contemporary chroniclers in 862,<sup>42</sup> again, just at the time of Horic’s death. Clearly by then, their ties to Vestfold were severed and they were ruling Dublin in their own right.

In conclusion, Viking raids, Scandinavian market towns and power politics in Denmark and Norway were inextricably intertwined in the first half of the ninth century. Information from contemporary written sources from all over western Europe, in conjunction with still-emerging archaeological evidence, paints a more complete picture every day. From approximately 790-826 Godfred and his immediate heirs ruled a united Denmark, including parts of southern Norway. He created Ribe, Hedeby and Kaupang in short succession, at exactly the same time Viking raiders first descended on England and Ireland. A new Danish family seized power after 826, Horic I and Horic II. Their hold on Vestfold was more tenuous than Godfred’s had been, but archaeology demonstrates that the market towns continued to thrive and larger and well-organized fleets of raiders began attacking England and Ireland, feeding the demands of the market towns. A market center at Dublin was founded probably from Kaupang, though whether by Danish or Norwegian kings is not entirely clear. At the time Horic II died, around 864, the great Heathen army descended on England, and Dublin clearly lost its direct tie back to Norway.

## ENDNOTES

1.ASC E, F 793.

2.AU 795.

3.ASC A, E, F (*s.a.* 835)

4.Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Ireland, Wales, Man, and the Hebrides’, in Peter Sawyer (ed), *The Oxford illustrated history of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1997), pp 83-109.

5.Egon Wamers, ‘Insular finds in Viking Age Scandinavia and the state formation of Norway’, in Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ragnall Ó Floinn (eds), *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (1998), pp 37-72.

6.AU 821

7. AU 824

8.Gwynn Jones; Viking Empires

9.Richard Hall, *Exploring the World of the Vikings*, 22-23.

10.Richard Hall, *Exploring the World of the Vikings*, 22-23.

11.James Graham-Campbell 83-84.

12. James Graham-Campbell, *The Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* 80-83

13.RFA 808.

14.RFA 808.

15.Hall, 60-63.

16.Hall, 60-63.

17.James Graham-Campbell 80-83.

18.Hall, 62.

19.Dagfinn Skre, “Kaupang – *Skíringssalr*” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink (Routledge, 2008), 112-120.

20.RFA 813

21.Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, p 73.

22. Dagfinn Skre, *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, 458-462.

23. Jan Petersen, *British antiquities of the Viking period found in Norway* (1940); Egon Wamers, 'Some ecclesiastical and secular Insular metalwork found in Norwegian Viking graves', *Peritia* 2 (1983), 277-306; and George Eogan, 'Irish antiquities of the Bronze Age, Iron Age and early Christian period in the National Museum of Denmark', *Proceedings of the RIA C* 91 (1991), 133-76.

24. Charles H. Robinson (trans), *Anskar, the apostle of the North, 801-865* (1921), pp 44-6.

25. O. Holder-Egger (ed), *Annales Engolismenses*, *MGH, SS* 16 (1859, rpr 1963), p 486.

26. AB 843.

27. AB 845, 850.

28. Dagfinn Skre, *Kaupang in Skiringssal*; James Graham-Campbell, *The Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* 80-84.

29. me, book, chapter 2

30. AU 849; see also CS 849, AFM *s.a.* 847.

31. Skre, *et al.*, *The Kaupang excavation project 2001*, [http://www.kaupang.uio.no/gamle-sider/dokumenter/aarsb\\_2001/index.htm](http://www.kaupang.uio.no/gamle-sider/dokumenter/aarsb_2001/index.htm), accessed 17 January, 2005.

32. AB 850; the Annals of St-Bertin put his death at 853 and the Annals of Fulda at 854. If Horic was killed at the end or beginning of the year, the difference could be explained differences between the annalists as to what date they chose for the beginning of the year.

33. AF 853.

34. James Graham-Campbell 83-84.

35. Alfred Smyth called the groups the "Old Northmen" and the "New Northmen," but conceded that Norwegians were the old/fair foreigners and Danish groups the new/dark foreigners, Smyth, *Scandinavain kings*, pp 87-8; more recently David N. Dumville, in 'Old Dubliners and new Dubliners in Ireland and Britain', in Seán Duffy (ed), *Medieval Dublin VI* (2005), pp 78-93, argued that the terms cannot be used in relation to Norwegian or Danish Vikings and should instead be understood in terms of the original settlers at Dublin and the later group who took over the site. He argues that even the terms Danes and Northmen were not used diagnostically by medieval chroniclers; however, he leaves out of his discussion any mention of Frankish sources, which clearly did make such distinctions, so there is no reason to think the Anglo-Saxon and Irish writers were unable to do so. His arguments that the 'Dark Foreigners' were specifically the members of the family of Ivar also cannot be sustained; the 'Dark Foreigners' first came to Ireland in 851, but Olaf did not arrive from 'Laithlinn' until 853.

36. David N. Dumville, *Annales Cambriae, A.D. 682-954* (2002), *s.a.* 853 and 867, respectively; the last phrase, a Welsh gloss, appears only in one redaction of the text. One other redaction calls it 'the battle of Dublin', but this could well have been an incorrect expansion by a copyist of *dub* (dark) to Dublin.

37. AU 853, CS 853, FA 853, AFM *s.a.* 851. Alfred Smyth's attempt to link this Olaf with Olaf the White of the much later Icelandic sources cannot be credited; it is far more likely that the authors of the later sources, attempting to promote the interests of their contemporary patrons, deliberately invented or innocently repeated inaccurate links in time to Norwegian royalty for families that were important in Iceland in the thirteenth century, see Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian kings in the British Isles* (1977), pp 101-5.

38. AU 853, CS 853, FA 853, AFM *s.a.* 851; the earliest recorded payment of this kind of tribute in Anglo-Saxon England took place in 865, see ASC E 865; in Carolingian France the earliest such payment was in 845, see AB 845; see as well A. J. Robertson (ed. and trans), *The laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I* (1925), II Æthelred 1-7.

39. Skre, 463-468.

40. AF 873.

41. ASC E 865, *s.a.* 866.

42. AU 862.