

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RAIDING AND WARFARE

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Raiding and warfare are central to our understanding of the Viking Age. For many years the only popular image of the Vikings was the Viking warrior, brutal and terrifying, raping and pillaging, burning monasteries, committing a variety of atrocities and demanding Danegeld. This image has been increasingly downplayed since the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars have rightly pointed out that there were many other important aspects to Scandinavian society in the Viking Age, and that only a small proportion of the population were warriors, while also noting that, since the surviving historical accounts were written by the Vikings' Christian victims, they may give an exaggerated picture of both the impact and the barbarity of raids by the pagan Vikings. Nevertheless, although the term *Viking* has come to be used for the whole society of the period, it is raiding and warfare that define 'Viking' activity – a Viking (OE *wicing*, ON *vikinger*) was a raider or pirate, and although trading, crafts, seafaring and settlement and many other aspects of Viking society may be equally important, it is the raiding which gives us the concept of a Viking Age. It is increasingly clear from archaeological evidence that there was contact between Scandinavia and the rest of northern Europe before the late eighth century, and historical sources show the Scandinavian kingdoms increasingly becoming part of the European mainstream from the eleventh century, if not earlier. It is only the visible military expansion from the late eighth century to the eleventh that makes the Viking Age a meaningful concept.

The motivation behind the earliest raids remains the subject of debate. According to one school of thought, the early raids on monasteries represented a pagan political/religious response to the aggressive Frankish Christian mission against the Saxons and the Danes (Myhre 1998). However, this interpretation has not been widely accepted, not least because the earliest raids seem to have been launched from western Norway, not Denmark, and against the British Isles and Ireland, not against the Franks (Wamers 1998). It is clear that later raids were primarily motivated by the desire to gain wealth, and it seems likely that this was the main motivation for raiding and external warfare throughout the Viking Age. This leaves aside internal warfare within and between the emerging Scandinavian kingdoms, which was apparently motivated by the desire for political power, but the raids against western Europe are characterised by a desire to gain wealth abroad. This might then be translated into political power either abroad,

as in the formation of new Viking kingdoms and earldoms in Britain, Ireland and Normandy, or at home, where successful Viking leaders such as Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson used their success in England to press their claims to kingship in Norway.

The results of raiding brought wealth in different forms. Conquest brought landed wealth abroad, and the fact that the military expansion of the Viking Age coincided with the more peaceful settlement of the North Atlantic serves as a reminder of the importance of landed wealth, however it could be acquired. However, raiding which fell short of conquest could also generate portable wealth, which might then be converted into land and status at home or elsewhere. This could be acquired directly through plunder, or through the ransoming of captured people or precious objects, such as the *Codex Aureus* (an ornate Gospel book from Canterbury) (Webster and Backhouse 1991: 199–201), or through the imposition of tribute. Although the payment of ‘Danegeld’ is particularly associated with the later Viking Age, and especially the reign of Æthelred II, large payments to the Vikings for peace are recorded in Frankish sources from the ninth century, and even Alfred the Great was forced to ‘make peace’ with the Vikings on occasion (Coupland 1999; Abels 1998: 79, 105–14, 140–2). Archaeological finds of Insular material in Scandinavia provide clear evidence of looting in the early Viking Age, while the vast number of late Anglo-Saxon coins found in Denmark and Sweden (more survive there than in England) must in part reflect the success of the later Vikings in taking gilds (Wamers 1998; Blackburn 1991: 156–69; Metcalf 1989: 178–89; 1990: 165–76; Gillingham 1989, 1990; Lawson 1984, 1989).

Clearly the Viking raids were significant enough to be recorded as major events by their victims, but how important were the raids, and how distinctive was Viking warfare? Scholarly interpretations on these points differ, especially on the scale and importance of the raids, not least because Viking raiding followed different patterns in different areas. In England, Ireland and the kingdom of the western Franks, there is an apparent progression from small-scale seasonal raiding at the end of the eighth century through larger seasonal raids, then over-wintering, then conquest and permanent settlement in the ninth century. However, it is clear from historical sources that the pattern in Frisia was different, with a series of Danish chieftains settling in Frisia in the early ninth century, under Frankish overlordship, as part of an ongoing dynamic of political relations between Danish and Frankish rulers (Coupland 1998). Similarly, archaeological evidence suggests that Norwegian settlement in the Northern Isles of Scotland may have begun as early as the first half of the ninth century (Crawford 1987; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998; Hunter *et al.* 1993; Ballin Smith 2007). It would also appear that although there was relative peace from Viking raids in England in between 954 and the reign of Æthelred II (978–1016), this gap in England saw extensive Viking activity in northern Scotland and around the Irish Sea (Crawford 1987; Williams 2004). The idea of a First Viking Age and Second Viking Age, found in the works of some English historians, thus represents a narrowly English perspective on Viking raiding.

The earliest raids seem all to have been on a small scale. Where numbers are given, only very small numbers of ships or men are cited, such as the three ships that attacked Portland in what may have been the earliest recorded Viking raid, in the reign of Beorhtric of Wessex (786–802). Where numbers are not given, the choice of wealthy but exposed coastal monasteries such as Lindisfarne and Iona rather than larger targets also suggests relatively small forces. Such small raids were probably undertaken by

local groups under their own leaders. The raiders at Portland apparently came from Hordaland in western Norway, while Frankish sources identify attacks by men from Vestfold in southern Norway (ASC E–F, *sub* 787 [789]; Nelson 1991: 55 n. 2). Raiding on a small scale continued throughout the Viking Age. A battle off the coast of Wessex in 896, described in unusual detail by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC A, *sub* 897 [896]) involved only six shiploads of Vikings, and much of the raiding around Scotland and the Irish Sea apparently continued to involve small fleets as late as the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

However, the ninth century certainly saw an increase in the scale of Viking forces. The size of fleets mentioned in English, Irish and Frankish sources increased, often numbered in hundreds of ships by the mid-ninth century, and led by named kings or earls. These titles probably reflect personal status and lineage, and do not necessarily mean that such leaders ruled major territories in the Viking homelands. These were not yet fully unified into the modern Scandinavian kingdoms, which begin to emerge fully only towards the end of the Viking Age. Nevertheless, such titles indicate that the leaders of Viking raids now came from the highest levels of Scandinavian society, although lesser chieftains no doubt also continued to play a major part.

While there is no doubt that the scale of the raids increased in this period, historians have disagreed over the extent of the increase, and on the impact of these larger forces. Peter Sawyer, in his influential book *The Age of the Vikings*, argued that while the smaller numbers such as three and six ships seemed to be exact, the larger fleets were always in suspiciously round numbers, and were therefore unreliable. He questioned whether any Viking leader could realistically have mustered fleets of hundreds of ships, and suggested that the figures in the sources are much exaggerated, with even the largest Viking armies numbering only several hundred men (Sawyer 1962: 117–28). However, Nicholas Brooks (1979) noted that there is close agreement between independent Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Frankish sources on the size of fleets, and argued that the figures cited in the various chronicles were more reliable than Sawyer had suggested, and that the larger armies probably numbered in the low thousands. More recent thinking has tended to fall between these two positions. Interpretations of early medieval warfare generally since the mid-1980s have tended towards relatively small armies, but it does seem hard to reconcile contemporary accounts of the largest Viking forces with numbers below the low thousands.

This is not least because of the scale of the achievement of the Vikings in war. It may be true, as Janet Nelson (1997) has argued, that Frankish chronicles suggest that internal conflicts between the rival successors to the Carolingian Empire were seen as more important than the Viking raids in the late ninth century, and that the Vikings suffered a number of major defeats. Raids on Britain and Ireland also need to be seen in the context of the recurrent warfare between the petty kingdoms there – Viking raids did not take place in a peaceful vacuum. However, the Vikings in turn inflicted major defeats on the Franks and succeeded in extorting large amounts of silver as the price of peace. In England, three of the four great kingdoms of the late ninth century were conquered, while the fourth came close. In the second wave of large-scale attacks on England, vast quantities of coin were paid for short-lived peace, and eventually the whole kingdom was brought under Danish rule for more than a generation. In Scotland, Vikings successfully conquered the Northern and Western Isles, and large parts of the northern and western mainland, and probably contributed substantially to the collapse

of both the Pictish kingdom and the kingdom of Dál Riata and to the emergence of a new kingdom of the Scots. Territorial conquest was more limited in Ireland, but the Vikings did succeed in establishing a number of defended trading centres on the coasts from which they were never permanently expelled. It is hard to see how any of this could have been achieved if the Vikings had been quite as insignificant in numbers and military prowess as some modern historians seem to suggest.

This does not mean, however, that historians have been wrong to question some elements of the Viking reputation as warriors. In particular, their reputation for atrocity seems to have been exaggerated. Certainly they showed little respect for churches and churchmen, and inevitably this provided material for religious polemic by monastic chroniclers. However, attacks on churches by Christian rulers were not unknown, while Charlemagne notably treated the pagan Saxons extremely harshly (Foot 1991; Halsall 1992). The one specifically 'Viking' atrocity, the so-called blood-eagle (in which a victim's ribs were split, and his lungs pulled out behind him like wings), does not appear in contemporary sources, and may well be a later literary invention (Frank 1984, 1988, 1990; Bjarni Einarsson 1988, 1990). Vikings were certainly capable of brutality by modern standards, but it is hard to argue that they were much more unpleasant than their Christian contemporaries.

Nor was the emphasis on raiding and plunder particularly unusual. Raiding in order to plunder portable wealth is typical of the warfare between the petty kingdoms of pre-Viking Britain and Ireland, and survived long after across medieval Europe, with the *chevauchée* continuing to play an important role even in the era of more obviously 'national' warfare in the later Middle Ages. Similarly, taking tribute seems to have been a central part of the relationship between greater and lesser kings in early medieval Britain (Charles-Edwards 1989; Dumville 1997), and although Anglo-Saxon sources tend not to equate payment of *geld* to the Vikings in return for temporary peace with the payment of 'legitimate' tribute to overkings, it is hard to see much difference in substance, and successful Viking leaders may well have regarded those who paid them *gelds* as tributaries. Frankish sources explicitly refer to such payments as tribute, and often imply that it was demeaning for the Franks to be in that situation (Coupland 1999).

Timothy Reuter (1985) argued persuasively that even the campaigns of a great European ruler like Charlemagne were largely carried out on the basis of a combination of raids against neighbouring kingdoms in pursuit of conquest where this was feasible, tribute where long-term dominance could be established that fell short of full conquest, and plunder when Charlemagne had the resources to raid but not to establish lasting domination. This provides a useful paradigm for much of early medieval warfare, and the Vikings are only unusual in that their expeditions were often led by 'private' warlords rather than by national leaders, and even this distinction becomes blurred in the eleventh century, when one looks at the campaigns of figures such as Sveinn Forkbeard and Cnut the Great of Denmark, and Harald Hardruler and Magnús Barelegs of Norway.

If the Vikings were not markedly more atrocious than others, and campaigns based around the combination of plunder and tribute were not unusual, it is probably also fair to say that their reputation on the battlefield has also been exaggerated. An important part of their campaign strategy often seems to have been to avoid battle unless they felt confident of victory. For example, although Viking raids continued in southern England

following Alfred's victory at Edington in 878, the various Viking forces seem to have done their best to avoid being brought to battle, and although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for this period is dominated by the activities of the Vikings, it presents a picture of Alfred and Edward repeatedly pursuing the Vikings as they moved from one temporary base to another, rather than a series of glorious battles. Viking armies did have notable victories, but they also had notable defeats. The limited evidence available suggests that Viking battle techniques were broadly similar to those of their enemies, based around the shield wall, with some use of missile weapons (Williams forthcoming: ch. 5). Although the sources indicate that Viking forces often moved on horseback, and emphasise the acquisition or loss of horses on more than one occasion, they seem to have fought primarily as mounted infantry, dismounting for battle, and rarely fought on horseback, unlike the Franks, who regularly used horses on the battlefield (Davis 1989). As discussed elsewhere in this volume, their weapons and armour were also very similar to those of their enemies, and many of their finest weapons and armour were of Frankish manufacture (Pedersen, ch. 15, below; Williams forthcoming: ch. 2).

There are, however, some distinctive features of Viking warfare. Closely related to each other, these are the use of ships in war, the effective use of mobility in their campaigns and a strong awareness of the importance of supplying themselves when on campaign. The use of ships in warfare was not unique to the Vikings, and both Anglo-Saxons and Franks had a history of seafaring before the Viking Age (Haywood 1991), while the Scots of Dál Riata appear to have had a comparatively sophisticated levy system based on boats (Bannerman 1974; Williams 2002). However, technological developments in the early Viking Age meant that the Vikings had access to vessels which were suitable for use at sea, and which were also of sufficiently shallow draft to be used on at least the larger inland rivers, and large enough to carry significant numbers of men. They could also be used to carry both supplies and loot, and ships and boats were far more effective than any form of land transport for transporting bulk goods throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

These ships are most commonly associated with the ability to arrive suddenly on a hostile coastline, attack a vulnerable target and leave again before local forces could be raised against them – the archetypal Viking park-and-raid approach. This was the strategy of all of their early raids, and a recurrent strategy throughout the period. However, ships also played a vital role in the large-scale campaigns of the mid- to late ninth century. The carrying capacity of the ships allowed Viking forces to transport both their accumulated wealth and stores, without the necessity for slow and cumbersome baggage trains, which would have made it much easier for their enemies to launch attacks on them. The shallow ships were able to penetrate far inland, and thus we hear of fleets, not just land forces, descending on completely landlocked targets such as Paris or Repton (Williams forthcoming: ch. 6). On occasion, the Vikings also divided their forces, sending one force overland and another by sea, to rendezvous at an agreed target, as with Exeter in 876 (ASC A and E, *sub* 877 [876]). This meant that the land force could travel unencumbered, moving quickly with the advantage of surprise, while the supplies moved in the ships, safe from counter-attack, although vulnerable to the weather, especially since they presumably sailed with reduced crews, since some crewmembers would have served in the land force.

As mentioned above, the Vikings sought to equip themselves with horses on land whenever possible, which also provided additional carrying capacity as well as speed

(Clapham 1910; Davis 1989; Williams forthcoming: ch. 6). Horses provided a similar mobility on land to that provided by the ships along the rivers and the coast, and allowed the Vikings to extend the idea of the surprise attack in areas without access by water.

This emphasis on mobility was coupled with a shrewd sense of where to raid. Familiarity with western Europe prior to the outbreak of Viking raids enabled them to target wealthy and isolated monasteries for the early raids, as well as major coastal trading centres such as Dorestad in Frisia, which was raided repeatedly (Coupland 1988). However, the choice of targets became even more important with the shift towards larger-scale raiding, especially once the Vikings began to overwinter, rather than simply raiding seasonally. This overwintering is again one of the most distinctive aspects of Viking warfare, with a significance that has largely been underrated. The early Viking raids tended to be seasonal, of necessity, since their ships were not well suited to winter sailing. However, it is easy to ignore the fact that land-based warfare was normally seasonal in this period as well. Even Charlemagne, despite his impressive record for conquest and tribute-taking, rarely campaigned over winter, although he tended to campaign in most years (Reuter 1985). Although Alfred the Great eventually recognised the importance of maintaining a standing army to counter the Viking threat, this was not easy to maintain, and on one occasion a besieged Viking force was able to escape because the besiegers were forced to withdraw before their relief arrived (ASC A, *sub* 894 [893]). When even major kingdoms struggled to maintain permanent field armies, the fact that the Vikings managed to campaign for years on end, often in hostile territory, is perhaps a more impressive achievement than any success they may have enjoyed on the battlefield.

They managed to do this by careful selection of overwintering places, descending on monasteries, towns and royal estates early in the winter. That meant that they arrived in places where supplies had already been gathered, which they could take over for their own use, while the onset of winter made it difficult for anyone to raise and supply an army to remove them before the spring. The Vikings then probably spread out over the surrounding area, making it easier to supply the smaller groups, but retaining the centre as a rallying point and defence in case they were attacked, and there is growing evidence for secondary Viking activity close to Viking overwintering centres such as Repton, London and York (Brooks and Graham-Campbell 2000: 69–92; Richards 2001: 97–104; Blackburn 2002: 89–101; Williams forthcoming: ch. 6). Some sites already had defences, such as Roman forts and fortified towns, but where they did not, the Vikings simply created their own fortifications, as at Repton, and the many fortified centres in Ireland known as *longphorts* (Price 1991; Kelly and Maas 1995; Docherty 1998; Kelly and O'Donovan 1998; Ó Floinn 1998; Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001; Gibbons 2004, 2005; McKeown 2005; O'Brien *et al.* 2006; Williams forthcoming: ch. 4, 6).

While tribute payments provided short-term relief, battles were rarely decisive enough to provide a lasting solution to Viking raiding (Coupland 1999: 68–9), and it was only when the twin issues of mobility and supply were tackled that the Viking raids could successfully be contained. Charles the Bald introduced fortified bridges to deny the Vikings access to the Frankish river system, making it difficult for them to penetrate far inland, although this strategy failed when bridges were not built or maintained properly. Fortified bridges were also used by Alfred the Great, who also built ships to

defend the coastline, and introduced a network of fortified towns across Wessex (Abels 1997; Peddie 1999; Williams forthcoming: ch. 4). These acted not only as refuges, but also as supply centres, denying the supplies to Viking raiders, and facilitating the resupply of his own army (Abels 1997: 257–65; Williams forthcoming). Despite initial difficulties, these *burbs* proved successful in Wessex, and the system was extended across England by his successors as they gradually conquered the Danelaw from its Viking rulers (Hill and Rumble 1996).

The social and organisational structures which underpinned Viking raiding and warfare have been hotly debated. Later laws from Denmark, Norway and Sweden all record the existence of a form of ship-levy system known as ON *leidangr*, and although these laws date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many historians have sought to project such systems back to the Viking Age. This view has been questioned since the 1980s, most notably by Niels Lund (1985, 1994, 1996, 1997; cf. Gelting 1999), who argued that no form of *leidangr* existed before the late eleventh century at the earliest, and that the Viking raids were basically private ventures, carried out by war-leaders with whatever followers they were able to attract through their own reputations and the promise of wealth, rather than any sort of national army, even when the leaders were important Scandinavian kings. This view has received some support for the ninth century from Richard Abels (2003), who notes that Anglo-Saxon sources tend to describe Viking forces as *here* (warband) rather than *fyrð* (army), and argues that describing Viking forces as 'armies' implies much more structure than probably existed.

Lund's views have not been universally accepted, and there is evidence that some form of *leidangr* existed in the tenth century, although since the *leidangr* seems originally to have been linked to defensive warfare, it is not clear that this would have much impact on Viking incursions into western Europe (Malmros 1985, 2002; Crumlin-Pedersen 1988, 1997, 2002; Williams 2002, forthcoming: chs. 7–9). There is certainly a case for arguing that some of the conflicts between Danes and Franks in the ninth century reflect some form of national warfare (Wamers 2002; Williams 2002, forthcoming: ch. 7), and it is difficult to separate entirely the roles of 'king' and 'viking leader' for figures such as Svein Forkbeard and Harald Hardruler. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the majority of Viking raiding and warfare was carried out by individual warbands. These might band together into larger groups, and their leaders might be kings or earls, or lesser chieftains. Occasionally, with the 'great' warbands of the late ninth century we see several kings or earls jointly leading their forces, again implying a merging of smaller independent forces. This apparent lack of formal structure makes their achievements in long-term campaigning and strategic and logistical planning even more impressive.

To conclude, raiding and warfare were typical features of the Viking Age, not just for the Vikings but for the whole of northern Europe. In many ways, Viking warfare is little different from their contemporaries', and the only really distinctive features are the emphasis on ships, and the strong emphasis on strategic mobility and logistics, which allowed Viking forces to campaign for years at a time. However, it is important not to underplay the significance of Viking raids, in terms of either their perceived impact by contemporaries, or the lasting effects of their conquests. Other 'Viking' achievements may be more impressive, and certainly more positive, but many of these rest in part on their military success, and without Viking raiding and warfare, we would have no 'Vikings'.

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