

INTRODUCTION

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The Scottish Society for Northern Studies moved out of the Scottish ambit and held one of its regular Easter Conferences in Cumbria. We found that the move served several useful purposes; it gave us a wider perspective of the Viking raids and settlement and helped us to appreciate the irrelevance of national boundaries where the Vikings are concerned. It also drew together a selection of speakers whose combined papers provide a comprehensive study of the history, culture and economy of north-west England in the post-Roman and early medieval period, which appears to fill a significant gap in the list of published works on this area. All specialists of this period and those interested in the Norse world in general will be extremely grateful to Ian Whyte and John Baldwin for seeing that these papers have been made available to a wider reading public.

What became abundantly clear as the lectures proceeded was that this apparently remote area, tucked away in the north-west corner of England, has in fact been open to many influences from all quarters during the historical period, even though it may appear to have been peripheral to the activities of the many peoples whose impact is better known in different parts of Britain. This is a reflection of solid geological matter, for as Peter Vincent so lucidly explained, the geology of the Lake District has no cultural unity at all. The mountains do not give it any cohesion but, as mountains everywhere, they really are a barrier and a frontier zone. In consequence the districts north and south, east and west of the central core of upland hills have more obvious social links with their neighbours across the Pennines through river valleys, or across the estuaries and the sea, than with each other. Deirdre O'Sullivan started us off on the right foot by warning us of the complexities of the pre-Viking situation in which she discussed the problem of Romano-British survival (which has been discussed in relation to many other areas of England in recent years) and assessed the impact of Anglian influence from the east and British influence from Strathclyde in the north. Nick Higham then gave us the historical framework for the tenth-century activities of the Norse in the area, and while stressing the insubstantial nature of much of the evidence for Norse settlement nonetheless managed to convince us that Cumbria was central to many of the complex political events of the period. In fact the Irish Sea has been called a Norse lake in the tenth century, for the Vikings raided and settled all around it — on the Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English shores. Because of the political link-up between Dublin and York, routes through and around Cumbria became Viking highways as much as the seas themselves. The importance of the Eden–Stainmore route is very evident from the meeting at Eamont in 927 when the kings of Scots and Strathclyde submitted to King Athelstan in one of the extraordinary international high-level peace talks of the period; and is also evident from the

death of Erik Blood-Axe on Stainmore in 954 when he was fleeing north after being expelled from York.

Given the total absence of historical information for Norse settlement in Cumbria, and the inconclusive archaeological evidence which really proves no more than that pagan Scandinavians were present at some time, but need only have been passing through the area, we have to look at other sources of information for evidence about the Scandinavian settlement of Cumbria. Gillian Fellows-Jensen and Richard Bailey provided us with that information: the former in a masterly study of the place-names, and the latter in a discussion of Viking-Age sculpture, a field which he has made his own and which provided us with such exciting visual interest during the outings. Both these papers brought a significant element of new research into the Conference and their publication makes a most important addition to the secondary literature concerning the whole question of the origin and extent of Scandinavian settlement in Britain. In particular, they throw light on the problematical element of Scandinavian settlement north as well as south of the Solway Firth. As Richard Bailey made very clear, the sculpture of the Viking period is a large body of evidence scattered throughout the area, and in that respect comparable to place-name evidence. It gives us visual information about local society and its beliefs, about a mingling process between Anglian inhabitants and Scandinavian incomers, and about links with the neighbouring societies round about; all aspects which the linguistic information is used to illumine on a wider scale, if perhaps less dramatically. When the two sources combine to point in a particular direction, as towards hitherto unexpected links across the outer Solway Firth between Galloway and West Cumbria, then the Society's valuable contribution in drawing together experts from different fields and thus enabling their ideas to be heard in an inter-disciplinary environment is made very clear.

The next batch of papers looked forward from the Viking Age to the medieval period when the pattern of agriculture in the area was becoming recognizably the same as today, with expansion into the pastoral uplands from the coastal lowlands by what were evidently Norse-speaking communities. Yet despite the increasing Scandinavian imprint on the toponymic landscape all these papers left one with the impression of deep continuity with the pre-Viking past, and indeed with the remote prehistoric past. Mary Higham brought out the antiquity of the organization of a pastoral community; and Angus Winchester discussed the territorial organization of the Norman period which, despite its imprint of lay honour, ecclesiastical divisions and commercial centres, appeared to be (at any rate in the western area) a Normanization of previous Celtic groupings known as 'multiple estates'. The question then comes to the fore as in so many other parts of Scandinavian Britain; how did the Vikings fit into this territorial pattern which appears to have retained its basic features despite the population upheavals which, from the place-name evidence, evidently occurred? The answer is no doubt not simple, although the alternative broad lines of 'from above' or 'from below' put it at its simplest. What does

seem rather surprising, given the place-name evidence of Scandinavian infiltration, is that there are not more echoes of Scandinavian terminology in the names of land-holdings, military organization or monetary payments. Even the system of coastal defence, which is a feature of the whole area of Scandinavian Scotland, had the very English name of 'sea-wake'.

In the whole area of the organization of a pastoral economy there is the highly interesting and still not fully understood 'aergi' problem. Several speakers referred to this Celtic name for a temporary settlement for summer pasturing which spread to so many parts of the Norse world, and which the Society discussed fully at a previous Conference in the Isle of Man. A proper understanding of how this Celtic term spread to the different parts of the Norse world might help our understanding of the movement of settlers round these different parts. Along with the interpretation that many of the Norse settlers in Cumbria came from Scotland, the term itself probably also came from this Gaelic-speaking area. Whether it retained exactly the same meaning in Cumbria, or whether it changed to fit in with different geographical circumstances, was discussed by Ian Whyte along with other terms for upland summer pastures and the whole organization of this important aspect of pastoral farming in an upland region.

Perhaps more than at some other Northern Studies Conferences the papers do, then, focus closely on the matter of Viking settlement and the territorial organization of the area in which they settled. This is because there has evidently been a great deal of interest in the post-Roman and early medieval period in Cumbria among young scholars. The intrinsic interest of these papers more than made up for the slight archaeological evidence of the presence of Scandinavian peoples in the locality. Even the site at Ribblehead which the excavator, Alan King, talked about and showed us round, cannot definitely be said to be a Norse settlement site although it has sometimes been talked of as such. The impeccable dating evidence — to the third quarter of the ninth century — makes it unlikely that it was the farm of a Norse pioneer settler in that upland location at a time when the historical sources give no indication of any Scandinavian infiltration into north-west England. Yet the morphology of the site and the finds from it might be considered diagnostically Norse. Current excavations at Bryant's Gill, Kentmere by Steve Dickinson should also serve to warn us of being too Viking-orientated in our approach. Similarly, as Deirdre O'Sullivan points out, the small number of potential pagan Anglo-Saxon burials in the area could just as easily be of Viking date. The warning she gives bears repeating: 'although we may often use archaeological material or place-names to infer ethnic survival, it is impossible to claim any kind of absolute value for the exercise'. The temptation to look at Cumbria as a geographical entity and attempt to make generalized conclusions about the impact of the Vikings — whether of the 'continuity' or 'big-bang' variety — should perhaps be resisted. Surely what so many of the papers here tell us is that the pattern differed throughout the peninsula and that the variety of the geographical conditions itself helped to create a

variety of ethnic development, with different emphasis, whether of Norse or Danish, of Anglian or Romano-British survival, or of Irish or Scottish colouring. The 'Viking' element is just one layer in this cake.

The icing on top of the many layers was provided by R. W. Brunskill, who opened our eyes to the vernacular building traditions in the Lake District, and by Stanley Ellis who opened our ears to the Cumbrian dialect, with its strong Scandinavian elements. We absorbed the scenery from the coast to the high fell, from estuary to the lakes, in brilliant early spring sunshine with an unending view over the tops of hedges of white lambs gambolling in green fields. We could only sympathize with the Vikings, even though their undocumented settlement of this beautiful corner of England did mean the loss of his land by one Englishman at least, Alfred son of Brihtwulf who fled east from the pirates but managed to get himself an estate in Durham. We could only sympathize with him too!



Plate I The Keskadale oak woodland, at high altitude and on a steep slope in a valley west of Keswick, is considered by some to be a remnant of the original woodland cover of the Lake District only slightly interfered with by man.

Plate II Tarn and Peat Bog, Coniston: the kind of site which can provide a pollen sequence showing changes in the vegetation cover through the post-glacial period.

