

Lindisfarne Priory
By Evan M. Crowder

Lindisfarne had become by the spring of 793 ripe for the type of plundering that would come to define the Viking Age. The vulnerability of monasteries was easily exploited: "This (raiding) was not really unexpected, since the monasteries were repositories of wealth and hardly designed to be impregnable, even if there were armed men present." (Cavill, 9) In addition to the immense wealth that lay ready for the taking, the location of the Lindisfarne priory played a great role in its demise. The church sits atop a tidal island on the eastern coast of England, directly to the west of central Jutland, a short and easily navigable route for riches. The island is twice daily cut off from land, but at low tide, a causeway from the mainland appears, allowing travel to and from the island. The island possesses sandy beaches and is easily seen from a distance at sea. For the Vikings, Lindisfarne proved an irresistible target, particularly because of the technology at their disposal.

The emergence of the Viking long ship played an undeniable role in the events that transpired at Lindisfarne. Britain, being an island, was conquerable at the time only with naval supremacy, a task that was easily achieved by the superior Norse ships. Without contest, the Viking mariners could sail across the North Sea and freely assault targets all along the Northumbrian coast. The geography of Britain and Lindisfarne perfectly suited the northern invaders. It was of highest importance to maintain secrecy during raids; the long ship, with its removable rudder and three-foot draft could land on sandy beaches and sail up inlets. The crew of soldier/sailors could haul in their sails and row toward their target in order to minimize visibility. Many factors converged to produce the Lindisfarne raid, and the long ship is perhaps the most important literal and figurative vehicle that drove the Vikings to power in Britain.

Another motivating factor involved in the decision to raid lay in the structure of medieval Saxon Christianity. The monastery at Lindisfarne, like other Saxon churches, was responsible for granting land to the local citizenry. Furthermore, monasteries served as a depository for the King's wealth, and due to the isolated lifestyle of the monks, huge amounts of wealth lay in coastal locations, relatively undefended. (Campbell, Eric and Wormald, 41) The temptation of raiding an ill-defended and riches laden power center grew too great for the Scandinavians, who in 793 sailed west to claim their share of Christianity's wealth .

The first account of Scandinavian incursion in England is noted in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle; the crews of three Danish ships are attributed with briefly landing and slaying a king's reeve in 787. (Garmonsway, 55) While the Danes made contact with the English before the events at Lindisfarne, the attack of 793 marks the first organized assault on mainland England. Perhaps the most vivid account of the events of that day came through Simeon of Durham, a twelfth century historian, who working through locally written sources, produced a compelling account:

In the same year the pagans from the northern regions came with a naval force to Britain like stinging hornets and spread on all sides like fearful wolves, robbed, tore and slaughtered not only beasts of burden, sheep and oxen, but even priests and deacons, and companies of monks and nuns. And they came to the church of Lindisfarne, laid everything waste with grievous plundering, trampled the holy places with polluted steps, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers, took some away with them in fetters, many they drove out, naked and loaded with insults, some they drowned in the sea... (Cavill, 9)

Simeon's relation of the devastation that befell the monks of Lindisfarne, while second-hand, paints a vivid picture that, historically, proves accurate. The behavior of the Vikings that came to Lindisfarne is no different than the accounts of raiders in action elsewhere in the British Isles. The slaughter of livestock is mentioned repeatedly in the sagas, as is the practice of enslaving the survivors of raids. Perhaps the most believable aspect of this account is the raiders' insatiable thirst for treasure. Simeon's account, however, does far more than simply relate the events of the attack—it reflects the perception of the Norse built by texts like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Alcuin's letters.

The horrors that occurred at Lindisfarne create an interesting case—the writers of the day, mostly priests, (Magnusson, 22) used the sensational news of the monastery's sack to their advantage; by heightening the fear of the populace, the priests succeeded in two major fashions. First, the church was strengthened as people placed deeper faith in God, praying for mercy from the Norsemen. Second, English reactions that were written immediately following the raid possess an air of moral instruction, stressing the importance of a righteous lifestyle in avoiding what was thought to be divine judgment at the hands of the northern barbarians. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in regard to the 793 raid captures this perspective:

Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 June the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter. (Garmonsway, 54-56)

This passage vaguely outlines the misfortune that befell the monastery, but more importantly, shows the earliest stages of Saxon myth-making and new-found piety in response to the Vikings. The dragon that appears in the sky over Northumbria is certainly not real, but serves as an omen, doing much to create a sense of fear. Coupled with lightning and famine, the cause of the Viking attack appears completely supernatural to the readers of the chronicle. This unreal atmosphere does much to foster the political and religious goals in England at the time. By vilifying the admittedly ruthless pagan invaders, the Saxons gained a sense of unity through their hatred, and were bound more completely to their king and their church, the two major sources of power in Medieval Britain.

Perhaps the one of the most intriguing texts produced along these lines was written by the Northumbrian Alcuin, living with Charlemagne at the time of the raid. Considered one of the eminent Saxon intellectuals, his letters to Æthelred and Higbald do much to reshape the social life on the British Isles, casting it in a decidedly more Christian mold. Alcuin makes this point in a letter to Northumbrian king Æthelred:

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 peoples. (Richards, 7)

Alcuin's language relates far more than a simple history or his dissatisfaction with the looting of Lindisfarne. The text has supreme religious overtones, and demonizes the "pagan peoples" of the north. His highly dramatic style accentuates the terrible acts committed by the raiders, and summons an emotional response in its reader. Alcuin selects his language carefully, glorifying the priests slain at the

monastery, and universalizing Britain as the Scandinavian's prey. This image of the Vikings grounded in the fear they caused when first raiding, became popular conception, and lasted for centuries.

The main goal of Alcuin's letters lay in inspiring a more fervent belief in god, indicated in one of his letters to Higbald, bishop of Lindisfarne:

...the calamity of your tribulation saddens me greatly every day, though I am absent; when the pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God, and poured out the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope, trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the street... What assurance is there for the churches of Britain, if St Cuthbert, with so great a number of saints, defends not its own? Either this is the beginning of greater tribulation, or else the sins of the inhabitants have called it upon them. Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well merited by someone. But now, you who are left, stand manfully, fight bravely, defend the camp of God. (Grout)

Not only does Alcuin glorify Christianity while vilifying paganism, he provides an insight into the Saxons' reasons for the Scandinavian attack. Unlike the omens mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Alcuin does not see the arrival of the Norse as a direct sign of the apocalypse; he believes God's retribution is a major factor in the Pagans' arrival. The holy relics of St. Cuthbert are unable to defend themselves against pagan assault, a sign that further problems will come. The most interesting revelation here is not the fear of apocalypse, but rather how Alcuin attributes the possible reason for the Viking invasion to the unholy, sinful behavior of the Saxons and their kings. F.M. Stenton writes, "(Alcuin) had no respect for him (Æthelred) as king and regarded the sack of Lindisfarne by the North men in 793 as the beginning of judgments about to fall on Northumbria because of the violence, contempt of justice and the evil lives of its rulers"(Stenton 93).

The instability existing between the church and the state in medieval England suggested by Alcuin's letter also does something to explain the arrival of the Vikings. What was viewed as divine dissatisfaction by Alcuin was viewed as opportunity by the Scandinavians. The disunited kingdoms in power in England were too impotent to withstand a continued assault from the east. The corruption, riches and conflict within Northumbria was a weakness exploited, while intermittently, by the Norse for the next century.

The attack upon Lindisfarne marks the beginning of a long heritage of Scandinavian raiding in England. After the summer of 793, raids upon the English coast became more and more infrequent. This is most likely due to Norse activity to the north. "These early raids," writes Julian Richards, "should be seen in the context of the Norse colonization of Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides"(Richards, 31). This expansion westward played an important role in the preservation of Northumbria for nearly fifty years.

The Scandinavians, contrary to popular belief, focused more on farming and trading than raiding, and in the period immediately followed the Lindisfarne raid, began to lay claim to the mostly uninhabited islands to the north of mainland Britain. While these islands did not afford the gold that Lindisfarne and comparable monasteries could, they provided the Norse with an even more precious commodity—free land. The over-population in Scandinavia at this time had begun to affect the free farmers, forcing them to find new land away from home. The perfectly situated islands in Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides offered land, protection and the promise of a new life, as well as a strategic staging ground for raiding and trading across the north Atlantic.

When settlement locations began to dry up in the northern isles, Norse raids along the English coast that had been sporadic for almost half a century renewed in earnest. Beginning in 835, the Danish assault on mainland England stayed consistent until 850 when a period of raiding switched over to an era of colonization ultimately resulting in the Dane law, beginning in 886 (Richards, 23).

What had once been the crown jewel of western Christianity lay in ruins, and by 875, the abbey had become uninhabitable. The community of monks and nuns that once lived and studied on the holy island had withered away to small band of dedicated clergy. After being repeatedly marauded by the Norse, the monks journeyed west, and after seven years of fleeing the Vikings, settled in Chester-le-street in 883(Cavill, 37). While the buildings were left behind, the Lindisfarne gospels and reliquary of St. Cuthbert were carried by the monks and spared. The gospels, which survive to this day, serve as the oldest bible written in the English language and their impact on modern western culture remains immeasurable. Many of the monks in England were forced to abandon their profession; the danger of Viking attack had become too great to openly practice their beliefs. Because of these dangers, Lindisfarne was never restored to its earlier glory as a center of religious thought, and the once famous monastery lies in ruins on its original location on the holy island.