3

The course of the Scandinavian invasions to c.AD 954

The Viking Age lasted the best part of three centuries, and it is by no means easy to decide the most convenient and useful point to break a narrative account of the impact of the Northerners. Their aims, methods, and achievements varied from generation to generation and right to the end provide the historian with a complicated pattern of human nature and circumstance. There were settlers in the eighth century; there were raiders and pillagers in the eleventh. Active Danish, Norwegian and Swedish traders performed their more peaceful function throughout. Nevertheless if a break has to be made 954 represents as convenient a dividing point as any, marking as it does the end of the attempt to keep the north of England in a Scandinavian/Irish political orbit.

Within the first of these periods, *c.*786–954, each of the main communities suffered in different ways and at slightly different periods, interlocked and interdependent, and connected also with the ebb and flow of Viking invasion on the Continent, especially in Normandy. Scotland has been treated first because of a natural priority in time and also because of peculiarities in its development which make it essential to grasp the situation in the North if invasion elsewhere is to be understood. Ireland is treated next for a similar chronological reason, and Wales is brought into the story to round off the picture of events on the western seaboard of Britain. Last of all in place but not importance is England. Rather more than half this chapter will be taken up with English affairs not only because events are so much more fully recorded in relation to them, but also because truly decisive happenings not only for the British but for European history took place on English soil during these years.

Scotland

Scandinavian activity in Scotland concerned itself with three principal geographical areas: the Northern Isles, the Caledonian mainland,and the Western Isles extending as far as the Isle of Man. Most interesting and clearcut are the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland. These consist of two virtual archipelagos of islands, nearly 70 in the Orkneys and about 100 in the Shetlands, only comparatively few of which are now inhabited. Communications were of necessity by sea, and skilled seamen were needed to man the boats in what are often tempestuous and dangerous waters. Yet at several points in time these islands have been at the centre of important movements of people and civilization. Megalithic monuments such as the stone-built tomb of Maeshowe in Orkney, great henge monuments such as the Ring of Brodgar or the Ring of Bookan, the well-excavated and much discussed village site of Skara Brae, all testify to the vitality of the inhabitants of the islands in the two millennia BC. At a later stage the fantastic brochs, the stone-built tower of which at the best-known broch site at Clickhimin near Lerwick still stands 17 feet high, speak of a strong organized military community spreading from the mainland throughout the islands in the second and third centuries AD. Modern man is rightly amazed at the skill of the sailors of these periods from the Neolithic to the Early Iron Age. But though it is wrong to think of the islands as perpetually on the fringe of civilization, it is probably true to say that never were they as much at the centre of a great movement as during the Viking Age.

Mysteries surround the arrival of the Scandinavians in Orkney and Shetland. Both the state and nature of the original inhabitants and the date of the Scandinavian descent were even more a mystery to historians of the Middle Ages than they are now when there is still a deep division of opinion between those who claim evidence for strong pre-Viking contact between the Islands and Norway and those who insist that Norse settlement was not effective until well after AD 800. In Norway the *Historia Norwegiae* (dated to *c.*1200) took refuge in a set of good stories, describing the Picts as little more than pygmies, active builders in the morning and evening but hiding themselves in sheer terror in subterranean dwellings at midday when they lost all their strength. There were also Goidelic priests called *papae* because of their white robes. The medieval historians put

natural emphasis on the deeds of Harold Fairhair and his followers, pirates of the kin of Ragnald, in the late ninth century. He is said to have established his winter quarters in the Orkneys from which summer forays were made, leading to the exercise of tyrannical rule now among the English, now the Scots, and now the Irish, to the point where they subjugated Northumbria in England, Caithness in Scotland, and Dublin and other seaports in Ireland.

Modern archaeological evidence tempers the emphasis on Harold Fairhair, proving Scandinavian presence in the islands from at least 800 and confirming the presence of Picts who were overwhelmed politically but not exterminated. Continuity in domestic building on sites such as Buckquoy in north-west Orkney suggest some element of cultural transmission. But well-authenticated and serious raids down the east and west coasts of Britain (*c.*786–840) become fully intelligible if associated with the presence of secure bases of the Jarlshof type in the Northern Isles, and one can postulate fairly a period of steady Scandinavian recruitment through the raiding period to about 865 or 870, followed by intense colonization coinciding with Harold Fairhair's activities late in the century. During this long period those of the original inhabitants who survived would be enslaved and lose their native social and Christian organization. Saga accounts substantiate the view of a predominantly heathen community in the Northern Isles as late as the early eleventh century.

All authorities agree that that heathen community was the direct product of a true migration, principally from Norway. Subtler linguistic work on dialect suggests a preponderance of settlers from the western fjords, especially from Rogaland and the *fylkir* to the south of Bergen. Remarkable excavations at Jarlshof, Sumbergh Head, the southernmost point of Shetland, have revealed characteristic features of an early Scandinavian settlement, the first elements of which are dated to the first half of the ninth century. A rectangular longhouse, some 70 feet by 20, with the longer walls curved in slightly at the ends, was the chief building. Beside the house itself there were outbuildings identified as a byre, a smithy and a bath-house. Animal bones and midden deposits suggest that farming activities predominated in this community - even fishing playing a relatively minor role. The presence of many stone loom-weights indicates the importance of textile activity. Bone combs, exquisitely carved pins with animal, axe-head and thistle decoration, speak of considerable artistic development. The peaceful nature

of the settlement can probably be exaggerated. Virtual absence of weapons does not necessarily imply peace: rather it shows that the settlers took good care of their weapons and did not lose them. Later saga accounts refer to the settlers as ness-takers; men who, secure at sea, threw up hasty fortifications across the neck of a headland or peninsula to give themselves a base on land. Peaceful farming could come later when the settlement and land-taking were complete.

We know something of their institutions from Scandinavian analogies in the homeland and to some extent from archaeological and place-name evidence. The *bondi*, a peasant-farmer, represented the basic unit in society, head of a household with odal rights. Military leadership was supplied by sea-captains, but there is no evidence of an aristocratic principle at work, and no evidence for the transportation of rank over the North Sea except for the special respect shown to some men who may have been capable of boasting of royal blood in their veins. In the first settlement there was little room for the flourishing of lordly principles. We hear of men who styled themselves *jarl* but of no jarl (or earl) of Orkney or Shetland until the close of the ninth or beginning of the tenth century.

From their headquarters in the north, Scandinavians spread south to the mainland and west to the Western Isles in the course of the ninth and early tenth centuries. The first prominent ruler was Sigurd, brother of Ragnald Møre (and so probably the uncle of Rollo, first duke of Normandy) at the end of the ninth century. From the Orkney centre he exercised some authority over Shetland and also over Caithness. Place-names suggest Scandinavian penetration further south in Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland at the expense of Pictish power. The distribution of early Scandinavian names suggests that their movement was seaborne, that they established their little farming Jarlshof-type centres along the river valleys, relying on the rough pasture of the highland shielings to supplement and support the exiguous products of the poor barley-growing lands of the scanty lowlands. Whether they displaced or intermarried with the native population is uncertain, probably more of the latter than the former. The limit of Scandinavian penetration was indeterminate, far-reaching and longlasting in the modern shires as far south as the great spread of Inverness-shire, north of the great firth, no more than scattered, spasmodic, and temporary on the eastern seaboard of the Moray Firth and Aberdeenshire. The widest extent was probably reached as late as the middle of the eleventh century under the jarldom of Thorfinn the Mighty (d. 1065).

Expansion along the western coast of Scotland is more intelligible yet not easy to reconstruct in detail. The magnet was undoubtedly Ireland, but the trail of iron filings left scattered down to the Irish Sea, the Hebrides, Outer and Inner and the islands as far south as Man, must not be regarded as mere accidents of fate, refuges for those who had failed to reach their haven in Ireland. The islands had positive attractions for Scandinavian farmers and fishermen seeking a home and land for permanent settlement. Linguistic evidence suggests a degree of peaceful intermingling of Celtic and Scandinavian stocks. Archaeological evidence is scanty but sufficient to suggest an early accord between pagan newcomers and Christian inhabitants, and an early conversion to Christianity. In some places there was full continuity in the use of land. Christian cemeteries were used for pagan burials. Sculptural evidence is particularly strong in the Isle of Man to indicate that Celtic and Viking populations lived together in amity. A surprising number of Celtic names appear carved in Scandinavian runes. In an age when communications depended on the sea the islands continued to be treated as a unit, with two obvious geographical sub-units - the Nordreys and Sudreys. The notion of political allegiance to Norway continued to persist practically and actively in the north, to 1468–9, and strongly in the south to the middle of the thirteenth century.

Ireland

The pattern of Viking onslaught on Ireland is clear, though the detail is often obscure. Early raids bctween 795 and the 830 were followed by a period of intense settlement in fortified townships on the sea-coast. The key figures in the political events of this phase were the militant pagan Norwegian Thorgils (or Turgeis), a Norwegian chieftain of royal stock, Olaf of Dublin (*c.*857–71) and probably Ivar the Boneless, a Dane and the son of the Viking chieftain, Ragnar Lothbrok, whose death in Northumbria is said to have triggered off the main Viking attack on England in 865. During these middle years of the ninth century a Scandinavian presence in the harbours and ports of Ireland, especially in Dublin, was firmly established. A change comes over the pattern with the Scandinavian successes in England in the late 860s. From that time forward for the best part of a century the history of the Vikings in Ireland was inextricably mixed up with Viking enterprise in England, intimately

and directly with enterprise in northern England. Larger Viking ambitions ended in failure. The sons of Ivar and his grandsons were constantly active and often formidable, but they failed to establish a permanent dynasty. Dublin and York, the two twin power centres of their family - and of other Viking families too - were sometimes for brief periods brought under the rule of one man but more often went their own paths. The Irish Sea which the Vikings dominated for decades proved inadequate as a reservoir of political strength. The return of Olaf Cuaran, son of Sihtric, from York to Dublin in 952, followed by the eclipse of the Scandinavian kingdom of York itself in 954 put an end to the most extravagant of Scandinavian aims in Britain.

Wider Viking ambitions, conspicuously expressed in attempts to create a living kingdom of York and Dublin but not confined to English ventures, had an important bearing on native Irish history. The Scandinavian impact was tremendous but the danger of the complete Scandinavianization of Ireland was lessened considerably by these wider preoccupations. In the event the first long phase of Scandinavian attack left the mainland of Ireland overwhelmingly in Irish hands. The dominant note in Viking settlement was more attuned to the sea than to the land, the typical creation the fortified port with dependent hinterland, not the cluster of farms of the Scottish Islands. More often than not within Ireland itself the Vikings appeared as yet another element in the inter-tribal warfare of Ireland, now allying with the men of the North, now with the Southerners, now fighting in unison, now among themselves, Dane against Norwegian or Norwegian against Norwegian.

Detailed record of political events is spasmodic and at times ambiguous. The 790s, which had seen the sack of Lindisfarne, also saw Viking disaster strike the monks of Iona and the monks settled on the island of Lambey north of Dublin off the Leinster coast. In 795 Northmen sailing south from Skye, possibly the same group that had found Iona a profitable target, plundered and burnt the church at Lambey in the first recorded attack on Irish soil. For close on forty years sporadic raids on ill-defended monasteries continued to harass the Irish, though as certain scholars have been quick to point out not all the raiding and destruction should be attributed to Northern sources. These early Viking attacks seems to have coincided with a loss of moral force among the Christian Irish themselves. Churches and monasteries which for centuries had been regarded as sacrosanct became the prey of Irish ravagers as well as

of Norse. At some time in the 830s raiding gave way to permanent settlement associated with the shadowy and heroic figure of the pagan Norwegian prince Thorgils, or Turgeis. He seems to have made the North his political centre after the capture of Armagh, but under his tutelage if not always under his direct protection Norwegians set up their coastal strongholds at Anagassan on the coast of Louth, Waterford, Wexford, and most important of all at Dublin. The open Atlantic held no terrors for the Norwegians. They set up a small settlement on the Shannon at Limerick and, almost incredibly, at a later date even attacked the savage, isolated and one would imagine virtually impregnable, rock islet monastery of Skellig Michael, eight miles from the coast of Kerry, towering, almost sheer, cliff high above the turbulent and treacherous Atlantic. Thorgils, an intense pagan, roused Christian feeling against him, and was captured and drowned by his enemies in 845. Olaf of Dublin and Ivar the Boneless and his successors sustained and strengthened what were virtually pirate bases, particularly Dublin with its fine commanding position on the Irish Sea. There was no serious attempt whatsoever to conquer Ireland. In this phase of Viking impact on Ireland right the way through to Olaf Cuaran's failure at York in 951, Scandinavian ambitions, Norwegian and Danish, were concentrated on the ports which they themselves constructed and fortified. They provided a constant irritant to the Irish political body, dabbling in tribal politics, creating a new Irish/Scandinavian society only in their fortified townships on the coast, acting at times openly as mercenaries. Under provocation Cearbhall, the native king of Leinster, sacked Dublin in 902 and it took the concerted efforts of a new Scandinavian attack under Ragnald (Rægnvold), the grandson of Ivar, in the second decade of the tenth century, to re-establish the Viking coastal hold from Waterford to Dublin, setting up what was virtually a new planned town at Dublin itself. Ireland was treated as something of a milch-cow, a source of supply of slaves for use in colonizing schemes elsewhere, notably in Iceland, and as the essential base and haven for attacks on England and Wales. One of the reasons why the story of Scandinavian attacks on Britain appears at times in the records to have been so scrappy and uncoordinated is because so little is said of the steady recouping, refurbishing, and re-equipping that was the special function of the Irish strongholds, notably Dublin, in this massive enterprise. It is probable that as many Viking attacks were launched east from Dublin as south from Orkney, and virtually certain that more came immediately east from the Irish ports than direct from Norway.

Wales

The Welsh by reason of geography, favourable political accident, and possibly because of their relative poverty, weathered the Viking attacks in the period *c.*790–950 with surprising success. Danish attacks in the 790s were repulsed with heavy loss and later attacks in the 850s and 860s appear to have been little more than probing raids on the lowlands of Gower and Anglesey, part and parcel of the general unrest which was to culminate in the main onslaught against England in 865. Wales does not provide a good coastline for hostile forces to attack. The fine sandy beaches of Anglesey, Pembrokeshire and Gower, are more than countered by difficulties of approach, treacherous currents, and uncertain winds.

The indirect effect of Scandinavian pressure was undoubtedly great. In the ninth century Rhodri Mawr, prince of Gwynedd, 844–78, maintained the integrity of his principality in spite of serious attempts to set up Scandinavian settlements in Anglesey. He defeated and killed the Danish leader Gorm in what seems to have been a campaign of more than usual importance in 855. Even so, for a short while in the last years of his reign he was forced, after defeats at the hands of the Danes, to seek exile in Ireland. Anglesey was again attacked in the early tenth century, first by Vikings suffering from Irish victories at Dublin in 902 and later in consequence of the general surge of Viking activity in the Irish Sea area after 914. Neither attack was completely successful, the first diverted to Chester and so opening up an important stage in the settlement of north-west England, the second no more than a giant raid, a by-product of Viking restoration of their hold on Irish ports. South Wales was subject to greater strains. Pembrokeshire, offering a long and easy line of entry through Milford Haven, suffered sporadic attack and possible limited settlement along the Haven. The recoil of the remnants of the great hordes which failed to crush Alfred's Wessex led to severe raiding to the north as well as to the south of the Severn Sea. In 914, as part and parcel of intensified Viking activity, and possibly in direct consequence of the settlement of Normandy, a Viking host from Brittany, led by the two earls, Ohter and Hroald, ravaged the Welsh coast and penetrated the Wye Valley as far as Archenfield where they captured Bishop Cyfeiliog, bishop of Llandaff. The bishop was ransomed for £40 by the English king. Native developments in the south as well as the north helped to safeguard Wales. One of the greatest of medieval Welsh rulers,

Hywel Dda, Hywel the Good, flourished during the first half of the tenth century. He was a close friend of the West Saxon dynasty, worked well in harmony with them, and cooperated fully in meeting the Scandinavian menace which afflicted Christian Wales and England alike. About 920 he consolidated his hold on south-west Wales by campaigns in Pembrokeshire which may have had the effect of limiting Viking activity in that sensitive area. By 942 he was virtually master of all Wales. From the first long drawn-out phase of Scandinavian attack Wales appeared to have emerged without mortal wound and indeed strengthened. Hywel had protected the Welsh people and offered prospect of a greater unity very much as Alfred and his successors had offered protection and prospects to the West Saxon and the English.

England

English affairs are better recorded than affairs in the Celtic world with the result that we can follow at times in great detail the ebb and flow of Scandinavian attack on England. The overall pattern is quite clear. Raids in the later part of the eighth century were followed by a period of calm, broken in the 830s. The correspondence with events in Ireland is striking, but the English were wealthier, stronger, and better equipped to stand the initial strain. Their resistance was successful and the Danes did not winter in England until the year 850–1. From that point onwards however the momentum of attack grew, and serious colonization started in 865 with a climax reached about the year 878 when Alfred, king of Wessex, succeeded in checking the Danish advance. During the last decades of the century an uneasy political truce was established, leaving the Danes in command of most of England to the east and north of Watling Street and the river Lea, and the house of Wessex in substantial command of unconquered Christian England. Norwegian/Irish penetration of the north west intensified in the early part of the tenth century but an attempt to set up a straggling trading-based kingdom of Dublin and York failed. Under the leadership of a series of capable kings, greater Wessex re-absorbed the Danish-held territories so that by 954 the political shape of a unified Christian or Christianized England was fully formed.

In a famous entry (for 789) the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the first coming of the Vikings to England during the reign of

King Brihtric (786–802). Three boatloads of Norwegians from Hörthaland arrived off the Dorset coast. A king's reeve, apparently under the impression that they were traders, tried to force them to come to the king's residence. He himself had been stationed at Dorchester. The Norsemen turned on him and killed the reeve and his men. Four years later the Chronicle records the fearsome sack of the monastery at Lindisfarne and we are given the well-attested date of 8 June 793 for this event. Further ravaging (not without loss) is reported from Northumbria in 794 at the monastery of *Donemuthan*, presumably Jarrow/Wearmouth. A feature of these entries, reinforced by the voluminous correspondence which passed between England and the Frankish court of Charles the Great on the subject of the sack of Lindisfarne, is the completely unexpected nature of these happenings. The reeve at Dorchester had expected to find peaceful traders on the Dorset coast, men from within the civilized world, who would subscribe to the customs and conventions of the community and who would go peacefully with their goods to the royal residence. Alcuin writing from Charles's court to the Northumbrian king gives the best insight into the shock and horror with which the sack of Lindisfarne was greeted throughout the Christian world.

> Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold the church of St Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan people. (*English Historical Documents* i (1979) no. 193)

It was natural for Alcuin to look for an inner explanation of these happenings, to attribute them to sin, to fornication, avarice, robberies, even to the dress, the way of wearing the hair, the luxurious habits of the princes and people. The good Northumbrians are exhorted to look to their trimming of beard and hair, in which they have wished to ape the pagan. And the lesson is made plain when Alcuin writes: 'What should be expected for other places, when the divine judgment has not spared this holy place?'

These early raids were Norwegian and were accompanied by, and possibly a product of, sporadic settlement in the islands to the north and west of Britain. The Danes were also active, stirred up, as some

observers thought, by the ferment which resulted from the creation of the great Frankish Empire by Charles the Great. Reduction of the independence of continental Saxony and Frisia contributed to native Danish unrest. But for the first thirty years or so of the ninth century most Danish turbulence seemed to be directed against fellow Danes. Not until the 830s was a substantial proportion of Danish energy unleashed against the Western world. England now became a prime target for their unwelcome attentions.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was put together in the form we know it in the 890s, becomes our chief source of information concerning the Scandinavian attacks. Supplemented at times by entries in continental chronicles it provides a picture of constant attack or threat of attack throughout the ninth century. In 835 a heavy raid was directed against the Isle of Sheppey. The east and south east continued during this phase of onslaught to bear the brunt of piratical raids. The pirates went where the wealth was greatest. Twice, in 850 in the Isle of Thanet, and in 854 in Sheppey, there is record of Danish armies wintering in England. Throughout the whole thirty years to 865 there is however, no clearcut attempt at permanent colonization. This generation was concerned with loot and sporadic raids rather than systematic probing of defences with a view to stable settlement.

Danish ambitions during the last third of the ninth century were of a very different nature. The moment of change came in autumn 865. An army, described by the Chronicle as large, landed in East Anglia. Its leadership was principally in the hands of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, or Leather-Breeches, especially Ivar the Boneless and Healfden and Ubba. It would be wrong, however, to suggest unified command. There were many kings and earls with the Danish host. It is highly probable that the most meaningful element in the leadership was the personal authority of the sea-captains who commanded the individual longships and the warriors who sailed in them. A captain of royal blood would be known as a king and might exert loose authority over a small fleet; a powerful captain, again possibly exercising authority over a small fleet, might from past rank and present power be known as earl (*jarl*). They operated as armies in face of strong native reaction. The ferocity of their attacks is proven by all manner of evidence: for example, exact work on the deposit of coin hoards in England has proved beyond doubt that a substantial peak occurred in the deposit of hoards during the decade 865–75. Their army organization persisted to some measure as conquest gave place to settlement. But always underneath the facade of regional unity existed the independence of the smaller group, the ships' crews that continued to give protection as further immigrants settled and intensified the Danish hold on a large section of northern and eastern England.

The political story of the succeeding years is intimately bound up with the career of King Alfred of Wessex, the one Christian leader with the strength and will to check the Danish hosts. From 865 to 871, the year of battles in the course of which Alfred succeeded to the West Saxon throne, Danish victories were continuous. They used East Anglia as their base for supply and recruitment from the autumn of 865 to the autumn of 866. Extensive damage to Thetford, and some evidence for incendiarism in the cathedral of North Elmham may have occurred at this stage. The Danes were especially anxious to equip themselves with horses and it was as a mounted host that they embarked on the conquest of Northumbria in 866–7, in the course of which the great monastery at Whitby was sacked. York itself was captured on 21 March. Northumbria had been weakened by a civil war in which King Osbert had been rejected by his people who had chosen Aella, a man not of the royal stock, and the reputed slayer of Ragnar, as their king. The Vikings found such a situation to their taste, wintered at York, and after Osbert and Aella in a temporary reluctant reconciliation were both killed in a partially successful attack on the city, the Vikings appear to have set up an English prince who exercised nominal rule there *sub potestate Danorum*. The Danes then wintered at Nottingham, after ravaging Mercia and forcing the Mercian king Burgred to buy peace from them. In the autumn of 868 they descended again on York and the following year they moved back into East Anglia, defeating and killing the East Anglian king Edmund (855–69), who was quickly honoured as a saint and martyr by his countrymen. His death, probably as a captive in Danish hands, on 20 November 869, is immensely important. It marks the end of native Christian kingship in East Anglia. The impact on the Scandinavians themselves was also to prove formidable; in the twelfth century the conversion of Iceland was dated 1000 years after the birth of our Lord and 130 after the death of king Edmund. Northumbria also fell completely under Danish control though for the time being Egbert, a puppet Englishman, bore the royal title. The time was now ripe for a trial of strength with the strongest surviving English kingdom, the kingdom of Wessex.

From the autumn of 870 to King Alfred's death in 899, the dominant political theme was indeed the struggle between the West Saxons and the Danes. When the campaign opened Alfred was not yet king. He was the *secundarius*, the young heir-apparent to his brother King Ethelred, 22 or 23 years of age. The Danes moved their army headquarters to Reading and for a solid twelvemonth strove to break West Saxon resistance. This year of battles saw victories on both sides. Danish checks at Englefield and Ashdown (where one Danish king and five earls were killed) were followed by English reverses at Basing and *Meretun*. King Ethelred died in April 871 and Alfred succeeded. English defeats at Reading and Wilton forced the new king to buy peace from the Danes who were now in secure control of the Thames estuary and of London. But Alfred had at the least preserved his own authority over the West Saxons.

Alfred's reign may be divided conveniently into three clearly defined political and military phases. For the first seven years the Danes held the full initiative and it was much in the balance whether or not the whole of England would fall into their grasp. The middle years of the reign, from 878 to 891, were period of consolidation and of the marking out of new though in the event impermanent political frontiers. During the last eight years from 891 to 899, the last serious threat came of a political conquest of Wessex, a threat which came to an end with the break up of the 'great horde', the *micel here* as the Chronicle called it, in the summer of 896. It is customary to read this epic story from the defenders' point of view. Undoubtedly Alfred was a great king and his achievements played a dominant part in the shaping of a united Christian monarchy in England. He preserved Christian Wessex as a nucleus of a united England. He heightened the idea of a Christian monarchy by precept and example. It is salutary on occasions, however, to look at the political situation from the other point of view. Concentration on English resilience and awareness of ultimate English political success should not lead to neglect of Danish achievement and permanent social success. From 871 to 878 the Danish armies extended their hold in depth over East Anglia, Northumbria and the greater part of Mercia. Their 'great army' overwintered in 873–4 at Repton where archaeologists have discovered sensational evidence of their presence: possible ritual burial of a great Viking chief, and slip-ways for ships, a virtual charnel house of bones from well over two hundred bodies. They inflicted a decisive defeat on the Mercian king Burgred in 874. They initiated, under the leadership of Healfden, an agrarian

settlement in Northumbria in 876. They effected a rough partition of Mercia in 877. The following year, 878, was the year of decision. The Danes under the command of Guthrum overran the greater part of Wessex, forced Alfred to take refuge in the marshes of Athelney, and came within an ace of achieving complete conquest. King Alfred's emergence from Athelney, his rallying of his warrior-thegns and victory at Edington brought this phase of Danish onslaught to its conclusion. The Treaty of Wedmore between Alfred and Guthrum was followed by the conversion of Guthrum to Christianity. From the Christian West Saxon point of view Edington and Wedmore have intelligibly been interpreted as a saving mercy. This is not the only possible point of view. The terms of Wedmore did nothing to loosen the hold of the Danish armies on territories they had already occupied. Indeed Guthrum's army remained quartered in Chippenham throughout the summer of 878. Only in the autumn did they withdraw to Cirencester in English Mercia and not until 879 did they withdraw east to embark on a systematic settlement of East Anglia. The Danes could pride themselves on having won recognition now within the Christian community itself. The settlement in some ways represented a legitimization of their authority, though the situation was probably not completely clarified until 885–6. The boundary between Danish dominated England and English England lay through the old kingdom of Mercia in a line running roughly from north west to south east, from Chester along Watling Street to the river Lea and so to London. This boundary between what was later known as the Danelaw and English England became a permanent feature of the social and institutional life of these islands. London remained, temporarily it is true, in Danish hands. The campaigning, season of 878 had resulted in a military defeat at Edington, but the Danish army remained essentially intact and formidable. Its leader, Guthrum, was strengthened rather than weakened by his baptism. The attempted conquest of Wessex had failed, but attractive possibilities were now open in the east free from fear of West Saxon interference, and to some measure in accord with West Saxon wishes. The Chronicle records carefully that in 879 Guthrum, now a Christian king who took on the baptismal name of Athelstan, shared out the land in East Anglia. The kingdom of St Edmund had passed into Danish but not into heathen hands. It is possible, given their likely limitation in manpower and their assumed ambitions to win land for farming, that the Treaty of Wedmore gave the Danes of this first invasion precisely what they

themselves wanted, an opportunity to regularize their own territorial settlement in the North and East.

The middle years of Alfred's reign following the Treaty of Wedmore to the arrival of the great host from the Continent in 891 represent a working out of the consequences of the political movements of the 870s. Guthrum died in 890 and on the whole upheld the promises to keep the peace which he had sworn to his godfather, King Alfred, during the baptismal ceremonies of 878. Alfred made one formidable advance in 886 when he occupied London. This was part of a move to free the Thames estuary from further piracy and was further associated with internal English political happenings. We are told by the Chronicle in connection with the move on London that the English people who were not under subjection to the Danes submitted to him, and further that he entrusted the borough to the control of the ealdorman Ethelred. Alfred was now the sole surviving ruling prince of the old royal stocks and it was natural that the surviving English authorities should look to him. The ealdorman Ethelred, was a Mercian who quickly became if he was not so already – the date of the marriage is uncertain – Alfred's own son-in-law. He and his wife Aethelflæd, later known as the Lady of the Mercians, are crucial figures in the successful attempt to bring the West Saxons and the English Mercians into peaceful union. The issue of what was to be the most attractive type of silver penny of Alfred's later reign, a coin with the London monogram inscribed on the reverse, undoubtedly dates from 886. The principal Danish endeavours in fact seem during the 880s to have been directed towards continental Europe. One of the great difficulties of dealing with a period as fluid politically as the ninth century consists precisely in the complicated interaction of movements of these very mobile Scandinavians on the various more settled communities of the West. Within the area that we can now conveniently call the Danelaw consolidation of agrarian settlement and retention of military organization are both apparent. Land settlement and the introduction of immigrants were achieved under the discipline of armies which maintained fortified headquarters at Northampton, Cambridge, Tempsford, Thetford and Huntingdon. The 'five boroughs' of the north-east Midlands, Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Lincoln and Stamford, were probably fortified effectively at this time, a preparatory step to urbanization. In the north, York dominated the whole area, rapidly developing into a powerful Scandinavian fortified market, comparable with Dublin in its commercial aspects and more important than Dublin in that York also emerged as the political heart of a vigorous colonizing movement in Northumbria. Evidence from the later histories of the see of St Cuthbert at Durham, coupled with possible interpretation of the coin evidence, suggests a succession of kings at York prepared to work with the archbishops (Archbishop Wulfhere who was prominent in the early crises of the 870s was still active in the early 890s). Guthfrith, who may well have become the outstanding Viking leader in 880 after Healfden's death, enjoyed a good reputation among Christian historians, possibly because of the part he played in the transfer of the see at Lindisfarne to Chester-le-Street, and was buried in August 895 at his head church, presumably the cathedral at York. Excavations at York have been enough to suggest a strong trading community at a very early stage. By 891 a whole mass of Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian communities were established in the Danelaw. Some of the Vikings had been settled in their own farms or urban dwellings at York for half a generation and more. Some retained their native paganism but others had followed the example of Guthrum and Guthfrith and had accepted Christianity. Stone carving and sculpture for example in the Vale of Pickering, especially at Middleton, indicates a coming together of Christian and pagan motifs at a very early stage in the settlement of Yorkshire, probably from this very generation. Excavations at York Minster, too, have yielded evidence of continuity in stone-carving and epigraphic usage. For a people with no native coinage the Scandinavians took early to the use of coins. Already by the last decade of the late ninth century coins were struck in Danish-occupied England, some by English moneyers recruited specially to York and to East Anglia where religious motifs and inscriptions on the coins indicate the intensity of religious beliefs in new converts. Not all can have welcomed the new irruption of Scandinavian despoilers which came to afflict England in the 890s.

The troubles of the 890s were a direct consequence of the stiffening of continental resistance to Danish attack. The successful defence of Paris 886–7 was followed by Arnulf's victory at the battle of the river Dyle (near Louvain) in 891. At some time between September 891 and September 892 a force of 250 ships sailed from Boulogne, carrying their horses with them, landing at the estuary of the river Lympne in south-east Kent. Alfred's defensive measures were still incomplete and the half-built, poorly defended fortress at or near Appledore was swiftly overrun. Danish reinforcements

under Haesten set up a further camp at Milton in north-east Kent. The details of the campaigns of the following three years were carefully preserved by a contemporary witness. The strategic heart of the matter is clear enough. Formidable Danish armies from their sea-protected fortified bases in Kent and Essex, north and south of the Thames estuary, with intermittent help from the already settled Danes in East Anglia and Northumbria, attempted to overthrow Alfred's kingdom. They failed. Organization and systematic defence defeated them. A ring of fortified *burhs* (for the most part well-fortified townships) proved an effective shield for Wessex itself. The loyalty and courage of subordinate ealdormen, and of Alfred's son Edward and his son-in-law, Ethelred of Mercia, contributed to Danish defeat. They ravaged deep along the Thames valley, along the Severn valley and into Wales. But in 896 the enterprise was abandoned, the great horde split up, and the Chronicle was able accurately to sum the situation up, recording that 'by the grace of God the army had not on the whole afflicted the English people very greatly'. Alfred's last three years, 896 to his death on 26 October 899, were spent in peace.

The last Danish campaigns which failed are in their way as instructive as the earlier campaigns which succeeded. Women and children were present at the Danish camps in Benfleet. The armies were as ready poised for successful settlement in the 890s as their fathers and kinsfolk had been in the 60s and 70s. They did not succeed in winning a patrimony for themselves in south-east England, let alone Wessex and English Mercia. Not until the successful French campaigns of 911 and 912 twenty years later, was territory opened for primarily Danish settlement in what was to become the Duchy of Normandy. Yet a genuine land-hunger existed and a genuine land-hunger was in fact assuaged. The Chronicle tells us that with the disruption of the great army those who had enough property and money bought themselves into the settled communities of Danish East Anglia and Northumbria. No better example could be given both of the success and of the limitations of Alfred's policy. The integrity of English England was preserved. The strength of the settled Scandinavian population, capable of buying and selling land in company with fellow-Scandinavian and English farmers, was increased and intensified in the Danelaw.

The main interest of the second half of the ninth century consists within these islands in the survival of a strong kingdom of Wessex, the nucleus of a kingdom of England, and the provision in the

Danelaw of opportunity under temporary Scandinavian military lordship for more concentrated agrarian settlement. This was primarily a Danish venture. Skills learned in the harder but not utterly unsuitable environment of Jutland, Funen and Zealand could be employed to greater advantage in the possibly under-populated lands of some parts of Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, East Anglia, and the territory of the Five Boroughs. The first half of the tenth century saw the reabsorption of these territories under English lordship. Time was given in the critical forty years between the Treaty of Wedmore 878 and the decisive campaigns of Alfred's son which reaches a climax in 918 for a whole generation of Danish farmers to be accepted as a permanent and peaceful feature of the landscape of north and east England.

The story of the reconquest of the Danelaw is complicated, partly because it is in the nature of reabsorption. Danish farmers, settled and often Christianized, came to realize that their best hope of peaceful future lay in acceptance of the overlordship of the West Saxon dynasty. A succession of able kings, building further on Alfred's work, showed the right combination of military strength, planning ability, and political sense to bring success to the dynasty. Under Edgar 959–75, a truly united Christian kingdom of England came into being. The progress to such an end was not smooth, nor should it be regarded as inevitable. Vicious cross-currents from Ireland and the Isles – not so much from the Continent, and little direct from Denmark or Norway – tormented the political scene. Under Edward, 899–924, English political authority was reasserted over Eastern Mercia and East Anglia. His son and successor, the brilliant Athelstan, prematurely brought the whole of Northumbria under his control and was widely recognized throughout the British world. The twenty years after his death in 939 was a period of vacillating fortune, complicated by the success of the Norwegian and Irish adventurers in Dublin and York. After 954 the situation eased and Edgar's triumphant and peaceful reign (959–75) may rightly be interpreted as a fitting climax to this hard century of Christian resistance and Danish attack.

From the Scandinavian point of view two features are of outstanding importance. The first of these is the largely unchronicled but firmly evidenced fact of Norwegian-Irish settlement in the north west of England. The second, a tribute to the success of the Danish farmer rather than the Danish soldier, is the acceptance within the new Christian kingdom of England of a special law,

special customs, special agrarian institutions. Both features owed much to tensions within the Scandinavian world itself, to the commercial success which attended the opening up of the regular route from Dublin to York and which should not be masked by the ultimate political failure of the Norwegians at York, and to the fear which developed on the part of the more settled Danish colonists of the earlier generations for the more mobile Norwegian-Irish traders and raiders of the later generations. The settlers accepted Christianity quickly. Two of the outstanding clerics of the first half of the tenth century had powerful contacts with the Danelaw. Theodred, bishop of London, 926–51, effectively looked after much of the East Anglian kingdom. Oda, archbishop of Canterbury, 941–58, was himself of Danish birth and said to be a son of a Dane who came to England with the early settlers. He showed lively interest in the Fenland country, interceding with the king on behalf of a Cambridgeshire thegn, and receiving land at Ely. His nephew, St Oswald, a son of Oda's brother, continued the family interest in land and church affairs in the Danelaw. Heathenism does not appear to have retained a firm hold on the Scandinavians. Even in the North Riding of Yorkshire only one certain heathen place-name – Roseberry Topping – has been identified. Further south an Edgar the Peaceful was more to the taste of the Danish colonists of the Five Boroughs than an Eric Bloodaxe.

In the reign of Edward the Elder the first firm steps were taken towards the reabsorption of the Danes. Permanent fortifications at strategic points were established throughout western Mercia very much in line with Alfred's West Saxon defensive policy. A series of campaigns in 917 and 918 resulted in the seizing of Derby, an English victory at Tempsford and the rapid reduction or capitulation of the remaining Danish armies south of the Humber. Moves were even made by the Scandinavians in York to submit to Aethlflæd, sister of Edward the Elder. Her death on 12 June 918 brought these moves to a fruitless end. But by the end of the year after the surrender of Nottingham all the people settled in Mercia, including apparently the men of Lincoln, submitted to King Edward. The West Saxon king in 919 spent his best energies ensuring his own peaceful succession to Mercia and in the meantime Ragnald, the Viking leader from Dublin, successfully contended for a kingdom in York. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, its natural sympathies heightened by the drama of events, treats 920 as an *annus mirabilis*, and tells us that in this year there submitted to King Edward the Scottish king and people, Ragnald of York, the native ealdorman, Ealdred of Bamborough, with all the Northumbrians, English, Danish, Northmen, and others – and the king and people of Strathclyde. Welsh princes are also said to have submitted to him and to have paid homage to him. Undoubtedly the Chronicler has seized on the poetry of the situation. Alfred's son was widely recognized as overlord. Modern historians, while paying tribute to his achievements, have been more sceptical of the realities of his power. Constant effort was needed to preserve the union of Mercia and Wessex. In the last year of his reign Edward had to deal with a rebellion of Mercians in alliance with Welsh princes focused on Chester. There was nothing he could do north of the Humber. Danish political independence to the south of that river had been destroyed. Ragnald, by gaining formal recognition from Edward, had intruded a new potentially dangerous element into English politics.

Meanwhile under cover of all the political battles and the fortifications of Chester, of Thelwall, of Runcorn, of Bakewell, the last of the serious colonization ventures in England was under way. Place-names are our best guide and inference from cultural development, notably in stone sculpture, also adds to our knowledge. Substantial settlement of an Irish-Norwegian population, men and women from the Scandinavian ports in Ireland, from the Isle of Man, and from the Scottish islands, took place in north-west England. A great hoard of coins deposited at Cuerdale in Lancashire in the earliest years of the century, probably in AD 903, gives evidence of the trader-raider moves that went on between Dublin and York side by side with the colonization. There is a vast quantity of Viking-style sculpture in the north of England, much of it (such as the Dacre and Gosforth crosses) exhibiting clear signs of Hiberno-Norse inspiration, though some shows traits suggesting more direct contact with the Scandinavian homeland. Land not utterly dissimilar to the native Norwegian territory in the Lake District and surrounding territories proved more attractive to men of ultimate Scandinavian descent than to the Anglo-Saxons. In many of the deep valleys of Cumberland and Westmorland the place-name structure suggests that Irish-Scandinavian farmers met a British people with little or no Saxon admixture. The low-lying territories are different; and there in Lancashire and further north around the Solway Firth there is plentiful sign of early Saxon settlement. But over much of Cumberland, Westmorland, north Lancashire and west Yorkshire a vital new element was added to the

ethnic pattern in the early decades of the tenth century during the reign of Edward the Elder.

English impotence north of the Humber also threatened at one stage the intrusion and reinforcement of powerful Scandinavian elements in the north east. A later writer, anxious to establish the history of the see of St Cuthbert, relates how Ragnald, king of the Vikings at Waterford (probably the same Ragnald who ruled at York after 919), won victories north of the Tees, dividing out the conquered territory among his chief soldiers, two of whom are mentioned by name, Scula, who was given an extensive tract roughly 100 square miles or so in extent between the modern Castle Eden and Billingham while Olaf Ball (who is said to have sworn oaths by Thor and by Odin) received a similar massive grant from Castle Eden to the mouth of the Wear. Sir Frank Stenton, who first noted the true importance of these references as descriptions of precise settlement arrangements, pointed out the similarity in extent of the grants to some of the later sokes of the Danelaw, that is to say, areas over which the landlord exercised special rights of jurisdiction, such as Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire. The arrangement seems to have been reached between 912 and 915, and involved the transmission of clear political and military overlordship. There was not the same intensity of land-taking at this stage by the Irish-Norse elements in the north east as in the north west.

Edward's son and successor, Athelstan, 924–39, is remembered as one of the most powerful and spectacular rulers of the dynasty. He had been brought up in Mercia, was readily accepted as king by the Mercians and did more than any other single ruler to bring about by inspiration and deed a true union of West Saxon and Mercian. He strengthened contacts with the Welsh and had little difficulty in expelling the Scandinavians from York in 927. In European affairs he was widely known and respected. Harold Fairhair, king of Norway, treated with him as settled king to settled king, sent a great warship 'with golden prow and purple sail, armed within by a dense row of gilded shields' to Athelstan as a personal present, and permitted his youngest son, Haakon, Athelstan's foster-son, to be brought up at Athelstan's court. Although Athelstan's most enduring contribution to the unity of England came in connection with the imposition of effective royal government on southern England he is chiefly remember for his victory at Brunanburh in 937. A full poetic account of the battle was incorporated in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It represented a great victory for the Christian English, led by Athelstan and his young brother Edmund, against a coalition of Scots, British and Scandinavian Irish. The foremost leader and indeed creator of the coalition was Olaf Guthfrithson, the son of the man Athelstan had expelled from York in 927. Olaf survived to take his tattered remnant of an army back to Dublin, but no fewer than five men of royal rank and seven earls were killed from Ireland alone. Brunanburh inflicted a sharp check to the political ambitions of the Irish Scandinavian community.

The check proved, however, to be temporary only. With the death of Athelstan in 939 came fresh opportunity. By the end of the year Olaf Guthfrithson was back in York. In 940 he threatened to undo the work of the preceding generation and by a treaty drawn up by the two archbishops of York and Canterbury gained possession of the whole of the Danelaw. His death and the succession of lesser men, his cousin Olaf Sihtricson and his brother Ragnald Guthfrithson in turn destroyed this arrangement. For the last years of Edmund's reign, 944–6, the West Saxon house was again in political control of the North. But a further period of confusion and doubt followed Edmund's assassination in 946. Eric 'Bloodaxe' of Norway, a son of Harold Fairhair, Olaf Sihtricson of Dublin (949–52), and finally for two years Eric again (952–4) ruled at York. The Northumbrians themselves drove him out. His subsequent death at Stainmore brings a symbolic end to this phase of the history of northern England. Eadred, Edmund's successor, played little active part in the final events. Lack of single-minded purpose after the death of Olaf Guthfrithson contributed to the failure of the Irish Scandinavians to set up a permanent political hold on Dublin and York. The intrusion of a formidable and ambitious native Norwegian prince in the person of Eric Bloodaxe underlined the fluidity and complexity of the situation. The hard work inside the southern English kingdoms, the provision of better peace, the identification of Christianized Danish farmers with the surviving Christian dynasty helped to ensure that the future hope of a peaceful kingdom rested on the House of Wessex. Yet the time factor alone – the simple chronology of settlement of Dane in east and Norwegian/Irish in north west – helped to bring it about that the united England of Edgar's reign was a more complex ethnic entity than the familiar Heptarchic pattern of Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia.