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The Controlled Decline of Viking-Ruled Dorestad

*Christian Cooijmans**

In a dream I saw the Sun soaring over the earth, fleeing from the north, followed by dreadful clouds. In its flight it passed me by and disappeared from sight, allowing darkness to cover all places along the coast. Large scores of Northmen are coming, bringing war and unimaginable destruction with them, leaving this friendly land bereft of life.¹

FOREBODING prophecies like this one, attributed to early-ninth-century Frisian missionary Liudger, reflect worried attitudes apparent in numerous contemporary ecclesiastical sources from north-western Europe. Like many other areas surrounding the North Sea, Frisia was repeatedly overwhelmed by foreign marauders during the ninth century. As elsewhere, these attacks were largely opportunistic in nature, focusing exclusively on wealthy and vulnerable targets. One such target was Dorestad, a thriving focal point of interregional trade situated on a junction of several rivers, constituting Frisia's foremost commercial centre up to the mid-ninth century. The later ninth century, however, witnessed a reversal in Dorestad's fortunes as the settlement declined and disappeared within several decades. Systematic archaeological excavation at the site began during the 1960s and covered an area of over thirty-five hectares, providing physical insights into Dorestad's origins, pinnacle and ultimate decline.² Substantial amounts of research have since increasingly unearthed the settlement's cultural, political and

* Christian is a PhD Candidate at the University of Edinburgh, where his current research focuses on the politico-economic contextualisation of Viking activity within the Low Countries.

1 Translated by the author from *Sint Liudger*, 15.

2 Van Es and Verwers 2009, 9-13; Willemsen 2012, 66.

commercial role on the edge of the Frankish realm.³ Several hypotheses regarding Dorestad's eventual disappearance have been put forward, the most popular of which exclusively blames destructive Viking incursions. However, no explanation has thus far proven itself to be wholly sustainable. This paper will re-examine these theories before presenting an alternative, in which a framework of cultural, political and economic factors is considered to explain the settlement's gradual decline.

The Beginning of the End

Before becoming subject to Viking aggression during the 830s, Dorestad peerlessly dominated Frisia's commercial landscape, serving as a gateway between the Carolingian Rhinelands, Anglo-Saxon England and the Scandinavian north.⁴ With innumerable merchants exchanging goods, silver and ideas at the *emporium*, its wealth and prestige made it a prime target of Viking incursion. The initial attack of 834, recorded in the *Annales Bertiniani*, began as

[...] a fleet of Danes came to Frisia and laid waste a part of it. From there, they came by way of Utrecht to the *emporium* called Dorestad and destroyed everything. They slaughtered some people, took others away captive, and burned the surrounding region.⁵

The settlement appears to have lacked most defensive capabilities, leaving it unprepared and overwhelmed by Danish invaders.⁶ The incursion probably yielded a significant pay-off, as the annals indicate that Vikings returned no fewer than three times during the three subsequent summers, when they 'devastated Dorestad and Frisia'.⁷

3 Most prominent is the work of Wim van Es, who has published on Dorestad's archaeological aspects for over thirty years, and Simon Coupland, who has extensively mapped and interpreted the settlement's numismatic output. Van Es 1990, 151-153; Coupland 2010, 95-96

4 Local archaeological evidence indicates that Rhenish pottery, which had for centuries made its way north-west through the Low Countries, was still abundantly present in the emporium at this time. See Van Es and Verwers 1994, 184-186. In addition, numerous finds of the locally-issued 'temple'-coinage of Louis the Pious (820s-830s) indicate wide distribution patterns across northern Europe, see Coupland 2010, 97. Ninth-century imitations of this coinage, minted at Haithabu and Ribe, specifically denote Dorestad's continued economic influence in Scandinavia, seemingly unaffected by the initial Danish attack on Frisia that took place in 810. Malmer 2007, 22.

5 *Annals of St-Bertin*, 30.

6 Although Dorestad may have originally developed from an earlier settlement surrounding the former Roman *castellum* Levefanum, it is debatable whether the fort itself was still being used for defensive purposes following the fifth century. See Van Es and Verwers 2010, 19-20.

7 *Annals of St-Bertin*, 35. After the 837 attack, Dorestad remained a prominent target; the annals indicate that Scandinavians set out for another strike during the following year, only to be thwarted by disastrous weather. *Annals of St-Bertin*, 39.

Intermittent rebuilding efforts could not prevent a subsequent decline in local commerce during the 840s. Reduced finds of mid-ninth-century coins from the *emporium*, representing a waning silver influx, indicate that this decline was gradual, taking several decades to extinguish Dorestad's commercial liveliness.⁸ Frisian merchants were still frequenting the site during this period, and it is speculated that Carolingian coinage looted by Vikings may have subsequently returned into circulation through friendly exchanges at the *emporium*.⁹ Emperor Lothar, like his father Louis the Pious, still issued coinage at Dorestad's official Carolingian mint during the 840s, albeit in significantly reduced amounts.¹⁰

Annalistic sources indicate that the Danes then held sway over Dorestad from around 850, apparently having been granted the area as a benefice for their service to Lothar and his brothers in their rebellion against Louis.¹¹ The settlement's already deteriorating economy did not seem to benefit from Danish authority, as more and more merchants appear to have abandoned Dorestad for better prospects elsewhere.¹² The historical record is silent following a final Scandinavian attack on Dorestad in 863, its fate during the late 860s and 870s still subject to speculation. The complete absence of coinage of Lothar II and Charles the Bald, the dominant legal tender for most of this period, suggests the discontinuation of all economic activity at the site.¹³

A number of principal causes or a combination thereof have been theorised to have led to the decline and eventual downfall of Dorestad as a supraregional port of commerce. Most popularly and widely named as the main and often only cause of the *emporium's* demise are the Viking attacks of the 830s and subsequent attacks up to 863. Numerous scholars assert

8 Coupland 2010, 96.

9 Willemsen 2004, 74.

10 Coupland 2002, 226.

11 The notion of Frisian raids serving as an apparatus of internal Carolingian hostility is provided by the *Annales Bertiniani*, in which Lothar is described as conspiring with the Danes to 'damage [his] father's interests and the furtherance of his own'. See *Annals of St-Bertin*, 51. Nithard's *Historiae* (840s) corroborates these events, describing Lothar calling upon 'the Norsemen to help him' and allowing them to plunder and rule over Christians. See *Frankish Annals*, 167. This intra-dynastic conflict was not resolved until the Treaty of Verdun of 843 carved up the Empire into three separate kingdoms.

12 Van Es and Verwers 1980, 299. The Danish occupation itself left few traces at Dorestad; even the limited amount of objects possibly attributable to Scandinavian rulers, predominantly jewellery and weaponry, may just as well have reached Dorestad through earlier trade. For a description of the objects, see Willemsen 2004, 66-74.

13 Coupland 2010, 97. Van Es suggests that the *emporium* had been reduced to an agrarian settlement of limited significance by the late-ninth century (See Van Es 1994, 115). An Ottonian charter from 948, renewing the possessions of the Utrecht bishopric, includes Dorestad as a *villa* 'now called Wijk', a name it retained ever since. See *Oorkondenboek Sticht Utrecht*, 115.

that Dorestad's potent economic infrastructure, the result of centuries of intermediate trade between the Rhinelands and the North Sea Region, was entirely disrupted by the Scandinavian episode.¹⁴ These authors refer mainly to the annalistic corpus in support of their assessments, but often disregard these monastic sources' hyperbolic tendencies to disfavour the Danes as an uncivilised people that 'worshipped demons'.¹⁵ Instead, it is feasible that the returned attacks on the *emporium* in fact imply that it was repeatedly rebuilt and in continuous operation despite slowly depreciating economically.

Other scholars point to different reasons for Dorestad's decline: as little archaeological evidence of destruction layers has been found, it has been argued that the movements of the adjacent Crooked Rhine were ultimately responsible for the *emporium's* downfall.¹⁶ The river seems to have steadily shifted eastwards throughout the settlement's lifespan, and is thought to have moved as much as 200 metres by the late-ninth century.¹⁷ Several phases of causeway construction, bridging the increasing distance between navigable water and solid ground over the former riverbed, have been identified during the 1970s. These structures, either jetties or dams made of wood and earth, may have additionally supported both dwellings and workshops.¹⁸ Although the exact speed of the river's retreat is difficult to determine, merchants would have had little trouble reaching Dorestad's harbour during the ninth century, landing their vessels on the beach near causeway termini.¹⁹

A third and somewhat more ambiguous cause has by some been identified as the political turmoil within the Carolingian Empire during most of the ninth century. Imperial disorder would have adversely affected Frankish influence and defensive capabilities, a situation subsequently taken advantage of by prospective claimants to the throne and foreign invaders alike.²⁰ Simon Coupland suggests that the division of the Empire into separate kingdoms may have also broken down economic links, causing the otherwise uniform flow of silver to be interrupted.²¹ Although these circumstances may certainly have affected Dorestad, they could not have been detrimental to its functioning, as any economic downturn would have hit other regional *emporia* in a similar fashion. However, this turns out not to have been the case. In fact,

14 Heidinga 1997, 24; Milis 2006, 10, 16.

15 *Annals of St-Bertin*, 51.

16 Van Es 1994, 116. Comparisons have also been made between Dorestad's decline and that of Quentovic, its contemporary counterpart on the English Channel, which seems to have disappeared a century afterwards through environmental changes, see Forte 2005, 60.

17 Verwers 2010, 69.

18 Van Es and Verwers 2009, 61-62, 340-341.

19 Kalmring 2010, 72-73.

20 Eickhoff 2004, 64.

21 Coupland 2010, 103.

the mid-to-late-ninth century is characterised by periods of economic growth for nearby trading settlements like Deventer and more distant Quentovic.²²

None of the theories above have thus far been able to provide an altogether sustainable explanation for Dorestad's descent into obscurity. The continued operation of the *emporium* following each incursion indicates that the attacks did not severely impair on-going efforts to restore its commercial prominence. In addition, neither the shifting of the Crooked Rhine nor any internal Carolingian strife would have presented a terminal spanner in Dorestad's works. These dominant theories should therefore not be regarded as decisive, but merely contributing factors within a more elaborate scheme of local economic decline. The following narrative takes a step back to examine this framework, whose circumstances, both accidental and predetermined, would eventually drain Dorestad of its economic potential.

An Alternative Theory

Following the Dorestad raids of 834-37, Louis the Pious ordered the organisation of extensive defensive measures throughout Frisia, so that 'the [Danish] savagery and our men's fecklessness might now be avoided'.²³ Historical sources seem to point to the subsequent fortification of existing inland settlements like Maastricht and Nijmegen, both riverside towns likely encompassing prominent Carolingian markets.²⁴ Yet no such fortifications are evident in Dorestad. Even though the *emporium* held neither episcopal seat nor royal residence, its continued commercial prominence and favourable location must have still made it a valuable asset to the Carolingians. However, as the settlement at the time stretched several kilometres along the Crooked Rhine, any major defensive precautions would have been deeply problematic to implement.²⁵ Such a realisation may have prompted the Carolingians to allocate their resources elsewhere, lowering Dorestad's priority as a target worth defending. In turn, this may have dissuaded many Frisian merchants, fearing for their safety and merchandise, from visiting the settlement. Regardless, its commercial potential must have still been acknowledged; Lothar, despite having possibly encouraged raiding on Dorestad during the

22 Paffgen 2004, 94; Coupland 2002, 227.

23 *Annals of St-Bertin*, 37.

24 Leupen 1996, 88-90.

25 When harbour development peaked, around 825, Dorestad accommodated over a kilometre of densely packed storehouses along the Crooked Rhine. Further buildings are speculated to have lined the river for several more kilometres around this area, beyond the scope of current excavation. A similar but smaller harbour complex on both the Rivers Lek and Rhine, at the south of the settlement, is also speculated to have existed despite lacking evidence due to erosion. See McCormick 2001, 653; Van Es 1990, 162.

830s, continued issuing official Carolingian coinage from the *emporium's* mint during his rule.²⁶

The incoming Danes, led by their chieftain Rorik, would have become rulers of an already commercially weakened Dorestad.²⁷ As such, relinquishing direct control over it would not have been a considerable economic risk for Lothar.²⁸ In fact, the Danish benefice may have provided considerable advantages for the Carolingians, meriting such a bestowal. First of all, the establishment of a fiefdom would pacify the Danish aggressors, integrating them into a defined and controlled administrative hierarchy which bound them to specific defensive obligations. According to the *Annales Fuldenses*, Rorik was required to 'resist piratical attacks of the [other] Danes'.²⁹ This allowed Lothar to turn local military administration into a delegated task, protecting both Dorestad and the Carolingian heartlands upstream. As these hinterlands harboured some of the most influential political, ecclesiastical and commercial centres of the Middle Kingdom and East Francia, having the river well-defended from Viking marauders would have been in the Carolingians' best interests.³⁰ But where an imperial presence did not seem to prevent Vikings from raiding, Danish imperial vassals were a far more effective deterrent. In fact, only two significant Viking expeditions are known to have taken place in the Rhinelands during Rorik's twenty-odd year rule: one in 857, in the Dane's absence, and one in 863, for which he was swiftly reprimanded by ecclesiastical authorities.³¹ Far fewer attacks took place when Rorik ruled than before or after this period, which made his presence highly advantageous to the Carolingians.³² The end of Rorik's rule during the late 870s or early 880s clearly illustrates this significance, as the Rhenish heartlands once again seemed accessible to numerous bands of Scandinavian

26 Coupland 2001, 189-190. See also note 4.

27 The exact extent of this benefice remains unknown. For a discussion, see Coupland 1998, 97.

28 Coupland 1998, 96.

29 *Annales of Fulda*, 30.

30 Several contemporary royal palaces, *kaiserpfalzen*, had been established near the Rhine or its tributary rivers and could be found at Nijmegen (less than forty kilometres from Dorestad), Duisburg, Ingelheim and, most importantly, Aachen. Numerous trade settlements dealing in local commodities could also be found near the Rhenish river banks. Likewise, prominent imperial monasteries at Xanten, Lorsch and St. Goar, which enclosed specialised production facilities and local markets, were also present here. See Costambeys et al. 2011, 77; McCormick 2001, 664; Himstedt 2004, 32; Paffgen 2004, 104.

31 A letter from Bishop Hincmar of Reims to Bishop Hunger of Utrecht criticises Rorik for his involvement in a Viking campaign in the Carolingian heartlands, which multiple annals confirm was carried out by Danish raiders 'follow[ing] Rorik's advice', possibly steering them clear of Dorestad. See *Annals of St-Bertin*, 104; *Annales Xantenses*, 21; Coupland 1998, 98.

32 Coupland 1998, 101.

raiders. The year 881 witnessed unprecedented destruction in Cologne and Bonn, with their inhabitants driven out as churches were set alight. Similarly, the annals lament an attack on Aachen, where the Northmen apparently ‘used the king’s chapel as a stable for their horses’.³³

Apart from its military advantages, the Danish benefice also ensured the continuation of Carolingian authority over the region, albeit less directly involved. In theory, this would imply that Frisian and Frankish merchants would still be equally able to conduct business in Dorestad. It would also have been possible for royal officials to remain partially active in Danish-held Dorestad, securing the Carolingians’ local fiscal and judicial interests.³⁴ The *Annales Fuldenses* confirm that Rorik received the benefice ‘on condition that he would faithfully handle the taxes and other matters pertaining to the royal fisc’, which guaranteed a continued local income for Carolingian rulers.³⁵ A charter issued by Louis the Pious in 815 granted a *decima*, a tenth of taxes and tolls generated through production and trade at Dorestad, to the episcopal seat in nearby Utrecht.³⁶ This practice may well have continued into the 850s, and it is likely that the *emporium* would have accommodated a clerical presence until at least 857, when Utrecht itself was attacked.

Having secured continued access to Dorestad, local tax income and the region’s defence against further incursion, granting the *emporium* to Danish rulers may have been a less worrisome development than the annals indicate. It may even have been wholly premeditated, part of a more elaborate design to ensure a continued Carolingian presence and influence within Frisia. Because such a design may have been commercially motivated in part, it may also have anticipated the continued economic decline and eventual disappearance of Dorestad itself, as discussed below.

A number of Frisian trade settlements, economically similar to Dorestad but nowhere near as sizeable, had developed along the Frisian rivers during the eighth and ninth centuries, serving as commercial outlets for their respective catchment areas and relay stations for cargo to or from Dorestad.³⁷ This regional network of settlements included Deventer on the River IJssel and Tiel on the River Waal.³⁸ Archaeological evidence from both settlements indicates

33 *Annals of Fulda*, 90. Comparable havoc was wreaked in the following years in Trier, Duisburg and Neuss. Paffgen 2004, 93, 99.

34 Van Es 1990, 179.

35 *Annals of Fulda*, 30.

36 *Diplomata Belgica*, 315-316.

37 Lebecq 1992, 14.

38 The early-tenth-century *Vita Lebuini* suggests that Deventer developed around a wooden church established on the IJssel around 770 by Saint Lebuinis. “*Vita Lebuini Antiqua*”, 792. Archaeological evidence suggests similar agglomeration around St. Martin’s Church in Tiel. Sarfatij 1999, 268.

a steadily growing import of Rhenish ceramics from the mid-ninth century.³⁹ Finds of Carolingian coins, balances and metal weights, in addition, suggest the establishment of contemporary local markets.⁴⁰ Pim Verwers indicates that this archaeological corpus denotes a gradual adoption of Dorestad's former economic prominence.⁴¹ Despite the relatively compliant nature of the *emporium's* Danish vassalage, Frisian merchants still seem to have moved their business towards less perilous alternatives.⁴² As a result, Deventer and Tiel, which had presented no threat to Dorestad before, now gradually began to overtake the *emporium* commercially.⁴³

The simultaneous growth and decline of these respective settlements need not by itself be taken as proof of Carolingian intervention. The notion that Tiel and Deventer were in all likelihood located outside the Danish benefice, however, might be. The IJssel region, which included Deventer, was part of the county of Hamaland. Regino, abbot of Prüm, identifies Eberhard Saxo as its contemporary count in his early-tenth-century *Chronicon*.⁴⁴ Eberhard was a Carolingian ally based in Zutphen, which may have provided Deventer, some fifteen kilometres downstream, with a measure of military protection against Scandinavian aggression.⁴⁵ Despite this advantage, the annals report for 882 that 'the Northmen burned the port called in the Frisian tongue Deventer'.⁴⁶ The attack on Deventer, the motives for which are discussed below, prompted the Carolingians to hastily construct fortifications around both Deventer and Zutphen, which was likely also attacked during the same expedition.⁴⁷ This hurried response, which Dorestad had previously been denied, strongly suggests that Deventer had become an investment the Carolingians would rather not part with, possibly because it was now one of only few significant trade settlements in and around Frisia they had direct control over.

Apart from its economic expansion, Deventer also became Frisia's principal ecclesiastical centre; the bishop of Utrecht, having been forced to flee his seat following the Viking attack of 857, returned to the diocese during the late 880s or early 890s, residing in Deventer.⁴⁸ The apparent baptism of Rorik

39 Bartels 2006, 26; Verwers 2010, 63.

40 Sarfatij 1999, 273.

41 Verwers 2010, 63.

42 Verhulst 2000, 114.

43 Van Es 1990, 171.

44 *Chronicle of Regino*, 184, 193, 223.

45 Bartels 2006, 209.

46 *Annals of Fulda*, 93-94.

47 Paffgen 2004, 95-96.

48 Van Vliet 2004, 147. Charter evidence confirms the continued attendance of Bishops Hunger of Utrecht and his successor, Odilbald, at royal assemblies in the Carolingian heartlands between the 860s and 880s, suggesting their absence from the diocese but continued influence on royal affairs. See *Oorkondenboek Sticht Utrecht*, 79-80, 91.

during the 860s would have been a favourable development for the Utrecht church, and reprimanding correspondence from archbishop Hincmar of Reims to the Dane suggests that a degree of local clerical presence and influence had already been restored at that time.⁴⁹ With Utrecht itself apparently still in ruins following a raid in 881, Deventer was selected as an alternative residence from which to regain control of the area.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the town became both commercially and ecclesiastically dominant, a combination not before achieved by either Dorestad or Utrecht. An 896 charter confirms the transfer to Deventer of economic privileges the church had formerly enjoyed in Dorestad.⁵¹

The Carolingian design for Deventer and Tiel is also evident from a late-ninth-century charter, mentioning local appearances of royal officials, possibly having moved their office from deteriorating Dorestad.⁵² New royal toll stations were established in both Tiel and Deventer as merchants increasingly frequented these settlements.⁵³ At this point, Dorestad had already disappeared from record, its economic faculties fully adopted by newly thriving *emporia*.

Controlled Decline

Having discussed the circumstances of Dorestad's decline, the simultaneous advancement of nearby *emporia*, and possible advantages of these developments to Carolingian rulers, no great stretch of the imagination is required to assume that these events were partially or wholly orchestrated. If so, Lothar would have willingly 'let go' of an already economically weakened Dorestad to keep foreign invaders at bay, whilst simultaneously encouraging economic growth outside the Danish benefice by actively transferring royal and ecclesiastical offices to Deventer and Tiel. Hence, the subsequent terminal recession of Dorestad, rendered economically useless even to Danish vassals, may also have been part of this design. This controlled decline made Carolingian rulers more determined to develop and fortify nearby *emporia*, which they had more immediate control over. Meanwhile, trade continued and the Frankish hinterlands, paramount to the functioning of the kingdom, remained relatively safe.

As the Danes became Carolingian vassals in Frisia, they made little attempt to colonise their benefices, possibly due to contemporary commitments

49 Milis 2005, 68.

50 *Annals of Fulda*, 90; Paffgen 2004, 84-85.

51 These rights also seem to have applied to Tiel and other settlements subject to the Utrecht Church, see *Diplomata Belgica*, 327.

52 *Oorkondenboek Sticht Utrecht*, 94-96.

53 Sarfatij 1999, 268.

in Anglo-Saxon England, the Irish Sea Area and Normandy. Their motives concerning Frisia seem to have been mainly exploitative.⁵⁴ Upon initially receiving Dorestad, Rorik may have believed his benefice to be a lucrative prize. However, there are indications that the Danes soon realised their bounty was being rapidly drained of all economic potential. Although Dorestad's Carolingian mint ceased official production during the 840s, local minting still seems to have continued up to 855.⁵⁵ The final generations of locally minted coinage contain variously corrupt versions of both Lothar's name and the mint name, where this was much rarer before.⁵⁶ The distinct contrast in workmanship suggests that the Dorestad issuers were apparently none too skilled or concerned with the accuracy of their reproductions.⁵⁷ Evaluating the evidence, it seems warranted to conclude that these coins represent Scandinavian attempts at forgery to keep the local economy functioning. Van Es suggests that local Danish vassals were inept at controlling Dorestad's economic operation and would have probably sped up its decline rather than halt it.⁵⁸

Dorestad's disappearance was followed by renewed aggression throughout Frisia during the late 870s and 880s. The annals report that Nijmegen, Utrecht and Deventer were all attacked between 880 and 882.⁵⁹ As these attacks seem to have occurred relatively soon after Dorestad's final breath, the current or previous Scandinavian vassals of the former *emporium*, frustrated by its economic devaluation, may have questioned their fealty and condoned such hostilities. As mentioned above, the attack on Deventer prompted the erection of its fortifications and those of nearby Zutphen. The effectiveness of these defences thwarted the use of surprise attacks, causing the Vikings to increasingly turn their attention southwards, towards the Scheldt region.⁶⁰ Subsequent raids there are similarly thought to have instigated the construction of settlement fortifications.⁶¹ This defensive strategy ultimately proved effective in securing Carolingian economic assets throughout the Low

54 Coupland 1995, 199.

55 Van Gelder 1961, 40-41.

56 Both Lothar's 'temple'-coinage and subsequent issues have been found to contain corruptions. The reading IOTAMVS IPNEIRAT instead of HLOTHARIVS IMPERA is common, for example. See Coupland 1988, 18, 23-24; Grierson 2006, 223-224.

57 Coupland 2010, 102.

58 Van Es 1990, 169.

59 *Annals of Fulda*, 89, 90, 92.

60 Van Es 1994, 115.

61 In coastal Zeeland, a region particularly vulnerable to further incursion, palisaded ring-forts were built to ward off Viking raiders during the final decades of the ninth century. See Van Heeringen 1995, 15-39. Contemporary defences were possibly also established near current Leiden (South Holland) and at Aalburg (North Brabant), among others. See Van Vliet 2004, 145.

Countries against further Scandinavian incursion. Dorestad, a mere shadow of its former self, was returned into Frisian hands around 885, not to re-emerge as a town of significance for many generations.⁶²

Conclusion

Dorestad's rapid growth up to the mid-ninth century can be attributed to a combination of favourable environmental, political and cultural circumstances.⁶³ Despite being subject to Frankish rule and protection, the *emporium* became a preferred target of Scandinavian raiders during the 830s. The wars between Louis the Pious and his progeny had politically weakened the Carolingian Empire, which opportunistic Scandinavians gladly seem to have taken advantage of.⁶⁴ The initial attacks on Frisia, like those in Normandy and the British Isles, seem to have been exploratory. A series of more coordinated attacks started during the 830s as the newly developed urban culture of the Rhinelands took a severe blow.⁶⁵ Nautically superior, the Scandinavians overwhelmed the Frisian coastal defences and attacked its commercial centres, devastating Dorestad four times in four consecutive years.⁶⁶ Despite continual rebuilding efforts, the *emporium* sank into gradual economic depression. Political disorder, Viking incursion and a migrating river represent the most commonly proposed theories to explain this decline, which resulted in Dorestad's eventual disappearance during the 870s.

This paper has attempted to characterise the *emporium's* abandonment as a less clear-cut development by proposing it represented the initial phase of a Carolingian design to actively retain control of Frisian commerce, whilst simultaneously using Scandinavian vassalage to secure the Rhenish heartlands. Purposely relinquishing Dorestad to the Danes, the Carolingians were still able to reap its lucrative yet withering rewards through tolls and other taxes. Slowly, the axis of Frisian commerce shifted eastwards as Rhenish merchants moved their business to nearby Deventer and Tiel, towns more directly controlled by the Carolingians. Their mobility allowed these merchants to continue their trading activities elsewhere with relatively little hindrance.⁶⁷ As both Deventer and Tiel gradually appropriated Dorestad's commercial attributes, the Danes seem to have fruitlessly attempted to sustain its local trade, manifest in their forging of Carolingian coinage. Desperation

62 Van Es 1994, 117.

63 Willemsen 2012, 67.

64 Eickhoff 2004, 54.

65 Päßgen 2004, 108.

66 Eickhoff 2004, 54.

67 Ellmers 1985, 91.



Map of locations mentioned in the text – Early Medieval Low Countries. Adapted from Heidinga 1997, 2, with kind permission from the cartographer (Bert Brousenstijn, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam).

may have eventually led to defiance as new waves of Viking raids soon followed Dorestad's decline into obscurity. However, the Carolingians were quick to respond this time, building numerous fortifications throughout the Low Countries, successfully preserving regional commerce through its newly allocated nuclei. Focusing their efforts on southward settlements, the Vikings eventually entrenched themselves in continental politics as they received the Duchy of Normandy as vassals in 911.⁶⁸ Lessons may have been learnt from dealing with the Danes at Dorestad, as the Norman benefice was likewise brought about to pacify the assailants and preserve the economic and defensive capabilities of the West Frankish heartlands up the River Seine.⁶⁹ The Normandy fiefdom was a permanent development, which the Frisian benefice might also conceivably have been, were it not for the gradual seepage of all economic potential from Dorestad.

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68 Coupland 1995, 201.

69 Bauduin 2005, 189-191.

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